

## **The Incredible Power Of Email**

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When you consider the ways in which we communicate with one another on a daily basis, whether personal or business related, email is at the top of the list. According to David Daniels, Vice President of *JupiterResearch*, "87% of consumers' online time is spent reading their emails."<sup>1</sup> Whether by choice or necessity, most of us spend multiple hours a day in front of a computer screen and the age of our target audience is no longer a valid argument for remaining in the communication dark ages. In fact, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 74% of internet users age 64 and older send a receive email, making it the most popular online activity for this age group.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, more and more people are choosing to forego home telephones for cell phones, and these devices allow us to do far more than just talk - we can send text messages instead of call, read and respond to email, post on social networking sites and surf the web. So how can veterinary practices take advantage of these preferred modes of communication? The best place to start is by focusing on the integration of email correspondence into your practice as a means to increase compliance and strengthen and develop client relationships.

### **Email Communication**

The first step is offering your clients the opportunity to communicate with you via email. Whether it's making an appointment, or sending an update to the doctor, many people would rather type it in than pick up the phone, and your team needs to be able to respond in kind. The hospital needs to have a general email address that is checked and responded to several times per day. This is usually the job of the front desk staff, and if they can't answer the questions themselves they can forward them to the appropriate individual. The email address should be simple and preferably utilize your practice website's domain name rather than a commercial email address. For example, if your website address is [www.abcvethospital.com](http://www.abcvethospital.com) then your email address should be [info@abcvethospital.com](mailto:info@abcvethospital.com).

Both your website and email addresses should be prominently placed on all of your practice's written material, from invoices to business cards. One of the most important places to post your email address is on your website, yet surprisingly many practices with websites still only offer their phone number as a means of communication. You must cater to your clients' needs and preferences; many of them may have a question or want to schedule an appointment, but if they are on the internet they are more likely to want to do this with a click of a key rather than picking up the phone.

Along with a general practice email address, each doctor, manager and even department heads should have their own email address on their individual business cards. Again, it is important to keep in mind that while some veterinarians don't want to be responsible for checking their email or communicating with clients in this manner, this is often what *the client* prefers. Veterinarians are often pleasantly surprised by the amount of phone time this can cut down on with more "needy" clients. The doctor can let them know that they are welcome to send updates on their pet's progress by email; it's a lot quicker to jot a quick reply than to listen to a rundown of each trip their cat made to the litter box in the last twenty-four hours. The client is heard, the pet is monitored, and the doctor has more time to see patients - it's a win/win situation for everyone.

## **Email Reminders & Client Communication**

How many of the reminder postcards you send do you think get tossed in the recycling bin with the “junk” mail? A lot. How much money would you save on postage if you didn’t have to send out so many second and third reminders because you reached your clients on the first try? Quite a bit.

So what if you could increase your first reminder conversion rate without spending a penny on postcards and postage? By adding email reminders (I am not suggesting eliminating snail mail at this time) to your client communication program, your conversion rate for first reminders will greatly increase; track it and you’ll be a believer in no time.

To begin, if you haven’t already started collecting client email addresses, start immediately. With new clients your front desk team needs to ask for email addresses as part of the client information collection process – just like address and phone number, getting a client’s email address is just another question on the list. When current clients come in, making sure their information is current should always be part of the check in process, and it’s a great time to ask them for their email address. Always try to get a personal, rather than business, email address since it is less likely to change. As an added bonus, with both cell phone numbers and email addresses you don’t automatically lose the ability to communicate with clients if they move.

Print up a small sign for your front desk letting you clients know that you are adding an exciting new service and they can expect to receive their pets’ reminders online. Very few clients will decline to provide their email address, especially when you explain that your intention is to start sending email reminders. In fact, they are usually thrilled; it’s not as if they want to disregard their pet’s healthcare, but their lives are busy and they think they might have seen that postcard at one time but can’t remember what they did with it.....you get the picture.

Almost all veterinary management software not only provides a spot for entering email addresses but has the capability to pull this information just as it does from the other client and patient information fields. You should be able to create and send permission-based emails directly through the software program itself (if you can’t, it’s probably time to consider a change). If you’re not familiar with setting this up, the best thing to do is usually call technical support and have them walk you through the process. It will usually take about four to six months to obtain a large number of addresses, but that doesn’t mean you need to wait to start emailing reminders; each time you are preparing new reminders make sure to update the database from the previous mailing to include all of the recently collected addresses. At some point you may want to offer clients the ability to opt out of written reminders, but don’t consider this until you are confident in your software and are sure that the messages are making it into clients’ inboxes.

As with all of your marketing material, make sure to customize these reminders so that the pet’s name is included in the subject line and the message itself includes personalization; you don’t want the message ending up in their spam folder or being overlooked (there is a plethora of tips on email deliverability available on the web). A recent study shows that 20% percent of email in the United States and Canada is still not making it to the inbox while 3% of email goes to the "junk" or "bulk" folder and another 16% goes missing.<sup>3</sup> Make sure that your practice logo and information is displayed prominently once the message is open, and take the time to add color and photos to keep it interesting. Some software will enable you to download the pet’s own photo directly into the email! Whatever capabilities your software offers, take advantage of them! Whether a client chooses to hit “reply” or pick up the phone,

you've hit your target – the response is immediate and not put aside in a pile to be dealt with when time allows. In fact, if they open their email on their phone they can actually click directly on the phone number in the email and get connected!

If you are skeptical that email reminders can boost client compliance, it's easy to find out. You should already have data on your first, second and third reminder conversion rates so it is as simple as watching this improve – the greater response to first reminders, the fewer second reminders need to be sent, and so on. It's not a fluke! You can also try tracking this by creating an incentive program for your front desk staff so that they make a point of asking clients whether they are responding to an email reminder or a postcard. Make sure to share results with your staff and let them know what a financial impact their efforts have made.

Now that you have collected email addresses, consider the multitude of internal communication and target marketing possibilities available to you at no extra cost! Consider a situation where a frequently used medication has been recalled and you will need to reevaluate all patients currently on this medication and make a substitution. You can immediately pull this information from your database and send an email to these pet owners. Or perhaps you want to target all puppies and kittens over a certain age that have not yet been spayed or neutered by sending an email with some sort of incentive to entice their owners to schedule an appointment. While it is extremely important not to inundate clients with excessive emails, when used wisely and strategically it is the most impactful form of communication available. And since there's no charge for postage, it's definitely the best bang for the buck!

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<sup>1</sup> (George Bilbey, Return Path, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> (David Andrews, Jupiter Research, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010)