

Are You Change Ready?

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It's an indisputable fact that change is a constant state of affairs - there's no getting around it. Whether it has to do with science, medicine, technology, the economy, or social norms, nothing stays the same. As practice owners and managers, understanding and accepting this fact is crucial, and having the ability to integrate change into our hospitals can easily lead to the difference between success, and lack thereof. Each of us must continually ask ourselves, "Am I truly open to change?" because the solutions we promote today may not hold as much, if any, relevance in the future.

Consider that over the past ten years our industry experts demonstrated the necessity of raising fees in our veterinary practices. For many, it took a lot of coaxing, but a majority of veterinary practices took their advice, made adjustments, and reaped the benefits. Yet while some will continue to see increasing fees as a solution to waning bottom lines, the true visionaries have now moved on. These individuals recognize that while fees cannot remain stagnant, in general our pricing structure has reached an acceptable level, and the focus must now shift elsewhere – for example, cutting expenses and increasing services. This adjustment does not mean that their previous analysis was erroneous; what it means is *they understand that things change.*

One of the services I offer is matchmaking for practice owners that are looking to hire an associate or practice manager; I screen several candidates a week and each one of them tell me that they have no interest in a practice that does not have a "decent" website; they equate the lack of a website with an outdated veterinary facility, old equipment and poor quality medicine. In their eyes, not having a website is equivalent to actually having something to hide! Whether or not this is true is completely irrelevant, because the current reality is that you will not attract the best and the brightest without a decent website and online presence. Candidates look for reviews, see where you fall on Google, and read your website from start to finish, before even deciding whether or not they are interested in a position with your practice.

An owner approached me recently for assistance, because he had been trying to hire an associate for over a year but could get no one to interview at his practice. While we were on the phone I went to pull up his website but discovered that it didn't exist. I immediately mentioned this could possibly be a major contributing factor in his inability to find an associate, and he was completely taken aback. His response was, "I don't need a website – I have all of the clients I can handle!" What he failed to see was that a website, and an online presence in general, is about far more than attracting new clients. Because he wasn't a fan of the internet himself, he discounted the importance it holds for others, thereby placing him in a weak position on many levels. As I explained to him, refusing to understand and accept the importance of the digital age had basically taken him out of the running.

Not long ago I was giving a lecture to a group of veterinarians and practice managers on the benefits of a paperless practice. The focus was not on the “how” as much as on the “why,” and the underlying purpose of my talk was to demonstrate that making a choice to implement an electronic medical records system will enable their practice to experience continued growth and success, and ultimately retain its value. While fear of the unknown, or sheer stubbornness, may have kept them from going paperless in the past, I spent four hours proving (*successfully, I hope!*) that going paperless isn’t about change purely for the sake of change. Rather, the purpose of my talk was to systematically illustrate that ignoring these new efficiencies, and thus refusing change, can have both harmful and far-reaching effects on their practice in the areas of client service, efficiency and quality of care. And while having electronic medical records are not yet a make or break factor for associates, like a website, there is a good chance that it will grow in importance for job seekers in the not so distant future.

As with most things, it is always easier to tell someone else what to do than it is do it yourself, and I was recently reminded of this when I failed to heed my own advice. I was of the school of thought that quality veterinarians should never, under any circumstances, discount their services. I was taught that to do so was in essence to devalue their expertise and to enter the playing field where the dollar reigns supreme. After all, the well-known theory is that doctors don’t discount their services, so why should veterinarians? I abhorred the idea of offering coupons and was convinced that doing so would only attract the type of client that doesn’t care about their pet enough to take them to the best practice, rather than the “cheapest.” Yet I wasn’t considering some very relevant and factual information – *things had changed*. Instead of studying the change in buying habits during the current economic downturn, I was basing my opinion on emotion and outdated information. What was true yesterday was no longer true today, and I had stopped paying close enough attention!

While I am not recommending that everyone run out and offer coupons, in this situation continuing to regard “discount” as a dirty word and a defacement of the essence of veterinary medicine was a poor business decision on my part. The numbers speak for themselves, and there was a significant increase in new clients and gross income in the practice once I broke down and agreed to implement several campaigns. Not only that, but these new clients have returned for rechecks, surgeries, or with their other pets, which meant that their value far outweighed the discount they had initially received. Also, within just two months my tracking systems showed that these new clients were already referring others to the practice. I had made biased assumptions about the type of clients this type of advertising would attract, but if I had done my research I would have learned that people have become more careful about how and where they spend their money, and looking for a “deal” or discount has become common, even among those who had never done so before. If I had done my research I would have know that recent consumer studies have shown that whether or not someone has been personally affected by the poor economy, they have started clipping coupons and perusing mailers offering discounts and introductory offers. My inability to recognize this ended up costing the practice.

Clearly, not all change is good, but this is a conclusion that can only be drawn after fully understanding the motivation and potential behind each new concept. No doubt, mistakes will be made, and choosing not to change is always an option. But the decision to maintain the status quo should be made knowingly, with a full understanding of the path that you are opting not to take and the resulting

potential growth opportunities that may pass you by. Opting not to pursue change purely out of spite, frustration, or a sense of indignity, is a poor decision, but one that is made far too often. If you choose to take the path of *most* resistance, then do so for a valid reason and respect that the outcome, whether positive or negative, is of your own making.

Recently I taped a large index card above my coffee maker, where I am sure to see it every morning. In big block letters it reads, **"IT'S A NEW DAY – ARE YOU CHANGE READY?"** Corny? Sure. Yet for me it works as a daily reminder that as a hospital administrator, and a consultant for other practices, it is my responsibility to assess whether or not the systems and strategies currently in place remain effective, and if not, to adjust accordingly. Each day I must put my ego and biases on the shelf and make educated decisions based on current realities and the anticipation of future realities, rather than on those of the past. As the saying goes, "time stands still for no one," and success is based on the ability to stay in the race!