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The benefits of giving back to the community

What better way to enhance your practice's exposure and strengthen relationships with existing clients than by giving back to the community? Getting involved in the local area can also present a wealth of exciting marketing opportunities and attract new clients. This article takes a look at the many ways veterinary practices can serve their local communities and the considerable benefits that come from giving something back.

Share your knowledge

Giving talks about responsible pet ownership in the community can enhance your reputation as an authority on pet care and raise awareness of the work you do. Community partners – such as libraries, businesses, churches and museums – are some of the many groups that might like to work with your practice. Guiding and scouting groups, local primary schools and the Women's Institute (WI) may also welcome an informative talk or workshop.

The topic you choose to present should be based on the themes of responsible pet ownership and animal welfare. The subject may change depending on who you are talking to, or who is delivering the talk, but some ideas might be:

- what pets need to be happy and healthy
- general obedience
- looking after pets in the summer/winter
- the history of animals in war
- how to choose the right pet for your lifestyle
- animal body language
- careers in veterinary medicine
- a day in the life of your practice.

If you don't have the time or the availability of a staff member to deliver a talk, then why not share your knowledge through local newspapers and community newsletters? Many publications are likely to welcome content from local businesses – especially if it's relevant to the specific



issue or the time of year it is being published. Topics you might choose to write about include spotting the signs of dehydration in summer or keeping pets safe at Christmas. Remember to include your practice name and phone number at the end of the copy!

Donate to local charities

Donating is a brilliant way to benefit the area in which you are based, boost your practice's reputation and improve engagement amongst your employees.

In a recent study by Cone Communications, 74 per cent of respondents said they were more fulfilled when they were given opportunities to make a positive impact at work.

When deciding which charity to support, begin by selecting one that aligns with your practice values. This could be a local adoption centre, wildlife rescue organisation or a charity that trains assistance dogs – speak to your team and clients to find out which organisations they would like to support and why.

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**Suggested Personal & Professional Development (PPD)*

Once you have decided which charity you are going to support, use it as an opportunity to connect with your existing clients. Keep everybody informed about the cause, why you have chosen it and what activities you are planning to help within the organisation. This could include donating to a pet food bank, placing donation boxes in your reception area or selling tickets for a charity event.

Use multiple platforms – including social media, text messaging and email – to tell clients about your involvement with the charity and encourage them to support you. When the campaign finishes or reaches a significant milestone, send another message to let them know how much has been raised.

A perk that gives back

If time and budget allow, giving staff paid time off to volunteer during working hours is a great way to help out local animal charities. Whether it's cleaning out kennels at a local dog shelter or helping to run a neutering campaign, volunteering gives people a chance to develop new skills and learn from other organisations. It's also a great way to show your team that you care about them and the community in which they work.

Working with your chosen charity, encourage your team to volunteer their skills for particular shifts. You could pass around a 'sign-up' sheet during team meetings, pin one to a noticeboard or send an all-users email. When planning volunteer opportunities, include a mix of daytime, evening and weekend activities to allow for different schedules. Offering a variety



of short (one day) and long-term projects will ensure that everybody stays engaged.

Sponsor events

Sponsoring local events – such as fun runs, dog walks or agility events – can set you apart from the competition and strengthen your name in the community. They also have the added benefits of giving you direct access to your target market and help to strengthen existing client relationships.

As with choosing a charity to support, pick an event that fits with your practice ethos and find out as much as you can about it. For example, who sponsored the event in the past and how successful was it? It's also important to understand what you will

receive in return for your support – a stand at the event or your logo on promotional material, for instance.

Sponsorship doesn't have to be financial – it could be a case of simply 'lending a hand' or donating prizes for raffles and auctions. Remember to promote the fact that you are sponsoring the event on your social media channels, practice newsletter or through an email and keep everybody updated on its success.

Participate in careers events

Besides the obvious benefits of minimising recruitment costs and attracting new staff, school and college careers fairs are a great way to spread the word about your practice. By attending these events, there is also a good chance that you will have your practice name, logo and website printed on the promotional materials.

To make the most of your time at careers events, set up

attention-grabbing displays that make people more likely to stop by. Take along useful and original materials that students can't find online and set up a slideshow or video to give visitors a virtual tour of your practice. This helps to build client trust and increases the chance of their visiting your practice.

Another benefit of participating in careers events is that they allow you to meet potential employees before they even apply for a position – saving you both time and money. You could even conduct short, informal interviews on the stand that allow you to rule out unqualified applicants before they apply for a role. If you are advertising for specific job vacancies, make them identifiable by creating a sign that reads 'Now hiring for...' and list the available opportunities.

Host educational events

Delivering an educational event at your practice is

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another excellent way to strengthen relationships with existing clients. Dental care, parasite control, diet and how to care for elderly pets are just a few of the many subjects that your practice could cover. Depending on the topic, you may also be able to get funding or 'giveaways' for the event from other animal organisations, such as pharmaceutical and pet food companies.

Educational events are also the perfect way to introduce your practice to new clients because they open up opportunities for media coverage. Promote the event by sending out a press release to the editors of local newspapers – making sure to keep it interesting and positive. In the press release, explain how your practice

contributes to pet health care in the local community and the benefits of registering with your practice.

Organise an open day

Open days give people an exciting chance to explore your surgery, speak to your team and ask lots of questions. They also give your practice the opportunity to raise funds for your chosen charity or put back into the local area. When planning for your event, set a date that doesn't clash with any local, national or sporting events – weekends and evenings are a good time for many people.

Your open day should include a range of enticing activities that will keep your visitors entertained. Try to include aspects geared towards children using a

'fun for the whole family' theme and invite as many charities or stall holders as you can to keep the event looking busy. Ideas might include a children's round-the-bases quiz, equipment demonstrations and first aid for pets workshops.

On the day itself, keep yourself free to speak to clients as they arrive and be on hand to sort out any problems that might emerge. Most importantly, don't forget to smile! This is a fantastic opportunity to sell your practice and get to know the people that live in your local area.

A lasting effect

Giving back to the community through volunteering, sponsorship, charity or other means can be incredibly rewarding. It supports the organisations and individuals that already do so much for the local area and gives your team the opportunity to share its expertise.

Why not research upcoming events and organisations in your area and plan your own unique way of giving something back? In return, this will have a positive effect on team morale and a lasting impact on animal welfare. ■

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