

WHERE'S YOUR WEBSITE?

January 2010

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Websites are really quite simple. Don't have one? Don't wait another day. Have an outdated, unattractive one? Update it. Have an interactive and informational site with updated content and easy navigation? Congratulations! Think you've heard it all before? Maybe you have, but if building or modifying your site hasn't managed to make it to the top of your to-do list, then maybe this article can help to convince you that 2010 should be the year that your practice builds a strong internet presence. Just as we have learned in the past year that veterinary medicine is not 'recession proof', we must also accept that it isn't 'web proof' either.

The latest studies show that more than 88% of consumers find new service providers by using search engines. Those that are new to an area will most likely use their geographical area plus the name of the service to begin their search (for example, 'Brookline MA veterinarian' or 'animal hospital St. Paul MN'). If your practice doesn't come up near the top of the page with an actual site for them to visit, you have just lost a potential new client – it's as simple as that, no questions asked. Why then, did the Veterinarian New Media Usage Study, which surveyed 425 small and large animal veterinarians, find that only 70% of small animal practitioners and 43% of large animal veterinarians have a website, yet this same study determined that 91% of these veterinarians used websites for their own professional advancement! Clearly the veterinary industry has become extremely internet savvy (and we were definitely a bit slow out of the starting gate), so why do we expect any less from our clients?

A high-quality website is a practice's single most important marketing tool, and it is the backbone for all other marketing initiatives (every piece of practice literature should have your website and email address *prominently* placed). For example, placing a print ad in a magazine, or purchasing a list to send materials to new home owners, has little impact if you can't refer them to a website for more information. Study after study has shown that consumers are savvy and careful, never more so than when it comes to their pets. So while they may hang on to whatever you send them, when it comes time to make an appointment they will first access the site to do more research. What do you think happens when there is no web address, or the site is dated? What happens is you have lost their undivided attention, and they will choose to continue searching to see what else is available.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with a group of ten receptionists at a practice that has an outstanding website, both visually and content-wise. This practice makes a point of tracking their new client sources - another absolute must for the top of your 2010 to-do list. In 2009 they were able to determine that they had received 50% of their new clients from an internet source, 20% from client referrals, and the other 30% from what they call 'drive by' (interestingly the yellow pages was less than 1%). They told me that the number of referrals from the internet was even higher than the statistics showed, since even those who were referred by a current client often explained that what convinced them to actually make an appointment was seeing the practice's website. One employee who had been with the

practice for a long time was extremely excited and told me that since the unveiling of their new site about 8 months prior new clients consistently tell her, “your website is the best I’ve seen, which is why I decided to make an appointment with you.”

NEW CLIENTS ARE ONLY PART OF THE PICTURE

A website is so much more than attracting new business. It is about maintaining current relationships and changing the way people think of your practice. You must be more to them than just the place they go when their pet is sick or needs shots. Your site must become an integral part of your client’s life; just as they have specific sites they go to for certain information, your site should be “on the tip of their tongue” with regard to anything pet-related. Keep them coming back to your site, and you will keep them coming back to your practice. As an added bonus, solidifying this relationship with current clients will automatically increase personal referrals, and we know that new business originating from a satisfied customer has the highest conversion rate to a long-term relationship than that from any other source.

When speaking with the group of receptionists mentioned earlier, I asked them whether they thought their improved website was utilized by current clients, and if so, in what ways. According to them, clients love being able to order prescriptions and fill out boarding forms and other releases prior to coming in. Interestingly, increased email communication was another benefit they highlighted; on average they get 15-20 client email correspondence per day, whereas previously there had been none. They have set up a timely system to handle these requests but feel that the benefit results from a decrease in lengthy phone calls, which takes them away from their ‘live’ customers.

A practice manager at another practice pointed out that having a site with a detailed page of links has made everyone’s job easier. Her entire staff refers people to their site on a daily basis for links to approved sources for services and products, such as specific medical information, grief counseling, trainers, adoption and much more. She explains that this not only saves doctors and staff time trying to hunt down information, but it is also a great way to impact from what sources clients are receiving this information.

Another large hospital that offers a variety of services, such as acupuncture and physical rehabilitation, put a lot of time into highlighting and detailing these services on their new site and included lots of photo images and video (for example, a short video of a pet walking in the underwater treadmill gives people an idea of what to expect if they have never seen it before). The practice manager explained, “It makes our life so much easier! Our current clients want to know more about our services, and now we can recommend they go straight to our website to read about them. Not only do they almost always end up wanting to try something new, but I feel confident knowing that the quality and quantity of information received is not dependent on who they happen to speak with or how busy we are that day.”

ATTRACTING TOP TALENT

Here's a fact that is often overlooked - having a strong website can have a tremendous effect on a practice's ability to attract top talent. It doesn't matter whether you are looking for a new associate or a kennel attendant; having an impressive website is a huge draw and can easily make the difference between opting to work for you and accepting another offer. Where do employers post opportunities and job seekers look for available positions? They go to the internet. So why would you post a job opportunity, yet not provide candidates with a place to go and learn more about you? With no site for them to access, top-notch candidates will look elsewhere.

As a part-time veterinary industry matchmaker I ask job seekers, most often those looking for associate veterinarian positions, what makes them consider one opportunity over another. What I am told time and again is that while a practice with a mediocre site can be a turn-off, having no website at all leads candidates to make broad assumptions regarding a practice. Their assumption is that a practice that does not take the time to have a website is also a practice that hasn't taken the time to update their medicine, equipment or facilities. Clearly we can call this stereotyping, but whether it is accurate or not is irrelevant, since you'll never have the opportunity to see their resume and show them otherwise.

Look at this from the angle of the one doing the interviewing; you can take advantage of your website as a tool to weed out candidates that aren't committed or serious. It can be quite enlightening if an applicant has been provided with the name of the practice but hasn't bothered to do his or her "homework" prior to applying for a position. Do they reference anything specific in their cover letter? If you call them, have they taken the time to do their due diligence by accessing your site for information?

A candidate that arrives for an interview and is able to initiate a conversation by saying "I saw this on your website" or "I have a question about that" should spark your interest far more than one that hasn't bothered to learn anything about your practice. If nothing else, a candidate that has not taken the time to access your website prior to an interview should send up a yellow flag that leads to further questioning in order to determine whether this lack of initiative may be indicative of his or her job performance down the line.

Want another way to "weed out" the less-than-serious? When scheduling an interview, go so far as to recommend they go to the site prior to the appointment, and then see if they bother to take your advice. If not, ask yourself whether they really want to work for you, or whether they really just need a job - any job. In other words, what is their level of commitment? Doing this is also a great test of one's ability and willingness to follow directions.

FINALLY...

Clearly this article is not about how to build a website, but I do feel it is important to add that there are many different options available, and they fit every budget. I would suggest that unless you are a graphic artist, moonlight as a web designer or have hours upon hours of free

time on your hands, you should not build your own site. A few other tips to remember: clients want clean, clear, informative content. They want easy navigation tools so that they can find what they are looking for, and when it comes to images they want to see *your* practice and *your* people and *your* patients.

We exist in the world of Wii (where I just learned you can actually get a workout playing tennis with yourself in your living room), PS2, online relationships and instant gratification. Like it or not, there is no turning back the clock. In the United States owning a computer is practically considered a necessity, not a luxury. It is no longer accurate to claim that the worldwide web only attracts a certain demographic, although this is an argument I still hear from some veterinarians; there are two year olds on interactive learning sites and grandparents on Facebook. So, kudos to those of you who already recognize the benefits of a high-quality, high-content website. To those of you that haven't gotten there yet, no worries – it's 2010 and the sky's the limit!