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How can I get the most out of my practice's open house? **by: Linda Wasche**

Sponsoring an open house can acquaint clients and the community with your practice. If done right, it can be an effective tool for introducing services, building practice awareness and adding client value. Careful planning is essential. Follow these steps to make sure your open house delivers results.

1. Set goals.

Do you want to increase your number of teeth cleanings? Introduce your new holistic practice? Attract more clients with exotic pets? State goals in measurable terms and be prepared to track results.

2. Define your audience.

Based on goals, whom should you target? Consider demographic traits and types of pet owners you want to attract. Should you target new puppy owners? Singles? New families? Events tailored to groups with like interests are more likely to get attended.

3. Build practice identity.

Use the event to further establish the identity you are trying to build for the practice. Do you want the practice to be perceived as offering advanced diagnostics? Or as specialists in orthopedic surgery? The theme of your open house should reflect this.

4. Time it right.

Avoid vacations and days surrounding holidays and religious observances. Check local events calendars for conflicts as well as opportunities. Also check national observances like National Pet Dental Health Month (February) or Pet First Aid Awareness Month (April) that could add interest and credibility to your event.

5. Collaborate.

Consider co-sponsoring an open house with a vendor or related business or organization. Invite a local expert to speak. Host a local pet book author. Collaborate with a boarding or grooming facility. Especially if your practice is new or trying to build its presence, connecting with an established and respected entity could be beneficial.

6. Make it newsworthy.

Extend your message with publicity in the local media. If the event is open to the public, develop a news release on the open house and distribute it prior to your event. If you do not wish for the public to attend, focus instead on what took place at the event. For example, develop a news release on what a guest speaker said or the tips you shared for puppy training.

7. Follow-up.

Remember you are not just sponsoring an event, but building a relationship. Once you have captured the attention of an audience, maintain it with services updates, pet care tips, gift certificates or invitations to other events.

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MARKETING OFFERS FEW QUICK FIXES, BUT HERE ARE SOME PROMOTIONS THAT SHOULD GIVE YOU A LEG UP ON THE COMPETITION

By Linda Wasche

If you are looking for a quick fix way to market your practice, be wary. Even the most creative gimmicks often produce little or no results.

First, a little marketing 101. Keep in mind that marketing is complex and traditionally covers four areas of your practice:

- Your “**product**” or in the case of a veterinary practice, the **services** you offer and the all of the attributes associated with the **delivery** of these services.
- Your **pricing**, which means how you strategically cost your services, bundle them and encourage buying of multiple services.
- Your **place**, which includes everything from your location, your hours and facility attributes.
- **Promotion** or how you get the word out to clients and prospective clients about your services.

We also add to the traditional list, **positioning**, or the identity that you create for your practice in the minds of clients and prospects.

If you are looking for ways to let people know about your practice and attract new clients, you are talking about the fourth area on the list, **promotion**. There are a lot of promotional gimmicks out there and probably a lot of people asking you to try their latest and greatest. Maybe you have been asked about advertising on the backs of bathroom stalls or placing your logo on the sleeves that come with your take-out coffee cup. Maybe the local silk screener has suggested that you hand out t-shirts with your clinic logo on them.

Do these things work?

Keep in mind, first of all, that if any of the other marketing areas are not on target; promotion is not your quick fix. If your services and delivery, your pricing, your place and your positioning are not in tune with the needs of the marketplace, telling more people about your practice is not the answer.

Second, if a coffee cup is all it takes to get new clients in the door, most marketing firms would be out of business!

Third, and most importantly, promoting a veterinary clinic is a complex proposition. Oftentimes new clients will go through a process of gathering information, asking for referrals and perhaps stopping in for a pre-appointment visit. While an ad on a coffee cup might get you to pay a few bucks to check out a new quick oil change place – or an inflatable cartoon character in the parking lot might get you to go in and buy a hamburger – the decision to try a new veterinary clinic is a bigger proposition.

That said, and assuming that your practice has the right combination of product (service), place, price, and positioning, while there are few quick fixes out there, there are still some ways that your practice can spread the word without breaking your promotional budget.

To be most effective, any type of promotion should be connected to **predetermined goals**. Instead of just trying to “get your name out there,” consider specifically what you want to accomplish from the promotion as well as how you will measure results.

In all cases, the most effective promotions are those related to a desired immediate response, for example, to attend a seminar or to make an appointment for a specially priced dental exam and cleaning.

At the same time, consider your AUDIENCE or the target of the promotion. You have heard it before. It’s easier to get current clients to visit more often than it is to get a new client to come in your door. Therefore, the best – and most cost effective – promotions are those targeting the clients you already have. As said earlier, getting someone to try a new vet as a result of a single promotion is unlikely. Instead, you have a better shot at getting the attention of targets that already know and like you. Also consider reaching out to audiences such as referral sources who may have some familiarity with your clinic, but may be unaware of all of your services.

LOW-COST CLIENT PROMOTIONS

If you are looking for promotional ideas that do not cost a lot, there are many reasons to reach out to existing clients. One is that you already have established channels for reaching them – your lobby, client mailers, a possible newsletter. Second they are a DEFINED target meaning that you already know they have pets, want to take care of their pets and spend money to take care of their pets. This is unlike a promotion that tries to reach everyone and ends up being a shot in the dark!

Try these low-cost promotions:

- Bundle services together with special client pricing. Tie in with pet-related observances like National Pet Dental Health Month or Spay Day. Promote this through client mailers, lobby signage and a client newsletter if you have one. Also send a news release to your local papers which costs you nothing.
- Sponsor a contest or competition. Use themes like “best smile or” most glamorous pet” to promote teeth cleaning or grooming services. Offer incentives to those who enter as well as service packages to winners.
- Promote services on client reminder mailers. Since you are already sending out the mailer, this is a NO-COST way to remind clients of what you are offering and to also run specials.
- Consider extending your hours. Our research tells us that having convenient clinic hours is of high importance to clients. Yet, few practices are open during times that fit most clients’ schedules. Consider testing evening and/or weekend hours.
- Become a donation site. Local rescue groups are always looking for donated pet supplies and other items. Register as a drop-off site and then be sure to have literature on hand promoting your clinic’s services.
- Host a special event. This does not have to be complicated or costly. Consider:
 - A seminar or workshop for pet guardians with similar interests
 - An anniversary or other such celebration
 - Programs that tie in with national observances such as Be Kind to Animals Week or Adopt a Shelter Pet Week
 - An open house to showcase new facilities or services

- Invite clients to bring a friend. Offer incentives for clients to introduce your clinic to friends and family.
- Use your walls! Promote your services and the personality of your practice in your lobby and exams rooms. Use colorful posters and flyers. I visited a practice yesterday to get oral surgery for my pet rabbit. The vet was a dental specialist with more than 20 years of experience yet the “same old” dog and cat pictures in the lobby said that was a generalist practice.
- Use your staff! Get staff to wear colorful buttons to peak clients’ interest and promote services.
- Use your lobby! You have a captive audience for reading material, flyers, videos, electronic presentations and other media. Educate clients about pet care while they wait!
- Reward client loyalty with perks. Surprise clients who reach certain levels of expenditure with gift cards to local pet supplies retailers, restaurants or coffee shops.

OTHER LOW-COST PROMOTIONS

In addition to clients, reach out to other audiences such as referral sources and local pet-related businesses who are in a position to send clients your way.

- Collaborate with related local businesses. Attract clients of other pet-related businesses by cross-promoting your services with theirs. For example, offer incentives to visit your clinic or invite local businesses to clinic-sponsored events and programs.
- Stay connected with referring veterinarians. In many cases, colleagues may not be aware of your evolving experience or services. This is especially true if your practice offers specialty services such as oral surgery, oncology or orthopedics. Or, perhaps you treat pets that others do not including many exotics. Sponsor periodic open houses or consider mailers and newsletters to keep other veterinarians informed.
- Issue a news release. If you have news at your clinic, let the community know about it through the local press. There is no charge for publicity, though it will have to be something that your local papers consider newsworthy. See our prior columns on publicity and media relations.

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Do Special Promotions Get Tails Wagging?

By Linda Wasche

Question:

How effective are special promotions in attracting new clients?

Answer:

Special promotions – events, targeted programs, service packages – can be effective tools for reaching out to new clients and strengthening relationships with existing ones. At the same time, promotions are no substitute for a positive client experience. Effective promotions should have clear goals (see your marketing or business plan!), deliver value, follow a plan and provide measurable results.

Goals

Building awareness and getting new business are too general. Price reductions position you as the low cost provider. A promotion should be based on specific goals and strategies identified in your marketing or business plan. For example, based on what you know about clients and marketplace trends, are you targeting:

New clients through an entry point like spay and neuter?

Singles (high spenders on pet care)?

Existing clients for dental services?

A greater share of the reptile market?

Senior citizens (growing market)?

Value

One of our clients sponsored a National Pet Dental Health Month photo contest that educated clients, positioned the practice as experts, offered dental service packages and rewarded the winners. Effective promotions provide value that goes beyond veterinary (or other) services. Consider the intellectual, emotional and social benefits that you can deliver based on the needs of your target audience.

Execution

Even the best ideas often fail in the execution stage. Develop a detailed promotion plan that addresses timing, potential conflicts with other events, key tasks and completion dates. Consider how to leverage the promotion by identifying opportunities for:

Publicity in the local media

Tie ins with national and local events

Collaborations with other businesses or organizations

Promoting your website

Measurement

Was the promotion successful? Go back to goals. Identify early how you will track your response.