



Clara Ashcroft
BA(Hons)

Clara writes for Vision Media – a media agency specialising in marketing, communications and design services for the veterinary industry, and a publisher of veterinary websites, news websites and consumer magazines.

From clicks to clients

Many veterinary practices use social media to market their services; but 'likes' and 'shares' are difficult to measure and it is not always easy to see if your efforts are having an effect on the profitability of your business. Speaking at the London Vet Show in 2017, social media and marketing specialist, Dr Julia Bramble, outlined a social media strategy that practices can use to attract new leads and generate measurable results.

Changing media landscape

Social media algorithms mean that not everybody who follows you will see what you post. Facebook is a good example of this because it sorts posts on a user's news feed into ones that are 'relevant', instead of when they were published. Until recently, the main factors that influenced this were:

- how often the user had interacted with a post
- the level of engagement the post had received; and
- the performance of each post among those who had already seen it.

This meant that the more you could encourage your followers to engage with you, the more likely you would appear at the top of their newsfeed.

But in January, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced that the platform would be changing its algorithm to prioritise content from friends, family and groups over content from businesses and brands – the idea being that Facebook will become more fun to use and better for mental well-being. The change means that the average user will start to see more posts about their friends' holidays than the latest news from their local veterinary practice. It also means that organisations may start to see a fall in the popularity of their posts.

While it is not yet known what the impact of this algorithm change will be, it is a reminder that organisations have little control over what happens to



their social media accounts. When Facebook goes down, advertisers and marketers have been known to go into a panic, wondering if it will come back up again. Many businesses invest large sums of money into building up their social media following. So what would they do if those audiences suddenly disappeared?

Facebook is a great way to build trust and engage with new and potential clients; but it does come with risks. It gives practice owners little access or ownership of audience data, it requires payment to target a specified reach and it offers no control over the frequent – and often confusing – algorithm changes. When you are building your audience, you are doing so on somebody else's land, Julia stressed. For a business, that isn't a great way forward.

Building on what you already do

It is important to engage with clients where they are already active – and that includes Facebook. But it is also important to have a long-term strategy that will give you more control. If you are already using social media to build trust and raise awareness of your business, then the next step is to 'nudge' your followers over to a space that you own. That way you protect yourself from the changes described previously and capture people who are not yet ready to become clients.

Grow your e-mail list

One of the best ways to move your social media followers over to a space that you own, is to collect their e-mail addresses. However, this is easier said than done. Many people are protective of their e-mail address because



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they don't want to receive unsolicited contacts; while others are afraid that it may be sold on to a third party.

Before you start to grow your e-mail list, you must consider how you will store that information and how you will use it. Under the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), it is your responsibility to protect your followers' information – even if you are using software, such as MailChimp, to actually store those data.

GDPR also gives people the right to access, correct, delete and restrict processing of their data. So, if somebody contacts you asking you to remove their e-mail from your list, you will need to be able to carry out that request.

Offer a free gift

The easiest way to collect e-mail addresses from your followers is to offer them a free gift. In marketing, this is known as a 'lead magnet' and can take the form of a PDF, video, infographic or audio file. The PDF lead magnet is one of the simplest to create – especially if you already have typed copy from practice handouts. Simply export the copy as a PDF file and it is ready to use.

When deciding what you want your incentive to be, think about who your ideal clients are and tailor it towards them. For example, if your 'ideal client' owns three or more cats, then you might want to offer your followers a PDF on how to care for their cat's teeth. If your ideal client owns

dogs, then you might want to offer them some advice on training and behaviour. The idea is to link the free gift to the products or services that you want to sell (for example, your cat dental programme). The more specific you are, the more likely it is that the follower will respond.

Giving your audience information and advice about pet care brings several benefits:

- it gives a great first impression of your practice
- it solves a real problem
- it positions you as the expert; and
- it helps to build trust.

Another benefit of taking this approach is that you are actually giving your followers something they can use, rather than just trying to push a sales message. All this combined is likely to make your followers return to you for information in the future.

Share your incentive

When you are ready to share your incentive you will need to create a 'squeeze page'. This is a special type of landing page that is designed to capture e-mail addresses. Because the aim of your squeeze page is to encourage people to give you their e-mail address, it must look good – so no clashing colours or disparate fonts! It must also be separate from your website and usable across different platforms, including smartphones.

If this all sounds too technical, then fear not! You can download templates that build landing pages for you – search online for LeadPages

and Thrive Themes. With an array of different features and layouts, these templates are fully customisable – just enter your details, upload your free gift and hit 'publish'. The software will then collect the e-mail addresses and send out the free gift on your behalf.

What should I include?

Your squeeze page is essentially a sales page for your free gift and should include:

- a headline that encourages the user to take action
- a list of benefits (bullet points)
- a privacy notice letting people know how you will use their data
- a button for the user to enter his or her e-mail address
- an image of the freebie/ electronic download.

When you have published your squeeze page, share the link on your social media platforms, website, print adverts and business cards. For a more powerful and targeted campaign, you could also share the link via Facebook ads.

Lock out the competition

When you have a list of e-mail addresses, you should aim to make contact with your followers at least once a week. That way you will stay at the top of their mind and become the 'go-to' source for information about pet care.

To save time, send out content that you are already sharing on social media and sprinkle in information about special offers or events. This gives

your social media followers another chance to see the content that they might have missed the first time around. If you don't have your own e-marketing software, there are various online tools that can help. MailChimp is considered to be one of the easiest to use as it works seamlessly with the majority of marketing platforms, including LeadPages.

By contacting your Facebook followers in this way, you start to lock out the competition. Although clients might not be ready to book an appointment, the information that you are sending them establishes you as a leading authority on pet care. Consider if a puppy needed emergency treatment, how would its new owner choose a veterinary surgery? They are more likely to choose the one they already know and trust, not necessarily the one offering cut-price services.

Take back ownership

For many veterinary practices, social media is key to building relationships with current and potential clients. But as this article has discussed, ever-changing algorithms make it more important than ever to take back ownership of those relationships.

By following Julia's strategy, you can easily convert your social media followers into e-mail subscribers. In doing so, you will protect yourself from those baffling updates and gain a more direct, measurable way to communicate with your clients. ■

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