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Resolve to make your KOLs count

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ABSTRACT: Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) are well named because they *are* 'key opinion leaders' in the eyes of the local pet-owning community. Owners moving to a new area are more likely to ask other petcare businesses for practice recommendations, than to trust such an important decision to chance. If these contacts have a poor opinion of a practice, or have had their own bad experience, they tell their clients about it, for sure. This article looks at practical ways in which KOLs can be contacted, cultivated and contribute to a successful veterinary practice.

Whilst it may irk many practices to admit it, KOLs are well named – they *are* Key Opinion Leaders in the eyes of many in the local pet-owning community. Owners moving to a new area are more likely to ask other pet-care businesses for practice recommendations, than to trust such an important decision to chance by leafing through the *Yellow Pages*.

Kennels, catteries, breeders, rescue centres, pet shops, groomers, pet sitters, dog walkers, trainers and behavioural experts – each of these businesses has its own client base, and most of them probably also have their own pets. Which means that if they have a poor opinion of a practice, or have had their own bad experience there, they will be telling their clients about it, for sure.

Conversely, if they know that your practice is warm, caring and always does that little bit extra; if they have seen that staff are friendly and passionate about providing the very best care; you can be equally sure that they'll be telling that to their clients. The difference is that now their clients will want to come to you.

More and more practices appreciate that it makes sound business sense to foster good relationships with local pet-care businesses. Apart from anything else, pet owners are likely to see these service providers more often than their vet, and inevitably the wider questions of health and well-being will come up over the grooming table.

When you think that horse owners probably see their farrier every six weeks, cat owners may visit their cattery three or four times a year, and owners of long-haired dogs will be at the grooming parlour every quarter, it's easy to see where the many opportunities for spreading praise or passing on horror stories lie.

Historically, many in the veterinary profession have been a little sniffy about these 'paraprofessionals' – who do they think they are to give advice on health and well-being? What do they know about vaccinations?

The importance is not so much on what they do (or don't) know, but rather the simple and inescapable fact that they will be passing their thoughts and suggestions on to their clients regardless. If you ignore these KOLs and have nothing to do with them, then at best they simply won't mention your practice when asked

for recommendations – and at worst they will tell clients that you are rude and arrogant, and they had better stay away. And many owners will.

For a whole series of reasons, it is much better to be proactive and develop a two-way, open and professional relationship with the pet-care businesses in your catchment area. It's OK not to be best friends with them – but at least be civil and acknowledge that working together can bring very real benefits for you both.

It may very well be too much for the vets at your practice to swallow their pride and approach local KOLs, in which case this is a role that is perfectly suited to the VN. Owning the KOL relationship programme is a very productive and satisfying addition to the CV of any veterinary nurse – demonstrating and developing management expertise, organisational competence and people skills.

To be honest, there are also real advantages to be had from simply not being a vet! If we have a stereotypical idea of what KOLs are like, you can bet that your local business owners will also have their own thoughts as to how many vets behave! And they may well be right!

Nurses are perhaps more likely to 'click' with KOLs, being perceived as more 'normal', more 'like us', more passionate about the realities of being an animal owner, largely unfettered by the concerns of the science of treating sick animals. All things considered, local pet-care business owners are likely to be much more receptive to an invitation from a practice VN than the managing partner.

Getting started

Assuming that your practice currently has no programme of contact and education in place with local business owners, a good place to start is to assess how large the potential pool of contacts is. Searching online for categories of local pet-care businesses, – for example, 'dog groomers in Bath', 'farriers in Ripon', 'catteries in Ayr' – will quickly yield a surprisingly large number of KOLs. (And if your practice is actually in Bath, Ripon or Ayr, then so much the better!)

Once you have a list of around 30 related businesses, it's time to make contact.

“Engaging positively with pet care businesses in your catchment area demonstrates that your practice team is forward-thinking, welcoming, friendly, professional, good fun, knowledgeable – all the things for which you'd like to be known.”

A personal approach is always best, but obviously you have a day job to do, so face-to-face meetings may not be possible with everyone. Your colleagues may already use some of the businesses, so it's worth a discussion at the practice team meeting – and then when they are next visiting the KOL business with their own pets, staff can take the opportunity to speak about the events and services you have planned.

For the businesses where you have no existing contact, a telephone call or explanatory informal and friendly letter will get across your hopes and expectations just as well.

The size and scope of the KOL programme is entirely up to you, and can be as ambitious or as low-key as you like. Many practices find that a quarterly evening 'get-together' works very well for them. There can be an educational element to the event, with practice staff sharing latest developments or relevant community healthcare issues before the cakes and wine come out!

Newsletters can also keep your local business community up to date with developments at the practice – when new staff join the team, or when new services and facilities are offered.

Aside from the overtly educational aspect of these events, don't underestimate the benefits of some good old-fashioned social interaction. Sharing a moan about road works, passing on top DIY tips and asking opinions about good schools, plants for wet areas, recipes, films, etc. all serve to demonstrate that veterinary surgeons are just people too! And if this sounds facile, it is not – we all like to like people like us. Especially if they happen to like animals too!

Useful relationship-building mechanics

Any – or all – of the following offer practical and relatively low-cost ways to

engage with local pet-care businesses; money spent will prove to be a wise investment in growing your practice client database, as it will ultimately lead to increased footfall through your door following the recommendations of KOLs to their own customers:

- Holding a practice open day to show KOLs around your practice and answer their questions about what your practice does, and how you do it differently/better than others in the area – without naming names, obviously!
- Implementing lectures, workshops and mutual training sessions; all of which are good ways to build professional and personal relationships and demonstrate why your practice is so good.
- Organising social evenings, summer BBQs, dog-walking fund-raisers etc. as opportunities to understand any local issues or negative perceptions.
- Producing newsletters keeping these KOLs up to date with new services and facilities at your practice.
- Writing regular features for the local press. 'Ask the vet' columns and practice advertorials are good ways to demonstrate expertise with a friendly and professional style.

Summary

Like it or not (and by now hopefully you agree that it's OK to like it!), the fact is that KOLs have a very important role to play in the way your practice is perceived locally.

Engaging positively with pet care businesses in your catchment area demonstrates that your practice team is forward-thinking, welcoming, friendly, professional, good fun, knowledgeable – all the things for which you'd like to be known.

So don't put it off any longer, begin searching for your local KOLs and start planning your spring gathering. They are going to love you! 