

Internal Marketing: The 'Not So Little' Little Things

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Earlier this week when the temperature suddenly soared into the seventies I immediately loaded up my dogs and headed to the park. While they were expending their boundless energy, I began chatting with a fellow pet parent. As we struck up the usual conversation about our “kids” I asked her what veterinarian she used (my typical undercover tactic for unearthing information), and she gave me the name of a clinic nearby. Without prompting she then proceeded to add, “I don’t know if you are looking for a vet, but if you are I suggest that you don’t go to XYZ Hospital.” I asked why, and she continued, “I used to take my pets there, and the doctors are wonderful, but then it just seemed like things started to change. The staff wasn’t as friendly, and to be honest the place was kind of dirty. You know, with five pets I was there all of the time, but they acted like they’d never met me before!”

As I sat down later that afternoon to write this article on marketing, my thoughts kept returning to our conversation. Whether or not this woman’s assessment of XYZ Hospital was accurate, or whether they were just having a few “off” days, was irrelevant. She was a dog park regular and had undoubtedly struck up countless conversations with other pet owners, many of which included the topic of veterinary care. As a result there’s no doubt that this practice’s income had been, and would continue to be, affected as a result of her experiences.

What the above scenario illustrates is the breakdown a practice’s internal marketing system. Clearly, when the internal system has weak spots, the consequences can be far-reaching. The core purpose of internal marketing is to keep clients loyal and bonded to your practice, since we know that these individuals have proven to be the best form of external marketing that exists. New clients that choose a practice as a result of a referral are the key to practice growth. These individuals not only have a higher bonding rate than new clients from other sources, but they are far more likely to continue the chain of referrals.

So what are some of the ways to ensure the peak performance of a practice’s internal marketing system? The simple fact is that every time a client comes to your practice they must be treated as if they are there for the first time, which means that their expectations must be consistently met and exceeded. While these expectations may relate directly to client service, they may just as likely have to do with the peeling paint and pee stains on the floor mats. If you don’t believe that, think about your personal experience and how you’ve chosen the restaurants and businesses you patronize. There is no question that visual perception, what I term the ‘not so little’ little things, can have a tremendous impact on both the success and failure of any business.

The first step is to pull into the parking lot every morning, take off your manager or owner glasses, and see your practice through the eyes of a client. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How does the parking lot look? Are the lines still visible or does it look like a vast expanse with weeds growing between the cracks?
- Is there an area where dogs can relieve themselves? Is it cleaned several times a day? Is there a garbage can and plastic bags so that clients can clean up after their pets?
- Are the hedges neatly trimmed and the front entrance swept? Have you considered putting out flower pots to brighten the entrance?
- Is the exterior of your facility clean? When was the last time you painted the trim or power washed the stucco? Are there prints and dog drool on the front door?

Step inside your practice and take a good look around:

- Did hairballs fly up when you opened the front door? Are the floors vacuumed and mopped? Check under the furniture and in the corners, especially behind and under the scale.
- What about the walls? Do they need wiping down or really need of a fresh coat of paint?
- Look up – if you have ceiling tiles do they need replacing? Are all the light bulbs working?
- What about dusting? Picture frames, furniture, shelves?
- If you have plants are they dead or alive?
- Are the counters clean and neat or are they loaded with cardboard displays and material? Keeping things on the counter to a minimum is an excellent way to improve the overall appearance of professionalism and organization. Consider having a vase of fresh flowers instead.
- Take a look at your team members – do they look clean and neat, or does it appear that they may have slept in their uniforms and rolled out of bed?

Go ahead and look a little bit closer:

- If you have retail items in your lobby, when was the last time the stock was rotated and dusted? Are there items that have been out there for so long that the packaging looks like it's from the 1980s? Think about updating your retail area and including some unique items that cannot be found at the chain pet stores.
- If you carry retail items have they been set up strategically to catch the client's eye when checking out?
- What type of reading material do you offer? Is it quality material about pets or the latest gossip magazine? Is the reading material current, or is it dated and worn?
- Do you offer refreshments? Consider a small coffee and tea area that has one of the new individual brew machines where clients can choose their flavor.
- What is hanging on the walls? If your practice has the wall space, a great idea is to contact local pet portrait artists and photographers and start a rotating gallery.

Now spend some time in the reception area observing your team members:

- Do they review upcoming appointments so that they know the names of the clients and their pets? Are they greeting them by name?
- Are they properly trained to look up as soon as the door opens and smile and acknowledge the client regardless of what they are doing?
- Do they show interest in the client and make physical contact with pets whenever possible?
- When a technician or assistant comes up front to bring an appointment to a room are they prepared? Do they walk purposefully and knowingly to the client and pet they are there to greet, or do they gaze aimlessly around the lobby hoping someone will jump up and say, "me, me, pick me!"?
- Does a staff member automatically walk a client to their car when they have a pet carrier or might need assistance?
- Do they continue to address clients by name when they are checking out? Do they ask how the appointment went and make sure there are no further questions?
- If a client seems frustrated or upset, do your team members ask what they can do to help, and then do what it takes to ensure that no client leaves upset?
- Do you notice a tendency for your team members to get complacent? If they are busy do they tend to show frustration and skimp on client service?

Clearly this list could go on, but taking the initiative to observe things through the eyes of your clients is a great place to start, and you have most likely begun to address some areas of concern. Congratulations!

But of course it doesn't stop there – that would be too easy! The ultimate goal is to enter your practice this way *every single day* so that it becomes second nature. Think of it as an insurance policy - a way to keep a pulse on your practice and one of the best ways to ensure continued client loyalty and satisfaction. I guarantee that it will be time well spent!