



Gary Rutland RVN DipAVN(Surgical) ISFM CertFN

Having worked in the Millennium Veterinary Practice since 1996, Gary qualified as an RVN in 2003, becoming Head Nurse in 2005 and gaining the RCVS DipAVN (Surgical) in 2007. Gary holds the ISFM Certificate in Feline Nursing and the ILM Level 5 Certificate in Coaching and Mentoring. As part of Gary's role as head nurse and clinical coach at Millennium Veterinary Practice, a first opinion and referral practice, he leads up the practice's social media and digital marketing strategies.

Facebook: friend or foe?

Gary Rutland RVN DipAVN (Surgical) ISFM CertFN

Head Veterinary Nurse and Lead Clinical Coach, Millennium Veterinary Practice, Millennium Way, Braintree, Essex, CM7 3GX, UK

The world we live in today and the way in which we engage with, and communicate to, each other and our clients is forever changing. How many times do you find yourself in a room full of people all on their mobile phones, whilst watching TV and on an iPad too? We are constantly checking Facebook and Instagram and watching funny videos on YouTube.

Marketing experts call this frazzling, which is defined as short, frantic multitasking. Big companies are taking advantage of social media habits as a new way of engaging consumers.

Many practices have spent a lot of money on fancy websites, but if your clients aren't visiting the site then you're missing out on this vital communication tool. If you are new to social media or not sure how best to optimize this market then it is well worth investing in some digital-marketing CPD. A lot of what is available via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, to name a few, are free to use and, with the right person in charge, are easy to manage. Moreover, by engaging clients and offering them the opportunity to provide feedback and reviews, practices can increase their 'social proof' a term which is used to describe using public reviews to support a business's positive profile within the sector.

I am going to focus mainly on our experiences with Facebook, but some of the guidelines we follow are useful for all social media. You never know, but in five years time other growing social media outlets like Instagram, Google+ and even Snapchat maybe the pick of the month. Who remembers MySpace?

If you are new to business pages on Facebook, setting up a page is fairly easy. There are many online guides, including Facebook's own, which are free. In our practice, we learnt some key points while using Facebook.

We reviewed how our practice communicated and engaged with existing client and

as a result, appointed a PR team, comprising two nurses of different age groups, a receptionist, member of our support team and a veterinary surgeon. All are active on social media and as part of their role, lead the development of our advertising and community presence, plan our monthly promotions, work on new initiatives and review our digital marketing strategy.

Be on brand every time

Your practice may or may not have a defined brand as such; this is a separate topic for possible discussion at a later date. However, it will certainly have individual values and professional standards that the practice team follow, which undoubtedly contributes to the brand and how your clients see you. Social media invites greater scrutiny from the public and demands genuine transparency. Therefore social media etiquette should be the same as face-to-face communication. The potential risk of this increased scrutiny and negative reviews should not put practices off setting up a page, but it does require careful management and, if done properly, is a great opportunity to engage a receptive client. The difference between Facebook and other means of communication, is the potential scale of response; this is why you must demonstrate integrity and ensure that responses are considered, 'on brand' and swift, and never 'knee-jerk'.

It is important that the people that manage your social media know what they are doing and will be available to manage pages out of hours. It is not usually appropriate that this person is the director of the practice. In 2013, Ryanair's boss, Michael O'Leary, ventured into a live Twitter Q&A, which led to a barrage of disgruntled customers after his inappropriate responses to questions.

Another important issue for consideration in that it affects veterinary practices, is good governance and compliance with industry regulations. When running promotions and offers it is important

that we stay within the law, especially when POM-V products are involved. Manufacturers will often supply you with guidance on this along with materials, such as photos, that are suitable for social media use.

Ensure that your information is current and correct. For example, opening times and links to websites should all be up-to-date and should work. A broken website link looks unprofessional and reflects badly on the practice.

If your website traffic is low, try linking Facebook stories to a longer version on your website. Using a URL shortener like goo.gl will stop you having to put long-winded links onto your pages.

Quality not quantity

Social media is based on vanity – there is always competition for how many ‘friends’, ‘likes’ or ‘follows’ a person has. Although it may be great to have lots of followers, you don’t want to become that annoying friend that shares posts of every sneeze and meal. We may want to shout from the rooftops how amazing we are, but Facebook users don’t really care. Some of the most viewed videos on YouTube are videos of pets doing stupid things. So keep it fun: a funny picture or video will engage your followers and help to maintain an interest.

Facebook has some remarkable tools that enable you to schedule posts for anytime of the day so that you can target your audience when they are most likely to be using social media. Scheduling posts also allows you to double check for spelling mistakes and ensure that your message is ‘on brand’.

Facebook also has features similar to Google analytics that also enable you to keep track of your Facebook success, the demographic of people that follow you and their interactions with you. This information enables you to further target your communications to connect with your audience.

Our stories

We have had some great stories come out of our Facebook use and, with a current following of over 1,100 people

across the UK and even internationally, we have been able to engage a significant number of people. Our greatest success stories have been with lost-and-found pets. People love a happy story and are always willing to help. Moreover, we have been able to rehome numerous strays and unwanted pets very easily, thus having a positive impact on each animal’s welfare.

For example, a cat was found unharmed in a car engine and brought into us. No microchip was found so we posted a picture on Facebook. The finder had picked up the hire car and had no idea when the cat had got in. Our post eventually reached 27,900 people through sharing and we were able to find the owner, who lived in Cambridge, some 30 miles away. The owner made the journey to pick up her cat, but not before he was micro chipped! In a gloomy world, stories like this really engage your followers and show the true power of Facebook.

Alongside the positive there is the negative side. As discussed earlier, Facebook attracts intensive scrutiny and can escalate any issues as stories get shared around. It is worth keeping an eye on any local forums or joining closed community groups to keep a track on local chatter.

We have a small branch surgery in a small town. It was brought to our attention that some negative comments had been made about the practice within a local Facebook group. Some would decide to ignore this, as everybody is entitled to their opinion. However, a considered response can in fact turn the conversation around.

In this instance a person was looking for a veterinary practice and wanted advice on practices in the area, another example of people’s need for social proof. The relative anonymity of Facebook meant that there were a few negative comments as well as clients coming to our defence. It is important not to respond to each comment as this can lead to a confrontational discussion. We responded, offering the client an option to come and see the practice and make her own decision. This successfully dissipated the negativity from the source.

Competitions

Using Facebook for competitions is a fun way of engaging clients. For example, ‘Write the caption’, ‘Like or comment’ and pet photo competitions can help you (with client consent) create a bank of real people and real pet images that can be used in other areas of your on-line presence.

There are rules on running competitions and these can be found on the Facebook website. Linking competition prizes to local business products or services can help to increase your community presence and strengthen your social presence, additionally reciprocal advertising can be established. There are external companies that can help you run competitions, these will select winners at random and optimise coverage. They do however charge for their services.

Conclusion

The use of social media and digital marketing cannot be avoided. It is an important communication tool and practices should consider a digital marketing strategy. It should be used as an adjunct to other methods of communication and be used as an additional way to engage clients. Involve younger members of staff or a keen silver surfer to ensure that you keep up social media trends. Feel free to explore our Facebook page Millennium Veterinary Practice – official, or our website to see what can be done, details are below.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Useful Websites

<https://www.facebook.com/business/news/page-promotions-terms>

<https://www.facebook.com/business/>

<https://www.millenniumvets.co.uk>

<http://www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/pdf/>