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Opening the way to success

An open day is a fantastic way to market your practice; but before you put out the bunting, it's important to know what you want to achieve and how you are going to achieve it. This article offers some tips on how to go about planning, organising and hosting open days, and explains why it is so important to set yourself clear goals along the way.

For pet owners, having a choice is great. But when it comes to choosing which veterinary practice to register with, most people like to carry out some research. Open days can be an invaluable part of this. Not only do they give prospective clients a chance to meet practice staff, but they also give clients a unique opportunity to see behind the scenes.

For you, open days can make a significant difference to the integrity and profitability of your practice (Glen, 2010). As well as enabling you to build support and increase trust in your practice, open days can also help to raise public awareness, gain more clients and give you a sense of being part of the community. An open day is also a great way to motivate staff as it fosters pride and gives family members a chance to learn more about where their relatives work (Morrell, 2011).

Where to begin

Planning is key to a successful open day. Establish a team of veterinary professionals and support staff around two to three months before the event and share out areas of responsibility. The team should meet regularly to check the project's progress – and don't forget to be mindful of potential health and safety issues and ensuring appropriate insurance cover.

In your first meeting, decide what you want to achieve. Perhaps you would like to raise funds for a charity or put something back into the community. Maybe you want to address specific

issues in your practice, like reintroducing old clients. You could host a themed event based around certain animals or even an issue such as microchipping. Whatever you decide to do, set a date for your open day that doesn't clash with any local, national or sporting events. Weekends and evenings are an accessible time for many people. Think about who you are targeting and when they might be free.

Setting a budget

Consider how much you want to spend on your open day. Flyers, banners, adverts and other marketing materials can be costly and have little return on investment. Instead, you could try a more targeted, personal approach by sending a letter to local people asking them to come along. Don't forget to harness the power of social media either – a few well-timed Tweets or Facebook posts about your event are easy, cheap and effective ways to promote your open day and set people talking about your practice.

You can also cut costs by speaking to local charities. They may wish to bring in an animal for children to pet, donate a prize or contribute towards any advertising you wish to do. Food and pharmaceutical company sales representatives might like to set-up a stand to promote their products – alternatively, you could request financial contributions towards refreshments and advertising, in return for displaying their posters and logos on the day.

What are you going to do?

The next task is to make a list 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. Here are some ideas:

- guided tour of the surgery
- equipment demonstrations
- laboratory demonstrations
- surgical 'mock up' operation for visitors to do
- short talks giving advice on flea treatment/worming/neutering and nutrition
- meet the animals – encourage staff to bring in their pets
- first aid for pets demonstrations
- veterinary careers advice stand
- children's quiz or competition
- 'goody bags' and 'lucky dips'
- guess the name of the cuddly toy
- pet portrait competition involving local schools
- children's colouring competition
- face painting
- free prize draw/raffle – find out if suppliers will let you have a free or discounted bag of pet food or toys in return for advertising
- obedience training
- 'have a go' agility course.

Practicalities

Other more practical things to consider for your open day are the facilities. Do you have enough toilets and seating areas? Do you have enough car parking spaces? If you need to keep some of the practice running while the event takes place, plan your visitor's route so that the two can coexist.



*Suggested Personal & Professional Development (PPD)



MARKETING

You may also want to put together a plan to record enquiries so that you can follow up with clients when the event is over. If you are going to provide food and drink, make it easy to access and consume. Tea, coffee, juice, biscuits and cake work best. Avoid sticky food and provide plenty of waste bins!

Publicity and promotion

The work to publicise your open day should begin no more than one month ahead of the event. Put up posters in your waiting room and distribute them to local shops and public buildings. If your budget permits, print leaflets and send them out with booster reminders. You can also leave them in the reception area, and hand them out to local businesses too.

Work to attract the local media to cover the event should also begin around this time. Write a press release and send it to the editors of local newspapers, keeping it both interesting and positive. In the press release explain how your practice contributes to pet health care in the local area and how much better off clients will be if they register with you. Your press release will be more successful if you have a good 'hook', such as a celebrity guest or new equipment.

You can also try sending your press release to local radio and television broadcasters – and always follow up with a telephone call to the programme producer and be prepared to go 'on air' to talk about the event should they wish to cover it.

Lastly, if you are going to give away items at your open day – and your budget will stretch to it – put your practice logo on everything! That includes quiz sheets and pens, balloons, clothing and literature.

Running the day

On the day of the event arrive early to ensure that you

CASE STUDY

Ipswich Veterinary Centre

In 2015, Ipswich Veterinary Centre in Suffolk opened its doors to the public for the first time. Launched by television presenter and local farmer, Jimmy Doherty, the open day was a huge success, with some 2,000 visitors passing through the doors.

Fifteen veterinary surgeons and 20 nurses ran presentations and demonstrations throughout the day on farm, equine and pet-related issues. The surgery also ran hydrotherapy and treadmill demonstrations, and visitors could catch a glimpse of the dog groomers at work.

In the ultrasound room, staff pets helped to demonstrate the new equipment, and visitors were able to test their surgical skills in a game of 'hunt the foreign body'. Children took part in an 'around-the-bases' quiz and there were plenty of animals to meet and learn about, including some more unusual pets, such as snakes, tortoises and miniature donkeys.

All proceeds from the event have since been donated to the charities, Help For Heroes and the Royal British Legion.



have enough time to brief your team before the doors open. 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 yourself, the staff and your practice. Have advice leaflets ready and take plenty of photographs as you might want to use them afterwards.

Don't stop there!

After the event, remember to celebrate with your team. Thanking all the supporters

will ensure they are happy to attend next time. You should also use the open day itself as further publicity material, so send out another press release telling journalists all about the open day and how successful it was.

Now is also a good time to review the event's success for effectiveness and future improvements. Did anyone book in for treatment? Did the practice gain any new clients? Four to six weeks after the open day, why not quiz your new patients? Put together a short

questionnaire and hand it to new clients at reception asking:

- how did you hear about us?
- what did you think about the publicity material you received?
- what did you think about the open day?
- why did you choose this practice?
- is there anything we can improve on?

You can then use the feedback to plan your next open day! ■

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