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Where to invest your time and money online

It is no secret that budgets are shrinking and client bases are growing; so if you are going to invest your time and money online, where should you focus your efforts? In an informative session at the 2017 SPVS/VPMA Congress, Susie Samuel, founder of Vet Help Direct, gave delegates some practical tips and advice.

Susie's first tip was to make a list of marketing objectives. These are a group of goals that a business sets when promoting products or services to potential customers. For a veterinary practice, this list might include acquiring new clients, increasing awareness of the practice in the local area or encouraging more pets to attend dental checks. When defining your objectives, they must meet what are known as the S.M.A.R.T criteria – they should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely.

Establish your audience

The next step is to define your target audience. A clearly defined idea of who you are talking to helps you to determine where and how to market your practice. Susie explained that you can learn a great deal about who your clients are and where they come from by looking at your practice management system. Most practice management systems offer comprehensive animal and client data profiles, giving you information such as the client's location, how often they visit the practice, and how much money they spend on their pet.

You can also learn about your clients through Facebook by using a tool called 'Audience Insights'. If your practice has a Facebook page, navigate to facebook.com/ads/audience_insights and click 'people connected to your page' (you will need to be logged in to do this). Assuming that you would like to find out more

about your cat-owning clients, under 'interests' click 'hobbies and activities', 'pets' and select 'cats'. The search will deliver all sorts of interesting information, such as the percentage of your 'followers' who are male and own cats, what their relationship status is and what their job title is likely to be.

Another way to find out more about your clients is to create

a survey. Using your existing email list, ask your clients a few simple questions about themselves, their interests and their contact preferences. Tools such as SurveyMonkey, SmartSurvey and eSurv are all free to use and allow you to create and send surveys with ease. Once the results are in, these tools let you view a summary of your data, create custom charts and download results in multiple formats. To

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*Suggested Personal & Professional Development (PPD)





encourage clients to fill in your survey, you might like to offer an incentive – 10 per cent off their pet's next visit perhaps?

Client personas

Once you have identified what matters to your clients, you can then start to build up client personas. A client 'persona' is defined by marketing company HubSpot as 'a semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer, based on market data about your existing customers'. They will help you to tailor your website content, messages and practice services to the specific needs, behaviours and concerns of your clients.

You can develop as many personas as you wish, but for a small practice, three or four should be enough to represent your audience. Hubspot provides examples of companies who have created marketed personas and there are templates for making personas of your own. Most contain the same basic information, such as who the person is, what they

value, and how they prefer to be contacted.

Client personas force you to look at things through someone else's eyes. Once created, pretend these fictional characters are new and existing clients. Viewing them as existing clients will help you to allocate budget and time, choose a suitable language in which to speak to them and to plan preventive care communications. Viewing through the eyes of a new client, you may be able to work out what information they need from your website, what impression of the practice they might have and, again, allocate budget accordingly.

Websites

Once you know who your clients are, the next step is to decide how you are going to target them. Susie explained that a well-designed website is the most important tool in your marketing kit because it will be at the centre of your internet marketing campaign. Everything else – emails, social media, videos – will link back to your website at some point.

She recommends avoiding the use of stock images on your website as they don't really tell the client anything about the practice. If budget allows, invite a professional photographer into your practice to really capture how your staff care for animals.

Email marketing

Email is another important marketing tool, although it is still very much under-used. As well as being a great way to promote your services, email marketing is an inexpensive way to drive traffic to your website and educate clients about their animals.

To gain the most from e-marketing, Susie recommends segmenting your email lists so that you can provide content that is more relevant to your clients. The more information you collect from your clients, the more you will be able to tailor emails to suit their needs. At a minimum, divide your

list into dog, cat and rabbit owners. Rotate the sets if you don't have the time or budget to email everyone at once. If you can, customise each email with the client's name and the name of their pet. This might be tricky, however, if the client owns more than one animal.

Reviews

As more people use their smartphones to find out information about goods and services, reviews are becoming increasingly important. According to Susie, 63 per cent of customers are more likely to buy something from a website that has user reviews. Registering your practice with popular review websites, such as Yelp and Google My Business, will also help to increase your search ranking. Many of these sites allow you to install a review 'widget' on your website so that the reviews are easy to find.

"Client personas force you to look at things through someone else's eyes"



Facebook

With more than 1.86 billion active users, Facebook is the world's leading social network. A recent change to the website's algorithm, however, means that posts by friends and family take priority over posts by brands. For this reason, Susie recommends investing in Facebook advertising. This will allow you to reach an audience beyond your existing followers and will drive more traffic to your website. She suggests setting aside £30 to £180 a month for Facebook advertising; with the option to set up your post so that it reaches the type of audience you want to attract – for example, people in a specific area. A small amount of money can go a very long way.

Other platforms

For veterinary practices working with a limited budget, the digital marketing strategies described above may deliver the best results; although there are a few other strategies that you should consider if time and money allow. The first is to improve your internet search rankings.

Susie explained that it adds enormous value to be at the top of search engines naturally – for example, through search engine optimisation (SEO). But until your website is up to scratch, it pays to invest in tools such as Google AdWords. This places a

sponsored link at the top of the page when people search for phrases related to your business. You pay a small amount every time the link is clicked, but *you* set the budget and can change it whenever you want. Experts recommend that you start at around £30 a month and increase or decrease the budget depending on the advert's success, measured as the number of 'click-throughs'.

Online videos can also be an effective way to show off your practice. Even a few seconds of a vet or vet nurse talking about how much they love working for the practice can have very powerful results. Other ideas include showing the relationship between your veterinary professionals and their clients (with the consent of the owner), or educational films, such as how to brush your dog's teeth.

Another social media platform to explore, if you think you have clients who will use it, is Instagram. According to a recent study (Jang et al, 2015), 90 per cent of Instagram users are under the age of 35. Some ideas for posts include patient selfies, puppy and kitten photos, staff achievements, practice awards and open days.

Measure and test

Measuring how well your marketing campaigns are doing is time well invested.

Not only does this reveal what is – and isn't – working for your business, it also suggests how you can improve it. One of the most popular tools that can help you to track the effectiveness of your marketing campaigns is Google Analytics – a free service that tracks and reports website traffic (search 'Analytics Academy' for more information).

When it comes to measuring the success of social media campaigns, all the major sites have built-in analytics. If one of your S.M.A.R.T goals is to attract new clients, keep a note of the baseline figure. As new clients join the practice, ask how they found you and record their responses on a spreadsheet.

Embracing technology

In an age where information is freely accessible to everyone, digital marketing is essential. However, with changes happening so fast it can be hard for the busy veterinary practice to keep up.

In this article, we've looked at some tools you can use to market your practice that will allow you to focus your time and money. By testing out these methods and measuring their effectiveness, you will find out what works best for your practice and how you can drive it forwards. ■

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