

Starting from scratch

Lesley M. Moser, DVM

Rolling M Veterinary Clinic, Englewood, TN 37329

Abstract

Opening up your very own veterinary practice can be daunting, almost like science fiction, especially if you are a recent graduate of veterinary school. I am here to tell you my story of how I made it my reality. This venture is not without a fair share of struggles, but it can also be extremely rewarding. Put on those muck boots, and let's get into the nitty gritty.

Key words: start up, practice ownership, starting a new practice

Introduction

I am a 2014 graduate of The University of Tennessee Collage of Veterinary Medicine. After graduation, I completed a one-year food animal and ambulatory internship at Mississippi State College of Veterinary Medicine. Upon completion of this internship I moved back to East Tennessee and opened my own all large animal ambulatory clinic. This is my experience of starting a clinic from the ground up. I hope that my story, and me detailing the steps I took, can help you decide how you might move forward in building your own clinic.

How to get Started

Consider *why*

Start with your WHY³. Not *why* do you want to be a veterinarian, you have already accomplished that goal. But *why* do you want to start your own practice? Why not just go work for someone else? You also need to ask yourself what kind of veterinarian do you want to be... large animal, small animal, ambulatory, stationary clinic? *Why* do you want to be this type of veterinarian? These questions, *why* you want to start your own practice and *why* do you want to start this specific type of practice, are both deep questions that you need to reflect upon and spend time answering. Every move forward will be predicated from the answers to the above questions. If you do not establish a firm foundation at this step, then you may not be ready for the task ahead. You cannot be everything to everyone all of the time, so you should decide what you want to be before you start your practice.

Create a Vision

After you spend time dwelling on your questions of *why* you will start answering the questions of *what* and *how*. What type of practice do you want to have? Do you want to purchase an existing practice? Do you want to build your own? Do you

want to do all ambulatory? How? Do you want to start out ambulatory and build/ purchase a clinic in the future? There is no wrong answer. I opted to do an all-ambulatory clinic. I purchased a used Ford F-250, found a used Bowie vet box insert, and from this my ambulatory clinic was born.

It is important to remember that answers to these initial questions will change and grow as you move forward in your career. The vision you have now may very well change with time, as you grow as a veterinarian, and how the area you choose to practice in evolves.

Craft a Mission Statement

After focusing on your *why*, *how*, and *what* you are ready to craft a mission statement. Your mission statement should be short and to the point. Your one-sentence statement should clearly communicate your niche. For example, my mission statement is "Bringing large animal veterinary medicine to your family." In this 1 simple sentence I convey to clients and future clients that I am a veterinarian offering large animal services and that I travel to you.

Write a Business Plan

Now you are ready to start your business plan. For this you can utilize the Small Business Administration website⁵. On the website, sba.org, find the Business Guide tab at the top menu, and then click on the menu item titled "Write your business plan."⁶ This page will provide a list of all the typical components in a business plan and explain each of them. You can also view sample plans. From this information you can format your business plan into a Word document template and tailor the business plan for you. While creating your business plan you will also need to choose your business name and start developing a logo. Stay consistent with your font and color choices as you create materials for your business. A logo is a good, easy way to get people's attention and also helps with product/brand association. You can create your own logo at a website such as canva.com or hire a graphic designer.

After you have developed your business plan you should ask a friend, classmate, mentor, veterinarian you did an externship with, or someone you meet at this conference and have them proofread your business plan for clarity. This will ensure that all your information is conveyed in a way for others to understand. Be sure the relevant information is written in a language free of jargon, in a language that a non-veterinarian or a regular person can understand. Remember, not everyone understands how we veterinarians speak to one another.

Factor in Finances

Now it is time to focus on finances from a realistic standpoint. What are your startup costs? How much money are you going to need to get started? Make a list of equipment, medication, and supplies you need to start seeing animals. Excel is your friend here. Utilize this to make a list of equipment/supplies and the associated cost. Excel will keep a running total for you. Your list does not need to include every shiny object you want. Start small and grow as you become more financially stable. This will also allow you time to see what your clientele are looking for in their veterinarian and afford you the opportunity to figure out your niche market.

You must also consider how you want to finance your startup cost. Will finances come from out of pocket, a credit card or a line of credit from a bank? Depending on which option you choose you will need certain information to present to your financier, hence the reason your business plan needs to be understood by non-veterinarians. There are pros and cons to each of these options. You will need to decide which is the best route for your individual financial situation and have a plan to pay it back in a timely manner.

Apply for Licenses

Investigating and acquiring a license is also a step you will take as you build your own practice. You have graduated and are licensed in the state you chose, now what? You need to find out exactly what all licenses are required by the state or states that you plan to practice in. These include, but are not limited to, the following: state veterinary license², DEA license⁸ (if you plan to use/purchase controlled drugs), business license, and Federal and state tax ID⁷ number. These can also vary depending on the way you structure your business (sole proprietorship, limited liability company, professional limited liability company, etc.). See the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) business structures page of the website for a breakdown of the difference between the business structures³. These forms and licenses do take a significant amount of time to fill out and receive back, so be prepared and plan according. These will all need to be in hand prior to seeing patients under your own business entity.

Investigate Insurance

Purchasing insurance is also an initial and ongoing need. Insurance, insurance and more insurance. Health insurance, business insurance, malpractice insurance, and mobile vehicle insurance are just a few of the types that you will need to look into having for you and your practice. American Veterinary Medical Association Professional Liability Insurance Trust (AVMA PLIT¹) is a good resource to look over and gain information on the different type of insurance available for veterinarians. The American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) *Have You Herd* podcast from August 12, 2020 “Student Extern Liability, Safety and Risk Mitigation” with Dr. Linda Ellis from AVMA PLIT is a great resource as well.

You are open. Now what?

Congratulations, your business is open. Now what? Client communication, establishing procedures, finding your niche market, pricing, and setting time aside for yourself are important components of the business management side of being a veterinarian.

Client communication

Answering calls and messages is a very, very important part of your business. This will vary depending on your practice. For me I am the sole owner and employee, so I answer all calls and messages. This has pros and cons. I always know when someone calls or messages. If the call or text is not answered, I know it's because I did not respond. This can be the most stressful part of the job. I am very open and up front with my clients. I let them know that I am the only person that works for me (the business) and that I do not answer the phone while I am seeing an appointment and I will not call you back if you do not leave a message. I update and change my voicemail message regularly depending on the time of year or if I will be unavailable. I always leave a name or number for emergency services if I am unavailable. I let clients know the best way to communicate with me is via a phone call or text message. I do get new clients that will message my business Facebook page and I will use that to set up an initial appointment. I use email for sending medical records and receipts, but I do not do any scheduling via email. This is what has seemed to work out the best for me. There are lots of other options available, such as having a receptionist or using an answering service. The point is, there is no wrong way to do this. Just make sure your clients know how best to reach you and set yourself up to respond back in a timely manner. People appreciate a call or text back even if you are not able to help them.

Setting boundaries with your clients is a delicate topic. You will have to decide what these are for yourself. Once you decide and set boundaries, you have to stay firm and stick with them. My clinic number is my cell phone number, so clients have direct access to me personally. I did this because I did not want the hassle of carrying or dealing with multiple phones or phone numbers. I had to set boundaries of texting after “normal business hours.” What this looks like for me is that between the hours of 8 am – 6pm Monday through Friday I am available to message back. After these hours if you have a question or are wanting to schedule a non-emergency appointment then I will respond the next day. This gives me time to not “feel guilty” about waiting to respond to a text at 9 pm about wanting to schedule an appointment because the owner just thought of it at that moment. I am available after these hours for emergencies and respond to those as they arise.

Protocols

Set up protocols from the beginning. This will help in the long run. This will help even if you are the only employee.

You have to think of it as if you are working for a company because you are the company. For me, this was hard and silly all at the same time. But I needed to think of the type of practice I wanted to run and how I wanted my clients to treat me.

Business hours and emergency hours or call. How do I want to handle these? What do I want my regular hours to be? For me, these change with the season. In the spring and summer I keep longer hours than I do in the fall and winter months. These hours coincide with what my clients are asking for. I also have the ability to refer cases to the veterinary school for treatment or hospitalization if needed.

Practice radius. This was difficult for me in the beginning. But within a year I had figured out my radius and actually moved where I was living to be in the center of the geographic area I now cover. Do not spread yourself too thin or you will not be able to do a good job.

How to fire a client? This will happen eventually. It is so much better to think about things like this before they happen. This way you are prepared and not making an emotional decision. An example letter or template as well as other consent forms can be found in James Wilson's book(s)⁹.

Payment? I require full payment at time of service. This was the only way I was able to get going in the beginning; now all my clients are accustomed to that. I suggest taking multiple forms of payment (cash, check, credit card, etc.) and letting the client know up front when and how that payment is due. I gladly will give a client an estimate prior to a visit so they can have the payment available. Also, you will need to have in place how to handle things if someone writes you a bad check or if their card is declined. Being prepared and developing your protocols helps. You will have already determined how to handle the situation before it arises.

How to value yourself and your skills--- figuring out pricing

Pricing varies so much by geography, your skill level, and what your clients are used to in terms of service fees. There are several different ways to set this up. Do you have a set price for each service? Do you charge hourly? You should be paid for your current skill level. I am not saying this to be negative or discourage anyone. Exactly the opposite. I am telling you this to motivate you. As you improve, do more, attend more continuing education training and so forth then you can reevaluate your worth and charge appropriately. No one just wakes up one day and is an expert. They practice and study.

There are numerous ways to set a pricing schedule and you can have a mix of them all. Typically, there is a percent markup for medications that is pretty standard. But for surgery/procedures (etc.) you can have a set range or charge by the hour. This may allow you to "reward" clients that have good working facilities and ample help, allowing you to get in and out quicker.

I continually evaluate my method for pricing. It has changed and adapted to my skill level and style of practice.

When I started my practice, the clients were used to one specific style of pricing and being billed monthly for any services performed. Payment at time of service was an adjustment that they had to get used to when using me. It took some time for me to develop my pricing/charging method. This does not have to be set in stone from day one; like I said, I continually evaluate my method at least on an annual basis.

Finding your niche market

Where do you (your practice) fit in? What area you are trying to serve? What do you like to do? What services are those potential clients looking for? What other veterinarians service the area you are interested in serving? What services do they currently offer? Is there a service that you can offer that is different from other veterinarians in the area? Are you going to share clients with another veterinarian? The truth is yes, you will be sharing clients with other veterinarians. This may be for a referral, a species you don't work on, you didn't call back soon enough, or simply a procedure you do not want to do. The point is, you cannot be upset if a client also uses another veterinarian. Unless they are just price shopping and, in this situation, you can figure that out pretty quickly and decide if you are going to keep them or adjust your pricing. Once you find out what it is your clients are looking for, then become the expert in that specific area. Utilize that niche to get you onto a farm or talking to new clients. Then you can use that experience to get you back on the farm and develop a relationship with that client.

Time for yourself

You have to schedule time off or time for you to have a break. Having a group of friends outside of veterinary medicine is very important. This should be a good group of non-vet friends or people that don't ask you for advice every time you are around them. It is healthy for us to interact with other "normal" humans and have a regular conversation. Your time is precious, so be careful who you spend your time on. Surround yourself with people that will push you to be better and grow; otherwise you will become stagnant.

Find a hobby that does not involve the care of animals or is in any way related to your job. This will allow you to use other parts of your brain. You can turn off the doctor brain and relax. You may be surprised at the results of this simple act. I certainly have been. I used to enjoy horseback riding as my "me time." However, I still had that little part of my doctor brain going. I have developed a new hobby that has allowed an entire new part of my brain to come open and express creativity. I find myself completely relaxed and refreshed. Then I am able to return to work guilt-free and ready to be at work.

Develop as a Professional

Growing as a professional is an important attribute in owning your veterinary practice. Conferences and mentor-

ship groups are excellent ways for you to connect with others and build your skillset. Continuous education is key for successful longevity.

Attend Conferences

I completed the 2017-2018 AABP Next Generation Veterinary Practice Analysis Workshops. I started this program in the first year after starting my own practice. I had one year's worth of data for my initial meeting. Luckily, they had data for an example practice, so I was able to use this to complete the required assignments for the workshops. The information from these workshops helped me get started and allowed me to make financial decisions and goals. I was able to do a business budget. This gave me a measurable way to see how my practice was performing. I was then able to do a partial budget for the equipment I wanted to purchase in the future. This gave me the tools needed to judge when, or if, it was feasible to purchase that piece of equipment and judge how I would be able to make that piece of equipment pay for itself. It was during these workshops that I was able to plan for the growth and financial progress of my clinic and avoid a heavy debt burden. By creating a value proposition, I was able to see the level of service I started out offering and make a plan to improve the level of services that my clients needed. This assisted me in finding my niche in the market I'm currently serving. By making SMART goals (Specific Measurable Attainable Relevant Time based) my practice has been able to grow in the direction I envision.

Mentorship Groups

Having a strong, ever-growing mentorship group, composed of other veterinarians, is a necessity. This group of people should vary in age, gender, years out of school and types of practice. This will give you a wide range of advice. You need to have other veterinary professionals that you trust to learn from and to talk to. Not just on seeing patients but on how they run their business, personal time, etc. Be willing to learn from other people's mistakes or stumbles so that you don't have to make them yourself. You can learn something from everyone you meet. This may be some great tips on how to perform a procedure. It may be how not to communicate with a client. But both of those are good learning experiences and you should view them as such.

Your mentorship group should not be limited to just veterinarians. In fact, I would strongly encourage you to have several non-medical personnel in this group. This can include tax and financial advisors, motivational speakers, and just overall good business people. Communicating with others will help you learn your strengths and weaknesses. Play to your strengths and outsource your weaknesses. Utilize the people in your life that are doing things the right way and are successful.

My Experience

What pitfalls did I make?

Starting my practice, I was freshly out of an internship and was in a cast. At the tail end of my internship I suffered an injury to my hand. That resulted in surgery and being placed in a cast for 6 weeks. This gave me too much time to think and I was prone to over analyzing everything. I was going to physical therapy, trying to start a business, and doing small animal relief work so that I could pay my bills. Needless to say, the first few months were very stressful. More than once, I thought about just calling it quits and going to work for someone. The biggest factor that kept me from stopping was that there was no clinic in the area that ran a practice exactly the way I wanted to run mine. Once I was released to go back to work, I went to work. And I did nothing but work! I went to the extreme. I thought I had to jump up and run out the door every time the phone rang no matter what it was, where it was, or what time of day/night. I was over-worked and spread myself too thin. I made myself too accessible to clients, thinking they could get an immediate response no matter when they called or text. I was overzealous and got myself into a few situations that were not so safe to try to prove that I could do it just because I am a female. I also extremely undervalued myself and my services in the beginning. All these things changed in time and with the help of my mentorship group.

What did I wish I knew before I started this?

Starting or owning your own practice is not for the faint of heart. It requires a lot of consistent hard work and time. Being willing to learn, adapt, and change is all part of the process. You are human, you will make mistakes, but learn from these and do better the next time. I have been open and honest with my clients from the beginning. This has allowed me to develop a real relationship with my clients. They respect not only my opinion, but my time. It is so rewarding to see the clients and patients grow with you.

Conclusion

Starting your own practice is not impossible. With time and proper preparation, you can start your own veterinary clinic. Making a business plan and budget are the first steps. Having a mentorship group you can talk to and scheduling time for yourself are all keys to a successful practice. My greatest hope that this information will help someone else along their journey.

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