



ATTRACTING NEW CLIENTS

BY COMBINING **BUSINESS SENSE** & **COMPASSION**



FORMING AN ALLIANCE WITH A REPUTABLE LOCAL ANIMAL RESCUE ORGANIZATION IS A **CREATIVE STRATEGY** FOR **BUILDING** A STEADY STREAM OF **NEW CLIENTS** WHILE **SERVING** THE COMMUNITY AND ENHANCING YOUR **REPUTATION**.

The animal health industry is experiencing an unfortunate dichotomy: while pet ownership continues to increase, a large number of veterinary practices report a decrease in new clients. Prior to 2001, pet ownership and new clients showed relatively parallel growth, but according to The Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study the me-

dian number of new clients per each full-time (or equivalent) veterinarian dropped from 271 to 218 in the period 2001 to 2009.¹ The spotlight has shifted from realizing declining trends to understanding the underlying causes and working on solutions and strategies to reverse them.

Not all strategies lend themselves to

immediate results, however, and as we collectively work to improve our communication skills, emphasize pet owner education, and attract new clients, it's important to recognize the value of long-term growth opportunities even though financial benefits may not be immediately realized. Teaming up with a rescue organization is one example.

MAKE SURE TO **EDUCATE** ASSOCIATES THAT THE OVERALL **GOAL** OF THE PROGRAM IS TO **PROVIDE CARE** AND **GROW** THEIR **CLIENT BASE**.

WHY A RESCUE GROUP?

There is a significant new client opportunity when rescue group pets go to permanent homes. While shelter adoptions are far more numerous, there can be exceptional added-value in the type of pet owners who adopt from a well-run rescue group.

- Their choice to become pet owners is not an impulse “purchase;” they have taken the time to fill out a lengthy application and have undergone a personal screening and home visit.
- Very often, they sign a contract promising to provide adequate veterinary care for the life of their adoptee and agree to return the pet to the rescue group if they become unable to do so.
- Overall, people who adopt pets from reputable rescue organizations tend to belong to a demographic that is financially stable and will make the adoptee a treasured and integral family member. In other words, they are the perfect clients.

While shelters can make excellent partners, due to the large number of pets that pass through their doors, there is less of an opportunity for building relationships and

creating a strong referral base. For example, the person handling the adoption at a shelter may not know where the adoptee received medical services, nor will they have developed a relationship with that practice that would encourage them to make referrals. Also, many shelters have found it more cost-effective to provide veterinary care within their own four walls, so opportunities to become their chosen service provider are far more limited.

Unlike shelters, however, rescue groups tend to rely solely on private practices for veterinary care. This means that the pet's entire medical history and treatment record is with the practice and that familiarity is something that many owners will wish to maintain—especially if they are adopting an older pet or one with a significant medical condition. This is the reason it is so important that the group be locally based and that at least 50% of the pets taken in are eventually adopted within the local community (this percentage is one you can adjust, but it should not be less than 50%). If the rescue group is breed-specific, it is quite common for a practice to earn a reputation for “specializing” in that breed, which is definitely something to cultivate and capitalize upon whenever possible.

CHOOSING A PARTNER

As with any alliance, the organization you choose to partner with must have a spotless reputation and you will need to collect information and documentation to make this determination (see **Initial Rescue Group Request Letter, page 34**). Before making any type of commitment, meet with the head of the organization to cement the expectation that if you agree to offer them a

discount, your practice will become their provider of choice. Ask them to actively promote your practice with adopters and place a direct link on their website. If they send a newsletter or hold meetings, your doctors should be invited to lecture or write articles.

You may choose to put together information packets to be given to each

new pet owner and/or offer a complimentary exam upon adoption. Ask that the rescue group tell the new owner to call the practice to set up an account and have the pet's records transferred to that account. Even if clients don't come in right away, you will "own" their future reminders, increasing the odds of becoming their permanent veterinarian.



Don't Want to Discount?

There are multiple ways to partner with rescue organizations aside from just offering discounts. Consider collaborating with them for fundraising or educational events such as these:

- Host a weekend pet grooming or toothbrushing seminar where attendees pay a fee donated to the rescue group. Your technicians can teach nail clipping, grooming skills, or dental cleaning.
- Offer to do an "ask the vet" session at a fundraising event for the charity. Only answer general questions; to avoid potential legal problems, don't answer specific questions about individual pets.
- Give discounted advice to the rescue group and answer their questions about nutrition, behavior, and shelter medicine outside business hours. The only cost is your personal time, but your professional, expert advice has enormous value.

MAKING IT WORK

Beyond requirements placed on the organization, it is imperative that a practice have protocols and policies in place for managing this type of relationship before moving forward. Just as with any other new client initiative, tracking methods must be implemented to determine whether these relationships are mutually beneficial. At a minimum, this requires monthly tracking of both the number of pets seen through the group and the conversion rate of adopters to new clients.

Other questions to consider include:

- Who will be designated the practice's rescue group coordinator and handle all associated responsibilities?
- Will you seek alliances based on breed, species, or other factors? *TIP: This presents a great opportunity to get staff input and generate their interest and commitment.*
- How many groups can your practice afford to work with? *TIP: Depending on the activity level of an organization, anything over 2 or 3 groups can become more of a burden than a benefit.*
- What type of discount will you offer? Will it be a specific percentage across the board, or will it vary by specific services? Will medication be included, and if so, how will it be discounted? What about grooming and boarding?
- With whom will you be dealing from the rescue group? Who authorizes the care (and payment) from the rescue group side? *TIP: If foster parents are responsible for bringing in the pets for treatment, consider having a written "Foster Parent Code of Conduct" and ask that the head of the organization disseminate it to current and future foster parents; this can be a great "preventive" policy!*
- Are you going to request that these pets be seen during your practice's slower times so that they don't interfere with your practice's peak appointment times?
- If your doctors are compensated on a percentage of production, how will that be calculated? Will they receive the same percentage, but on the discounted price, or will they receive a smaller percentage?

Many practices have long understood that if the relationships are well defined, there are many benefits to assisting rescue groups outside of pure philanthropy. Rescue group partnerships foster goodwill within the community, offer marketing and PR opportunities, and can lead to a steady stream of new clients. And while this stream should not replace other new client initiatives, over time a practice's bottom line will reflect that the quality of a pet owner is just as, if not more valuable, than the quantity. | [EVT](#)

See [Aids & Resources, page 40](#), for references and suggested reading.

On the Web: Improve Your Practice's Business

Is every client who walks through your practice's doors having the best experience possible? This month at myEVT.com/magazine learn to gain and maintain your clientele. Read these online exclusives:

- Show & Tell: Building More Value Into Exams
- Overcoming Feline Resistance
- It's a Fact: You Can't Modify What You Don't Measure!
- Bringing the Human-Animal Bond to the Web

Visit myEVT.com/magazine today!

Initial Rescue Group Request Letter

Jessica Goodman Lee, CVPM

Dear Rescue Group President,

Thank you for considering us to serve as the veterinarians of choice for the _____ Rescue. We would be pleased to consider your request and would ask that you send a copy of the following to our Rescue Group Coordinator:

1. A copy of the IRS notification of exempt status
2. A written statement regarding the history of the organization and its mission statement
3. A written statement describing the animals you accept, those you do not accept and the criteria used to make this determination
4. The percentage and number of pets adopted within a 10-mile radius of our practice in the last 2 calendar years
5. The names, phone numbers and individual contact information of 2 veterinary clinics with whom your organization has previously worked

Once our Rescue Group Coordinator has received the above information, he/she will call to schedule a meeting with the head of your organization. Please prepare the following information for that meeting:

1. How many animals did your organization accept during the last calendar year?
2. How many animals did your organization adopt out during the last calendar year?
3. In what circumstances is euthanasia considered a viable option for an animal under the care of your organization?
4. How many animals are currently in the care of your organization?
5. Do you use foster homes, kennels or both?
6. How many animals are allowed per foster home?
7. Does the organization provide any of its own veterinary care, such as vaccinations?
8. Are all pets required to be spayed and neutered prior to adoption?
9. Who will be bringing the animals to the clinic?
10. What kind of care are you interested in having our clinic provide?
11. As the head of the organization, is there a specific dollar amount beyond which your approval is required to perform treatment? Please be very specific as to the situations in which your approval is required.
12. What is your estimate regarding the number of animals per month that would be seen in our hospital?
13. Do you have an animal hoarding policy stated in your by-laws? If so, please provide a copy of this statement. If not, how does the organization approach potential hoarding situations?
14. What is the screening process for potential adopters?
15. As an organization, are you willing to verbally promote our practice to local adopters? Are you willing to provide printed promotional material?
16. Do you currently owe any unpaid balances (over net 30) to veterinary care providers in the state of _____ for rescue animals that have been, or are in, your rescue program?

Thank you for your interest in partnering with our veterinary hospital, and we look forward to working with you in the future.

Best wishes,
Rescue Group Coordinator