

Commonsense, Practical Answers to Key Marketing Questions in Practice

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It's not enough to have an attractive building, good equipment and medical expertise; you have to figure out how to market what you've got if you're going to succeed in practice. The following 15 questions and answers will help you think through what you're doing, avoid common mistakes and make better marketing decisions to grow your practice.

Q-1 What's the single most important decision I can make for my practice?

Location, location, location! A well-located practice has a hard time failing. A good location means:

- The sign and building have good exposure to passing traffic
- There's sufficient parking
- It's easy to get to from the road
- The building is attractive and inviting
- The space is affordable

Q-2 How much money should I be spending on Yellow Pages advertising?

After location, your advertising in print telephone books and online listings is your next most important marketing decision, so let's focus there. You can keep your expenses under control by carefully selecting the book(s) you'll be in to target attractive areas and by including key information in your ad.

Your listing should be visually attractive and stand out from others. Your ad should highlight your location since this will help nearby pet owners select your practice. Also advertise any special services you provide, such as exotics, boarding or grooming, and prescription food which can help build traffic for your hospital. Finally, keep it simple! If you're using a display ad, think of it as a mini billboard. It should clearly and succinctly telegraph your message. List your web page address in your Yellow Pages listing.

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Finally to keep cost under control, negotiate with your print Yellow Pages vendor to handle your online listing as well. Ask to have your online listing linked to your website and ask for a package price to cover both print and online listings.

Q-3 Are “on-hold” messages a good idea?

The worst thing you can do is to have *nothing* play when people are on hold. This makes the wait seem longer and callers may think they’ve been disconnected. “On-hold” messages make sense because they remind pet owners of things they should be doing for their pets, like heartworm checks, and tell them about new products and services your practice can provide. Use your on-hold messages as a brief, audio-newsletter for your practice.

Q-4 What is an easy, effective marketing activity for my practice?

An often-overlooked marketing opportunity is to use in-office displays or signs that tie-into seasonal issues. For instance, in the Fall, listing the signs of arthritis in pets can help pet owners recognize symptoms. Telling pet owners what signs to look for and that you can help their pet is always a good idea because the more clients know, the more they’ll do for their pets. To amplify the message tie it in with a targeted mailing to clients on new arthritis treatments and diets. Ask your staff to help. They usually have great ideas!

Q-5 Do I have to be open 24 hours to be competitive?

No. But you do have to be open *smart* hours: Ask yourself, what are the busiest days of the week at my hospital? What are the busiest times each day? What appointment hours do clients ask for that we don’t provide? You may discover that you can be more productive and work *fewer* hours if you match the hours you are open to those that are best for your clients.

Q-6 Don’t I need a lot of staff to provide good client service?

No. You need a few well-trained, competent, outgoing people. Quality wins over quantity every time. Smart scheduling and training can make your practice run smoothly with fewer people, and you can usually afford to pay them more which will give you a competitive edge in attracting and keeping good people.

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Q-7 Are newsletters a good idea for my practice?

It depends on the newsletter. If the newsletter is attractive, inviting, interesting and fun to read, it can be an excellent choice to stay in touch with your clients. Quarterly newsletters usually work best because they allow you to address seasonal issues, and they are less work and more cost-effective than monthly newsletters. To maximize their usefulness, make sure you have extra copies printed to use as handouts when you give talks and to give to new clients and others who come into your practice. Consider sending online newsletters to save on printing and postage costs.

Q-8 Do I need a logo?

A logo is usually a good idea. It's a symbol that announces "this is us!" It should be an expression of your practice's personality and make you stand out from the pack. To get full value from your logo, it must be used on everything: your sign, Yellow Pages ad, business cards, web page, brochures, client handouts, invoices, prescription labels, and more.

Q-9 Do I need a practice brochure?

Practice brochures originally came into vogue in the 1980s. At that time they were little more than brag sheets. If you do a practice brochure today, it should be developed from the client's perspective. Use a folder rather than a brochure so that you can customize it and easily change inserts to keep it up-to-date. Or think of referring clients to your "online" brochure on your website.

Q-10 Do I need to a Website for my hospital?

The short answer is "yes". Websites are fundamental marketing tools today. Your website should be used for two primary purposes:

- To attract new clients
- To provide improved service to current clients

To make a good impression online, be sure that your website:

- Looks good and is visually engaging
- Is well-organized and easily navigated
- Solves a problem – such as providing the information sought
- Shows your hospital telephone number and a map to get there

Q-11 How can we make my reminder cards more effective?

The number-one way to improve reminder cards is to make sure you're sending them on a *regular basis* and for *everything* that you should. Always give clients a second chance: If you don't hear from them in two weeks, send a second

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reminder card. If you don't hear from them after that, call to find out what's wrong. Don't forget to collect clients' e-mail addresses so that you can offer that option as well for reminders.

Q-12 How do I know what new services my clients want?

Clients tell us everyday what they want, but they do it by asking questions, not telling us outright. What are your clients asking about? Different hours? Herbal or acupuncture options? Boarding? Grooming? Veterinary nurse visits to their homes? Listen to client questions to find the answers to new services they want.

Q-13 Should we survey our clients?

Yes and No. It's important to know if clients are satisfied, but sending out surveys or giving people cards to fill out doesn't usually tell you what's wrong. The clients that like you will fill out your cards and say nice things, but the clients who are unhappy will vote with their feet and you won't hear from them. Two ongoing measurements of client satisfaction to track are:

- What percentage of your clients do you retain year-to-year? (Sixty percent retention is average.)
- How many new clients were referred by other clients? (Referrals are the best indication that clients are happy with your hospital – so happy they're even telling their friends about you!)

Q-14 What do I say when the local little league, high school band and other groups come knocking on my door for donations?

The first question to ask is: "Does this make sense for my practice?" Do you want to limit your donations to pet-related causes? For instance, would it be more effective if you and your staff organized a dog wash and donated the proceeds to the local animal shelter? Or, if you decide to donate to a fund raiser, make it a gift that promotes a new service at your hospital, such as a "pet nutritional makeover" or free microchip. Whatever donation you make should raise awareness, attract people to your hospital, earn goodwill and help pets.

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Q-15 How do you build word-of-mouth advertising faster?

Word-of-mouth advertising is the best, but it usually grows slowly. To speed the process you can:

- Track names and send a “thank you” to any client who has referred another to you.
- Post a sign that gives people the idea. It could say, “Thank you for your referrals. We enjoy taking care of pet owners just like you!”
- Do something exceptional that gets clients talking about you and your practice – perhaps scan their pet’s picture onto a sheet with your hospital’s name on it. Give it to them to take home after their appointment.
- Hand out your business card when you attend business and community meetings and give your staff their own cards so they can do the same. This is a business tool all professionals use. And it gives recipients personal contact at your hospital.
- Hold events (puppy classes, kitten classes, nail clipping classes, animal behavior seminars, dog washes, or classes for kids to help them be good “pet parents”) at the hospital to get people coming there and talking about it. Be sure to send press releases to the local media for each event.

There will always be new marketing choices and new questions to ask! I hope the ones discussed in this program will help you to make good marketing decisions for your practice and provide a framework to think through new choices in a pragmatic and practical way.