IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?
Using communication to build client loyalty

When it comes to client communication, it appears that vets and pet owners are not always on the same page, according to two separate pieces of research commissioned by Pfizer Animal Health. The Vet Support+ Spring Pulse Survey provides a snapshot of current market sentiment from practice managers and owners, whilst the client satisfaction survey was independent research conducted among 2,035 pet owners who have visited the vet in the last twelve months. Client satisfaction, loyalty and communication were examined by both pieces of research and communication was the main area that demonstrated differences of opinion between clients and their vet practice.

We know that communication is core to building and maintaining good client relationships and loyal clients are key to a successful practice. However, when you have a full appointments book and a staff member is off sick, embracing good client communication protocols can slip down the priority list. Fortunately, the effective use of increasingly sophisticated technology can raise loyalty in clients who are not just satisfied with what the practice offers, but also positive enough to recommend the practice to others. Some techno-friendly forms of communication to consider include;

In practice
A smile from the receptionist and clear communication in the consult room should be mandatory, but by actually asking your clients about their experience, you are showing a degree of attention beyond the ‘mandatory’. It is worth exploring the benefits of an in-practice or online survey. Technology can play a vital role in delivering user-friendly tools such as touch-screen in-practice surveys or online questionnaires which provide real time data.

Clever Communication
Harnessing email helps keep in touch with clients via a medium many would prefer. Email was indicated by 48% of the online pet owners polled as a preferred form of practice communication1. Practices are missing a trick and continue to rank post (80%) and telephone (79%) as preferred forms of client communication with less than a third (28%) citing email2. By contrast, pet owners were less enamoured by postal (50%) and phone (44%) contact1.

I’m not suggesting that all communication should be virtual, but by listening to your clients and understanding their preferences you can build loyalty by delivering a tailored service, utilising versatile communications which also save time, money and manpower to focus on the core business. There are numerous offers in the marketplace for template newsletters or reminder cards, either virtual or hard copy, but remember, not all are created equal!

Harness the Web
According to the findings, vets believed that the internet was the third most important reason a client chose their practice (22%)2 whereas it barely tipped the scales for owners with 2% currently citing it as an influencer in their decision making1. Although it may not be an influencer for future clients at the moment (and it is worth considering that there may be an issue of ‘cause and effect’ here, whereby practice websites are not being optimised to deliver on this objective), don’t dismiss the internet.
However, if loyal clients are what you are after, it is the near perfect medium to provide the services many of them say they need. Some practices are starting to recognise this, delivering or planning functionality on their website that continues to build relationships when clients are away from the practice. Repeat prescriptions is one service that the online pet owners would like the practice to offer (50%)\textsuperscript{1} and that many practice websites are already or planning to deliver (43%)\textsuperscript{2}. However, there’s a long way to go to meet owners’ demands for the ability to make appointments (69%)\textsuperscript{1} or ask their vet a question (59%)\textsuperscript{1} with only a quarter of practices believing they will offer this level of interactivity in the near future\textsuperscript{2}.

Technological advances mean there has never been a better time to consider upscaling your client communication to drive client loyalty. From e-Newsletters to touch-screen surveys and online appointments, all can be harnessed to speak directly to some owners in a medium they actively use and enjoy.

Words: 665
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Amy Rook is a Pfizer Business Consultant focused on servicing the needs of both privately-owned practices and larger corporate clients, helping them understand how they can improve their businesses from the perspective of businesses operations, client relations and staff management.

A graduate of Newcastle University with an Honours degree in Animal Science, Amy worked for the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) before moving into the veterinary pharmaceutical industry in 2005. She has spent time on both the small and large animal sides of the business working across the UK gaining invaluable insights into the unique issues for each, for her current role.

Amy has been involved in the planning and implementation of the Pfizer Vet Support+ Business Services from the beginning, aiding in the design and trialling of the range of services we have available today. Her training included the completion of a veterinary specific business course at Purdue University in the USA, as well as working alongside both the European School of Management and with experts in the UK market.

Ref 1: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2035 pet owners who have visited a vet in the last 12 months. Fieldwork was undertaken between 8th - 14th March 2011. The survey was carried out online. Pfizer involvement?
Ref 2: Pfizer Pulse report, Spring 2011