

If you market, THEY WILL COME

The key to attracting a crowd: Knowing what your clients want and raising your level of service to meet their needs. Then you can tap marketing tactics to spread the word.

BY JESSICA HARPER, MANAGING EDITOR

EFFECTIVE MARKETING FOCUSES on your clients, not on your practice. So to develop marketing strategies that work, you need to know how existing and potential clients perceive your practice, what they want from a veterinarian, and what factors they consider when choosing a practitioner. Then and only then can you turn your thinking to the tactics that you'll use—such as telephone-directory advertising and event sponsorships—to tell the community what you offer.

"You wouldn't treat a patient before doing an exam and performing necessary diagnostics," says Linda Wasche, founder and president of LW Market-works Inc. in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. "Running an ad before you've done the

background research is like saying, 'Let's try this antibiotic' before you've looked at Fluffy." Plus, when you know what message to send to clients and how best to reach them, the decisions about where to spend marketing dollars become much easier.

If you put off marketing efforts, the costs may be one excuse you give. Yet you don't need to spend an exorbitant amount, says Wasche. Your budget will depend on what you want to achieve.

If you've set your sights on aggressive growth, then you'll be looking at a higher price tag to accomplish your goals. But if you just want to strengthen your practice, you can get away with a smaller investment, she says.

Not having enough time to think

through your approach is another common excuse for giving your marketing strategy short shrift, says Rebecca Hart, an accredited public relations professional and co-founder of TheVetZone.com. "But like any area in life, you make time for what's important to you," she says.

Wasche agrees that making time for marketing is worth the effort. "Professionals, whether they're physicians, attorneys, or veterinarians, think that because they run an outstanding practice and they're great at what they do, people will come," she says. "But your client can't evaluate the quality of that surgery you performed. Clients decide whether they'll work with you based on other factors." ▶

rescue organization, or somewhere else to find you? Who do they talk to?

4. Build a marketing strategy, applying the data you've gathered to reach more potential clients. For example, did most of your clients find you through referrals? If so, think about how you could generate more referrals.

Yes, these steps will take work, says Wasche. But just as you would with a patient, you must focus on diagnostics before you move to a treatment plan. Then you can move on to the tactical aspects of marketing that most people are familiar with.

The good news: If you're practicing high-quality medicine, you've already started marketing your services, says Dr. Bellavance. "When you talk to clients about what's best for their horse, your recommendation usually involves preventive medicine and diagnostic work," she says. "Informing clients about these treatments and tests is one way of marketing the services you offer."

Underutilized tools to try

When you broaden your marketing approach, you need to choose the specific tactics that best fit your needs. The following strategies could be useful, and they tend to be underutilized by equine practitioners. (See "Options for Your Marketing Plan" at www.vetecon.com

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for a more complete list of strategies.)

> **Web site.** "Even practitioners who currently maintain Web sites aren't using them to their full potential," Dr. Bellavance says. Do you provide client education materials online? Do you offer clients online pharmacy options? "These tools save clients time," she says. "And you can start a Web site easily, and affordably. I know some practices pay only \$25 a month for hosting. With all the Web site programs and services available, you just need to know how to type to get started."

> **Client education seminars.** "Collaborating with your colleagues sends a strong message to clients about your professionalism," Dr. Bellavance says. She suggests working with a group of local or regional equine practitioners to offer educational seminars to the community. You could even tap suppliers to see if they'd be willing to spon-

sor a seminar, she says.

> **Referrals.** Asking for referrals might feel a little strange at first, says Hart, but word-of-mouth recommendations are your most powerful advertising tool. And you don't need to shell out a lot of money to get started. (See "Nudge Clients to Spread the Word.")

Wasche agrees. "If you're really marketing right, you'll see growth from referrals. If you can distinguish your practice in a way that pleases clients, they'll refer their friends to you."

A successful campaign

"The best marketing campaigns consistently bring in the new clients you need to sustain the practice," says Hart. "So figure out how many new clients you need—then find the most cost-effective methods to reach them."

One caution: You shouldn't expect to hit on the best method upfront. "Generally, practices need to track response to a variety of strategies for about a year to identify the most economical ways to bring client to the door," she says. In fact, thinking too short-term—then getting frustrated and doing nothing—is practitioners' biggest marketing mistake, she says.

Eventually, you'll hit your numbers. But don't stop there. "Marketing is a never-ending process," says Wasche. "You need to stay focused on what horse owners are looking for because clients' needs and market dynamics change over time." ■

Referral tips

Nudge clients to spread the word

Referrals are the best way to gain new clients. But the idea of asking for a referral outright leaves most practitioners squirming. Remember, though, says Rebecca Hart, an accredited public relations professional, "If you're providing good service, people will be happy to refer others to you." Try these four strategies to improve your referral business, and watch your efforts grow.

1. Start a spreadsheet that tracks clients who refer you and why.
2. Leave a few extra business cards with clients or the barn manager.
3. Print this statement on an invoice: "If you're happy, please tell others. If you aren't, please tell us."
4. Take the time to prepare handwritten thank-you notes for every client who sends you a referral.