

# Social Media

## and Self-Directed Learning: What Veterinary Practices Need to Know

Lauren O'Leary, RVT CVPM

“The purpose of a business is to create a customer...who creates customers” - Peter Drucker

### What Clients Want: Clarity

The internet is empowering people to learn more, through self-directed learning and learn it faster than ever before. Clients may come to us for a second opinion or are seeking a certain treatment or protocol for their pet but have never received a definitive diagnosis; they simply learned about it on the internet. Veterinary health care as we know it is changing. No longer will veterinary hospitals solicit clients to inform and educate them about their services; informed pet owners will search the web for a practice that meets their needs, within their chosen area. Many will have visited the clinic's web site prior to choosing a hospital to look up the doctors online, to check out their stance on an ethical issue, view from where they graduated, and where their interests lie within the field. A client can make contact from around the corner, or from around the world.

No longer are closed doors with “employees only” signs appropriate. Clients want

clarity. They want to see where their pet is going and how it will be treated, and with what protocol. What equipment is being used to monitor them? What are the credentials of the staff members attending to their pets? Wouldn't you want to know the same for your pets? After all, our pets are like family. (*AAHA Report 1995*)

One recent text sites, “After their physician, nurse or pharmacist – people are looking within their network for good advice on medical treatments. Some even list the advice from friends above that of their physician. Seventy six percent rely on what others say, while only 15% rely on advertising. [*Socialnomics, Erik Qualman (2009)*]

Within the veterinary health care industry, social media tools such as: breed club pages, client support groups, social networking sites, blogs, webinars, health education networks such as the Veterinary Information Network (VIN), Lifelearn, and Veterinary Support Personnel Network (VSPN), as well as video sharing sites like YouTube, are becoming increasingly popular. Clients may have been introduced to educational sites like Elluminate, Wimba and Moodle. They may have already used

learning management systems sites like Blackboard while at school, so using these sites become a very natural adaptation for them. There are interesting phone apps specific to veterinary medicine including formulary and calculation programs which assist with drug doses, fluid calculations, conversions etc. (e.g. 'A Vet Tool'). With the addition of programs like Skype and NetMeeting, we can keep in touch virtually with clients. Programs like Page Turner, SlideShare and Flickr can help us post virtual tours and photos demonstrating simple procedures to clients and to share event photos we are involved within the community.

Search engines are expanding their reach and becoming increasingly more specific in focus with sites like Digg, Firefox, Reddit, Stumbleupon, and bookmarking sites like Delicious. Clinic websites can become increasingly more interactive with tools such as podcasts, web radio and video sharing devices. Online sites Zoomerang and SurveyMonkey help clinics to design and collect data from clients through surveys on their websites. Sites like Voki, Animoto, Audacity, Prezi, are also gaining in popularity. Check them out and see for yourself the tools that are

available for your clinic to use, many that your clients are already using. These forums are changing the way veterinarians, their staff, and their clients learn, interact and communicate with each other. Client expectations are changing right along with these new modes of communication, this new method of bringing clients into community with us.

People rely more heavily on the internet now than ever before. In fact, they make medical decisions, get support, and learn about disease conditions without even contacting a physician. (*Sarason-Kahn 2008*) With the advent of Web 2.0, clients can share what they learn with others around the world experiencing the same journey. Author Jane Sarason-Kahn states “The collective wisdom harnessed by social media can yield insights well beyond the knowledge of any single patient or physician”. Online forums allow clients to search, blog and learn about treatment regimes for the management of their pet’s diseases. They can access technical support sites from product manufacturers. They can come into community and support other pet owners facing the same struggles, such as pet loss, diabetes and cancer.

When asked what they really want, clients will tell you plain and simple: they want clarity. They want to learn everything they can about their pets, their conditions and at their own pace. Doing so on the internet becomes one way to meet their needs.

### Shifting the Way We Think, Learn and Connect

Social media is a shift in the way we think, learn, and connect with our clients, our staff and our community. Forums provided by social media networks are not giant bill boards for no charge advertising, nor are they simply vehicles for selling people more products. Social media is about sharing information and bringing clients and their pets into community with your clinic. Searching for information is empowering for them, and it is engaging their minds to learn all they can about their pets condition. It isn’t just a big pool of data. They want to share the experience with others, not have data dumped on them. They choose what they want to learn about, in the format

they desire, through the venue of their choosing, be it Facebook®, a blog post, support group, or even Twitter®. In the past, learning required a physical classroom and a teacher. As web-based tools like Elluminate, Wimba, Blackboard, and Sakai have evolved, those wishing to learn online, can do so in their choice of environments: a synchronous (Instant Messaging, real-time) or asynchronous (blog post), whichever suits their needs.

### The Future Needs Integration

In the future, we will learn to listen to our clients via their chatter on the internet. We will monitor our own presence on the web. Have you ever performed a web search for your own practice? If you are having trouble finding your facility on the web, chances are, so are your clients. Don’t make them work too hard, or they may choose someone else’s services. Monitor your online reputation using, “Google Alert” to crawl the web on your behalf, looking for recent postings, reviews or data about your clinic. Respond to reviews and ratings – be honest and forthright. Correct any misinformation, apologize to people who are upset or have concerns. Remember to be real; these things will happen to everyone occasionally.

Within veterinary hospitals, we are already recruiting staff via postings on the internet using college and association websites and social media tools such as Linked In®, Monster.ca™ and vehicles like Craigslist™ and Kijiji™. In the meantime, privacy legislation allows us to check out potential staff members out by opening up their Facebook® page to see what they are really like when they let their hair down. This generation of learners has grown up online (Baird, Fisher 2005), surrounded by the digital world, and as a result have developed new ways of processing information. They are “hardwired” to simultaneously utilize multiple types of web-based partici-

patory media. This is a technologically savvy generation of learners who have no concept of using a 26 volume set of encyclopedias.

Almost immediately following the introduction of Web 2.0, one very important area of our practices began to change: our libraries. This area within our practices may become entirely virtual, with no tangible books or journals; replaced with e-books, e-zines, and e-journals, all read on iPads™, Kindles™ or tablets. At the very least, they will be delivered digitally to our smart phones. Newspapers have already begun to see circulation rates declines with the advent of web-based news sites. These rapid changes in technology demand continual learning, unlearning, and relearning as people adapt to emerging innovations and developments. (*Gouthro 2000*) Technology is changing so rapidly we need continual training just to stay afloat.

We need to integrate, but what does that look like and how does one go about integrating? One popular scenario has been to operate each of these social media functions through an area within your clinic’s website homepage. For client access, icons can be arranged which click right on to your Facebook®, Twitter®, LinkedIn® and YouTube® sites. You can also post a



## What’s Web 2.0?

The term Web 2.0 is associated with web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centred design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. A Web 2.0 site allows users to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators (prosumers) of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to websites where users (consumers) are limited to the passive viewing of content created for them. Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, hosted services, web applications, mashups and folksonomies. (*Wikipedia*)

general interest pet blog that is linked to your clinic's website enabling clients to see with which hospital the writer is affiliated. All of this can bond clients to your practice.

Perhaps one of the biggest changes to our world is going mobile. Forget the desktop computer, most of these new social media forums have applications which run on clients' and staff members' phones. Most are web-based and require mobile browsers, hence the popularity of the BlackBerry® and iPhones®, and now the iPad®.

What is disturbing, however, about all this talk of technology, is the speed with which these progressions are made. How can our staff keep up with this pace of change? How much preparation and training will need to be done in order to increase the productivity of staff members with the advent of these tools? Will they significantly decrease the hours in a work day, or have they merely provided a way to take work with you, everywhere, with no escape? How much time will all this take? Where is the typical veterinary hospital on this continuum of social media and its integration into veterinary practice? Unfortunately, the industry is all over the map, as everyone progresses at his or her own pace. It will take some time for hospitals and their clients to embrace this new culture of learning.

### **Pace Yourself**

In 1967, a US senate subcommittee predicted that by 1985 US citizens would be working 22 hours a week with the advent of the new computer technology. (Richard Swenson, Margin 2007) No study needs to be referenced to determine how that projection turned out. Workloads have increased, stress has increased, 'to do' lists are longer, almost invariably due to these very technological advances that futurists were sure would be a godsend.

To date, there are no longitudinal studies available on the affect of the social media boom on society and our self-directed learning. However, by virtue of our human nature, we are all about the next trend. In the long run, has each of these so called booms or trends benefited us? Has it benefited our environment and our living conditions, or just sold more consumer goods?

### **Is Technology Really Progress?**

"Few companies that installed computers to reduce the employment of clerks have realized their expectations... They now need more and more expensive clerks even though they call them 'operators' or 'programmers.'" - Peter Drucker

Progress continually gives us more options and advances at exponential rates. We have more technology, more labour-saving devices, more affluence, and more information than ever before, but we are stuck with human limits and 24 hour days. Progress has put us on a collision course with our limitations. (Swenson, Richard A 2003)

If we listen to the rhetoric, technology is designed to make our lives simpler and easier, to save us time and money. Yet studies show more time than ever is spent in front of a computer screen, and technology continues to be one of the most watched items on the stock exchange. When will our human expectations cease? The new, 'bigger, better, faster' - has now become 'smaller, mobile, and less expensive'. Technology used wisely, can be freeing. However, like anything in life, it can become all-consuming. We need to learn how to unplug and turn off, to protect our staff from overload and burn out.

Daily, we see people walking and texting, surfing and tweeting, checking emails while they drive, and even while they develop x-rays. Lauded for their ability to multi-task, these people are not interacting with others, nor are they relaxing.

Will social media benefit the important things in life long-term? Will it build relationships? Will it build our children's ability to interact socially, or spell with proper English? Or will it take us backwards with all high tech and no high touch? Will phone calls to clients cease, only to become an email, or a tweet? How can we know? How can we see into the future? We can not, we can only be aware of the risks and benefits of these tools.

### **Are There Benefits?**

Yes, clearly many hospitals are already seeing tangible benefits of the alliances formed through blogs and Facebook® pages for their clinic; there is a more intimate bond with their clients. Clients feel

better-informed and they receive timely dissemination of information such as: alerts, food recalls, reminders, and invitations to events. Clinics are finding out very quickly what works and what doesn't work for their clients, as clients have not been shy about speaking their minds, and giving feedback. On the upside, results are traceable if there is attendance at a posted event. What about return on investment? Many clinics will state that they feel they did not have to make a substantial investment of cash or time to get their programs up and running if they already had a presence on the web. Many of the programs and applications are free.

### **Are There Risks?**

Most certainly! Cyber bullying, propaganda, spam, scams, false information, slander campaigns, privacy issues, tampering, hacking, and information overload - to name a few. Is there really a client-patient relationship based on web interaction? Can we charge for advice we give? Is it ethical to consult on the internet? All these questions and many more will arise. Once something is out there posted on the worldwide web, it is out there forever. You can not take it back. Your only hope if misinformation is posted is to move into damage control mode. Answer honestly, correct mistakes and move on. What does it cost? Is it really free or is it costing us in terms of time staff are spending on manning sites, posting, blogging, checking and responding to emails and requests? Is it worth the effort? That remains to be seen, however at this juncture, one thing is true - clients certainly seem to think so!

### **Action Steps for Clinics Embarking Upon a Social Media Campaign**

- Niche your market
- Remember - it's about referrals
- Remember - overall database numbers are not important if no one comes back
- It's all about a relationship and building a community of learners
- Clients will choose if that community leads to a booked appointment, or a sale
- Listen to your clients and find out what they want or expect
- Google yourself and your clinic - find out what clients are saying or not saying about you
- Keep it simple
- Have fun
- Learn to integrate - there are programs



to inter-connect applications. i.e. HootSuite

- Share the love! Don't have one person in control of all aspects of your social media
- Designate different staff members to update different areas so the workload is shared

### Summary

In summary, it was our goal to delve into how today's veterinary team is coping with the steep learning curve that accompanies a foray into the realm of social media and self-directed learning.

In the very near future, veterinary communication will be revolutionized by the integration of social media into all aspects of client education and patient care. This shift in the way we learn and educate our clients, our staff and our community will be a fundamental change within the very culture of those veterinary teams that choose to embrace it.

### Conclusion

The domain of social media is vast. Remember that everyone learns at their own pace, so go slowly. Better to master one area, gain confidence and move along, than to jump blindly into several areas at one time, not attend to them, or enjoy success in any of them. You will find champions on your team in certain areas: planning, execution, posting, updating. Don't be afraid to celebrate successes, and discuss failures. Trial and error actually makes a good bedfellow for self-directed learning. Train, Train, and retrain. Integrate for ease of use, eliminating the need to access emails and posts at many different sites. Consider a software or application that does this for you for free, such as TweetBig. Check often for new applications and updates. This realm of social media is moving very quickly with new products being added daily. Remember also that different things motivate different people to learn, and people will naturally gravitate to a vehicle they can easily learn to manipulate, within their learning style.

There is one overwhelming truth regarding social media - there is a desire to connect and to be in community with others which runs deeply within us all. If at first you don't succeed, tweet tweet again!

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