

Newsletters, Questionnaires and Phone Contacts

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Competition is something new. Twenty years ago we could practice just about anyway we wanted and be successful. Those days are gone and it's probably a good thing. We now face competition from many quarters. It's no longer enough just to be a good veterinarian. We must apply principles of business management if we are to position our practices to prosper through the end of the twentieth century.

Those interested in business growth, in the personal satisfaction of a successful enterprise, in selling a vital business to a colleague, or in providing for a carefree retirement must learn to compete. It's hard work and it doesn't come naturally to veterinarians with little aptitude for or training in business.

But we have something going for us that much of our competition does not: our education. Not just our medical education, although that certainly sets us apart, but our college education. We've been trained to speak and to write; to communicate. So let's communicate!

One tool of communication is the **written word**. The newsletter. How many newsletters do you get in a 3 month period? I get at least two dozen. How many do you read? Certainly not all. But they served their purpose. They kept their sender's name in your subconscious and often that's enough. Big companies spend big money on newsletters because it's good business. If it's good for them it's good for us.

Let's look at the details. It's not easy to produce a quality newsletter and quality should be important to you. It's a quality image you want to project. One person in the practice *must* be committed to the endeavour. It takes discipline to write, to encourage others to write, to edit and to meet deadlines.

Cost will be about \$1.25 per letter for type setting and printing in the small quantities you will be ordering. Add to that the cost of word-processing or typing and postage and you have invested well over \$2.00 per client. Your time as writer and/or editor will probably exceed ten hours.

Sources of materials are everywhere. Newsletter editors trade each other's material all the time. Good sources include veterinary extension letters, the AABP newsletter, agriculture publications, The Journal of Dairy Science and meeting proceedings. The best source for articles are recurring questions from clients, common mistakes you see them making, and areas of practice you want to emphasize

and promote. *You* have the responsibility to ensure that it is pertinent to *your* practice area. After all, a few people *will* read your newsletter. Impertinent or impractical information will cause a loss of credibility and waste their time.

Once material is collected it is pared, shaped and honed into concise easily read paragraphs. Do not use generalities. There are plenty of those in the agricultural press. Do not use terms such as more or less, greater or smaller. Instead, give exact specifications, dosages and recommendations. Keep plenty of open space. Strive for visual appeal. Break up the page with graphs, tables and drawings. Go out on a limb. Be concise. Be controversial!

Color is a question open to debate. The idea of changing the color of each issue comes from a medical practice management newsletter. The color of paper and ink is changed with advise from the printer. I believe it alerts the client to a new issue and stimulates his interest. New issues of the AABP letter often go unnoticed on my desk because I mistake it for a previous issue.

At mailing time include the "stuffer" from pharmaceutical companies whose products you use and recommend. Send announcements of dispensing specials. The response to these ads pay the cost of the newsletter. Enclose all this in an attractive envelope and add a pretty commemorative stamp. These are sent only to clients who have used our services and not, for example, to colleagues clients.

Written communication was also very helpful when we surveyed our dairy clients recently. We wanted to know how we were doing and asked them via a questionnaire. The details are beyond the scope of this presentation but a few points should be noted.

The purpose of a questionnaire is three-fold. First, it lets your clientele know you value their opinion and want to satisfy their needs. Secondly, it allows you to discover areas of weakness in your program. Third, and possibly most important, it is a marketing tool. By asking them about services they may be unaware are offered you stimulate an awareness and subtly promote those services.

Some examples of the kind of information we generated:

Nearly 100% evaluated our newsletter as well-written and helpful.

58% consider price to be the determining factor in drug purchases while 68% also emphasized convenience.

Only 8% thought our fees were too high.

3% stated displeasure in being charged for consultation.

While 97% thought their phone contact with our office was well-handled 75% reported minor inconvenience in getting through.

49% use our computerized reproductive record program.

29% use nutritional consultation.

81% use us as a source of medical supplies.

90% use some form of reproductive service.

70% use diagnostic lab services.

8% have had minor book-keeping problems.

I recommend you try the questionnaire as a marketing procedure and learning device.

Verbal communication comes easier. When Mr. Bell gave us the telephone he provided the most versatile and useful form of business communication imaginable.

Follow up on difficult or uncertain cases shows the client you care and you are interested in his problem. It gives you an opportunity to sell further diagnosis, treatment or

medication.

Reporting lab results quickly and professionally also demonstrates concern and it allows an opportunity for further service.

Reminding clients of prior or standing appointments prevents disappointments, cancellations, and long waits.

Calling 15 minutes before arrival is really appreciated. The client doesn't waste time waiting. He gets the animals caught up just as you arrive. They aren't standing half the day. Stress is reduced and production suffers less.

Calling lock-up lists the day before palpation visits puts you back in control of the selection process.

Consulting with owners following the monthly herd monitor report allows opportunities for further service.

At a cost of 1% of gross income the telephone is truly your best marketing tool and cheapest form of advertising.

