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# Face it, Facebook is it: why your practice needs social media

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**ABSTRACT:** There can be no doubting the exponential adoption of social media by a majority of the UK population – many of them clients or potential clients of your practice. They are familiar with the nuances and application of these communication channels and expect modern businesses – including veterinary practices – to use them to their fullest extent. There can be no half measures. Once committed, your practice must dedicate time and resources to social media. This article explains how and why.

Chances are that most of you reading this article use social media regularly in your life outside of work – be it Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram, writing your own blog or reading those of others. Social media is no longer the next big thing, it is very much the norm.

Anyone who is still not convinced of the crucial role that social media play in the lives of consumers, and the massive impact it has on communications with pet owners and your practice's clients, might want to take a look at the following eye-popping statistics:

- If Twitter was a country, its population would be the twelfth largest in the world (Source: AllTwitter)
- An average Facebook user has 130 friends (Source: AllTwitter)
- 23 per cent of Facebook's users check their account five or more times daily (Source: Socialnomics)

- 80 per cent of social media users prefer to connect with brands through Facebook (Source: Business2community)
- A whopping 77 per cent of companies and 43 per cent of business service companies acquired customers from Facebook

Quite simply, if your practice is not using social media to connect and communicate with your clients, you're missing out. Because you can be sure that plenty of other practices around you are, and they're probably doing a great job of it too!

Social media are exactly that, social – friendly, involving, personal, fun and interactive. It enables practices to talk *with* clients, rather than *at* clients. It may seem a subtle difference, but it's massively important in influencing the 'feel' of your practice.

All our clients have a huge amount of choice when it comes to their pet's health care – not only from competing practices, but also from friends, breeders, groomers, and the wonders of the internet. (Hey, some of the advice they find from these other sources is even correct!)

So if they are able easily to go online and share their pet-related stories, unusual illnesses, advice and sorrows with other like-minded local pet owners – your clients – and receive fast, friendly and professional advice (from you!) in one place, a place they are already visiting regularly (Facebook and the like), then why wouldn't they jump at the chance to do just that?



It makes good business sense too, According to Facebook, people who 'like' your page spend twice as much as customers who are not connected to you in this way. And aside from driving your practice's turnover, creating an active Facebook community is probably the single best thing you can do to enhance the customer experience at your practice.

The two key words in that sentence though are 'active' and 'community'. Here's why.

Lots of practices have Facebook pages. However, many of them are very sparsely populated with news and photos. It's creating a page simply for the point of it – Facebook. Tick. Done that. Next?

There may be a few 'likes' but no obvious activity or client involvement. This is antisocial media. It does not tell potential clients that your practice is a caring, fun, friendly and helpful place – rather it sulkily shrugs your indifference. The obvious conclusion is that your service will be equally half-hearted.

If you're going to 'do' Facebook, do it properly. If you can't commit someone at the practice (and why not make it you? it's fun!) to champion your page, to keep it fresh with stories, offers, news and events, then just don't bother.

And if you are going to accept the role of Facebook 'King' or 'Queen', there are a few things to consider:

- Get a practice smartphone. Updating statuses and adding photos becomes very quick and simple if you don't have to log on to a computer at the main desk every time.
- Check the practice page three or four times a day. If there are any questions that need answering, or messages to pick up, it is much more professional to reply quickly. Similarly, if anyone has left any inappropriate content, you can respond to it swiftly.
- If negative comments are posted, don't delete them, deal with them. If there is a genuine issue, detail what you are doing to rectify the situation. If it's just griping, ask the 'poster' to come and have a chat with you – the practice always wants to deliver the very best service it can, and so if someone feels you have fallen short, you want to be able to put things right and learn from it.

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- Don't tolerate bad language or spiteful comments. You can delete persistent offenders' posts after you've warned them you will do so. And always report trolls or truly nasty comments direct to Facebook.
- Put plenty of photos and videos up. The fact is that people love to look at pictures of funny or cute animals. YouTube is stuffed with videos of cats doing hilarious things, and the video of the immortal Fenton spread around the world in a matter of days, so that a year later, the original video has now been viewed 8 million times.

The great news for your practice is that you spend your working day meeting these cute/hilarious pets, so whilst other companies have to spend hundreds of pounds sourcing photos from image banks, you have a free and endless supply on tap!

- Do make sure you get written permission from the owners to publish their images though! You can easily add some standard words to the bottom of all your practice literature stating something such as 'I am happy for images of my pet to be used for practice marketing, which will include social media: YES or NO'; and the vast majority will be more than happy to oblige.
- Create a library of 'How to...' videos and post them to your page. How to ... worm a cat, de-flea a dog etc. All done with warmth and humour as appropriate. This shows that your practice understands the 'tricksy' routine stuff, it demonstrates that you 'get' what it's like to own a pet, and all the house-plant-attacking, fox-poo-rolling joy that the day-to-day realities bring!
- If you're really serious about driving word of mouth recommendations and boosting client numbers, advertise. With Facebook advertising you can specify the location, age and gender of your target audience, so you can be sure that your message will be delivered to people in your area who are ready and willing to spend money with you.

You set the budget you're happy to work with and then sit back and watch your 'likes' increase!

Facebook is undoubtedly the best place for your practice to start experiencing the social media love. Once you've established a vibrant page with an engaged community of visitors, then Twitter is probably a good second step.

The good thing about Twitter is that it's quick and instant. You're only allowed to post 140 characters, so it's great for quick messages and reminders. Its difference is its immediacy – whereas Facebook users will generally check in a couple of times a day, Twitterites are hard-wired to their phones for instant updates.

So it's very useful for real-time things – drop-in clinic starting now (posted at the end of the working day to remind owners they can call in after work), reduced price flea treatments for the first 10 replies ... and so on. It's also extremely useful for following veterinary bodies, pet stories and local media, so that you'll get immediate notification of news and relevant issues.

Many practices feature blogs on their web sites, but this is another area where it's better not to do anything, rather than to do it by halves. Nothing says 'average practice who's trying to be relevant, but really doesn't get it' like a blog that's a year old. A regular monthly 500-word piece with stories from the human side of veterinary medicine on the other hand – that says we're a practice that understands, cares and is passionate about pets. Oh, and it's best if the spelling and grammar is pretty good too!

So there you have it. The key message is that it really is time to stop worrying about social media, and just get on with it. It's fun, highly effective, and free – so what's stopping you?

Try it. You might 'like' it! 🐾

The author wishes to thank Willow Vets, Newport Pagnell, for permission to use the image.