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## The bigger picture – how to use animals in your marketing responsibly

A recent RCVS disciplinary hearing stressed the importance of gaining client consent for photographs and social media posts. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are brilliant platforms to market your practice and connect with clients, but without adhering to your responsibility to maintain client confidentiality you could end up offending or losing clients, or worse, be taken to court for publishing an image. This article looks at how to use social media responsibly and offers some advice for taking photos that promote healthy pet ownership.

One of the quickest ways to a pet owner's heart is to share pictures of animals that visit your practice on social media – be it a kitten who has come into the practice for its first course of vaccinations, or a Labrador being united with its owners after a lifesaving operation. With stacks of material available at your fingertips, there's no need to use stock photography on your social media feeds. Pictures of patients are more personal; they put a face to the practice and are more likely to be shared – especially if they feature the social media user's beloved pet. Before you reach for the camera, however, it is important to cover all bases and ask for the client's permission.

### A word of warning

In April 2019, a veterinary surgeon practising as a locum in the United Kingdom was reprimanded by the RCVS concerning their failure to obtain consent for posts on social media. Between July 2016 and August 2017, posts were created on social media about animals being treated at practices in which they worked, but without getting permission from clients. On one occasion, a photo was shared of a cat with an

accompanying caption of the patient's surgery and condition. In another, a video of an animal being operated was shared without the consent of the veterinary surgeon.

After considering the available evidence, the RCVS Disciplinary Committee found the vet in question guilty of serious professional misconduct and issued them with a warning. The case made national headlines and sparked discussions in the veterinary press about what it means for the profession as a whole. As Josh Loeb writes in *Veterinary Record*, 'the proceeding could be viewed as a 'test case' about the vexed question of what is and isn't possible online'.

### RCVS code of professional conduct

In the aforementioned case, the RCVS warned the vet to be fully aware of – and to comply with – the provisions of the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct and its supporting guidance. In particular, that veterinary surgeons 'must not disclose information about a client or the client's animals to a third party unless the client gives permission, or animal

welfare or the public interest may be compromised.'

It adds that this same principle applies to veterinary professionals when using social media, noting: 'veterinary surgeons should maintain and protect client confidentiality by not disclosing information about a client or the client's animal, which could identify them on social media unless the client gives explicit consent. If consent is obtained this should be recorded separately (ideally in the clinical records).'

### So how do veterinary professionals go about gaining a client's consent?

The RCVS recommends that consent should, ideally, be written and compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In other words, the consent should be freely provided, specific, informed, unambiguous and affirmative. It must also be possible for the client to withdraw their consent easily. Getting the consent in writing means that, should a person dispute why you have used an image of their pet, you have proof that you asked for their permission.

If there is somebody specific within your practice responsible for taking photographs or using social media, ensure they have plenty of permission forms. When they ask the client if they can take a picture of their pet,

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they can invite the client to read over the form and sign it at the same time. You could also write it into a registration or appointment form as one of a list of things the client can agree to. This should be very obvious and not written in any small print that the client could miss – ideally your receptionist would make a point of highlighting this verbally when they hand over the form. Being confident about gaining a client's permission is important because it shows that you respect their privacy. Some clients may refuse to sign the form, but most will be over the moon to see their beloved pet in a newsletter or on the practice Facebook page.

A consent form should include consent to take photographs of the patient and client, consent to use the pet's name and permission to use and publish photographs both in print and online. The form should also state how long the photographs will be kept on file and whether the practice can alter the photograph.

The client should then sign and date the form, adding the name of the pet they are permitting for.

### Marketing your practice

Once you have gained the client's permission it's time to start thinking creatively. Staff 'selfies' with pets, before and after treatment pictures, and seasonal events are a few examples of content that some veterinary practices are already sharing on social media.

If you're posting the picture to Instagram, remember to add your location and a strategic hashtag. This way, potential clients can find your business when they search in the local area.

### Top tips

You don't need any expensive photography equipment. For most practices, a simple smartphone can be a great way to capture those precious moments. Why not keep one in the practice that can be used specifically for this purpose?

- when taking a photo, keep in mind that natural light looks

best, so try to place the subject near to a window

- keep in mind the patient's behaviour – do not take a photograph when a patient has just woken up from anaesthesia
- keep a selection of toys and treats on hand
- get to the animal's level for a more interesting viewpoint – lie on the floor if you have to
- clear the background of clutter. You still want it to look like a veterinary practice, but you don't want the background to be too much of a distraction.

### What to avoid

In 2018, the BVA called on advertisers and veterinary practices to give full consideration to the way animals are depicted in

their communications.

Then BVA president Simon Doherty stressed: "Just like television or print adverts created by big brands, any inappropriate use of imagery in our client-facing communications also has the potential to normalise hereditary defects, poor welfare, and inappropriate diet and housing, as well as drive demand for certain breeds with physical and behavioural problems that are not always recognised by the public. As animal welfare focused profession, it is paramount that vets and vet nurses take the lead in ensuring clients are presented with visuals that support responsible pet ownership and positive animal health and welfare outcomes."

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To help veterinary practices promote positive pet welfare, the BVA launched a set of pet advertising guidelines that identify good practice as well as common mistakes when portraying pets. For example, images of animals in human clothing or fancy dress. The guidelines, *Pets in advertising: A social concern* stress that images should, where possible, depict pets in situations that meet their five welfare needs. That is, the need for a suitable environment; the need for a suitable diet; the need to exhibit normal behaviour; the need to be with, or apart from, other animals; and the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

Of course, it's not always possible to address each of these needs (for example, if the animal isn't around any food), so the framework has been designed simply to encourage decision-making. It calls on veterinary professionals to consider the following questions before

publishing images of animals:

- is the animal shown in a suitable environment for its species and breed?
- is the animal shown eating food or near food that is non-poisonous, proportionate to its breed size and conducive to a nutritionally balanced diet?
- does the animal shown have enough space and/or the appropriate enrichment materials to exhibit normal behaviour?
- is the animal housed with, or apart from, other animals appropriate for its species?
- does the animal show any physical characteristics that negatively impact on its health and/or cause suffering? (For example, surgically altered characteristics such as cropped ears?)
- is the animal safe? (For example, free from injury, pain or stress?)

The above are all questions that can be applied not just to

social media, but also to client hand-outs, website imagery and cardboard cut-outs within the practice. Using the correct imagery promotes healthy pet ownership and it can be great for your practice too. Taking care to ensure the images that you share are responsible can enhance your reputation, improve your overall image and boost client loyalty. ■

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