

Making a decision to go solo

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Abstract

Many veterinarians find happiness following traditional routes in their careers. These routes include academia, research, employment as an associate, buying into practices or building booming, multi-doctor practices. But what about the rest of us? Some of us don't feel fulfilled from working the same hours in the same place every day. Some of us, like myself, find our calling driving around the countryside with our dogs, visiting a few clients per day, and not really having anyone else to answer to. However, making the leap of quitting a stable job that supplies steady paychecks, a shared workload, and a regular schedule is a truly terrifying thing to do. Will your business be successful? Will you be able to pay your bills? What if it's too much work? What if no one ever even calls? Starting your own practice comes with these questions and more, but if it is your calling, it is so worth it in the long run. Everyone's story, reasons, and process will be different. In this presentation, I will describe what going solo has been like for me, in the hopes of helping any other veterinarian who is considering it decide if it is right for them.

Key words: business, management, solo practice

Introduction

I grew up on a row crop and beef cattle farm in central Iowa. I graduated from Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 2017 and went to work in a mixed practice in Iowa. I stayed at this first job for about 2 years, but found myself doing more small animal work than I preferred. I also had discovered a love for the state of Oklahoma while I was in veterinary school, so I looked for jobs in Oklahoma. I found one that was significantly more large animal work, so I made the move. However, it still just didn't quite make me happy. After about 2 ½ years at that practice, I made the decision to go solo. I started my own mobile solo practice, primarily large animal with a focus on beef cow-calf ranches.

Why go solo?

There are many reasons a veterinarian might want to start a solo practice. As described earlier, this might be as simple as personal preference when it comes to the type of work one wants to do. It could also come from being unhappy in a current job, but not wanting to move to a new location. There could be a large need for a certain type of work in a geographic area that is underserved, providing a good business opportunity. It may also be a lifestyle decision to have more control over one's own work schedule. These are just a few possible reasons, and I am sure that every mobile veterinarian has their own.

For me, another of the biggest benefits to solo mobile practice is the flexibility. I love the work and the lifestyle, but I also love not being tied down to a physical clinic. Mobile practice provides a daily variety that I just could not get working in a clinic. It also allows me to have some control over my own schedule. Typically, I work a lot of hours and work around my clients' schedules more than my own, but when I do need to have time for myself, it is not a problem to make that happen.

Before you make the leap

There are a few things you should ask yourself before making the leap into solo practice. First off, what do you love to do? I strongly believe that if you don't love what you are doing, you won't be driven to succeed at it. If you aren't sure what your niche is yet, you might want to do some more career exploration before going solo. Being your own boss is a lot of work, and if what you are doing is not your passion, you will be more likely to quickly burn out. I had discovered that I really loved doing cattle work on farm calls. For me, this led to mobile practice focusing on beef cattle.

The next question to think about is whether or not there is a need for your passion in your location. I am located in an area of Oklahoma that has a huge cattle population, and while there are several mixed or large animal veterinarians in a 30-mile radius, there is plenty of work to go around. It has also helped my business a lot that I am only mobile. While the other veterinarians in the area are juggling in-house and farm calls, plus possibly small animal calls, people LOVE that I come to them. While there is probably not a need for another brick-and-mortar clinic in my area, mobile practice fits a niche that was not being completely fulfilled before. Each of the vets in my area has their strengths and specialties, and there are multiple that I work closely with and have mutual clients with.

Third, an important aspect to consider is whether or not you really want to work that hard. Sometimes it is just easier to keep on going to work, or to find a new job that suits you better. Starting your own business is a lot of work, and keeping it going is even more work. I have known veterinarians who tried going solo and found that it was just not for them. This does not mean that it is not worth trying out if you think it may be for you, but you have to be prepared for how hard it can be. I am the vet, the owner, the secretary, the bookkeeper, the inventory manager, the IT department, and countless other titles. Some of this can be outsourced eventually, but starting out, it will likely just be you.

Last, ask yourself if you are ready to go solo. You will probably ask yourself this a lot, and you will probably tell yourself no a lot. Truthfully, the answer to this is probably always going to be no! I was terrified to quit my job and go solo, but I reached a point where it was the only thing I could do. You are probably not ready, but if it feels like the stars are aligned, do it anyway!

Where to start

Once you have decided what you want to do, where you want to do it, and that you are probably not ready but you are going to do it anyway, a good place to start is lining up funding. First, you will need to figure out how much money you need. For me, the non-negotiable items were a truck, a vet box, an ultrasound, bull testing equipment, obstetric equipment, cattle processing equipment, and an assortment of medications and vaccinations. Your list will be different from mine depending on what you want to do. A good place to look for startup equipment and drug lists is on the bovine vet Facebook pages.

When you know how much you need, then you will need to figure out where to get it. This may be any combination of your existing savings, business loans and personal loans. I also found it helpful to have a backup source of income. I worked on a friend's ranch during the day and went on veterinary calls in the evenings until I had enough veterinary work coming in to support myself. Other options would be relief or temporary work in other veterinary clinics, ER shifts, teaching, etc.

Next, you need to legally set up your business. Your accountant is now your best friend. They know how to start a business as well as how to keep it going, and they even know how to do your taxes right. This will probably vary by state, but in Oklahoma, the first step was filing for a PLLC. When that was completed, I had an EIN tax ID and was able to start a business bank account, which my startup funding then went into. Next, the worst and best part – spending all that money. Find your truck and box, make a list of your must-have items, and start shopping. You will need to update your state veterinary medical association on your employment. If you need to use or prescribe controlled drugs and you don't already have the licensing, you will need to register for a DEA license as well as any state-specific controlled drug licenses. You will also need to register with your state tax commission. Set up accounts with the distributor(s) and laboratories that you plan to use, and call your local pharmaceutical representatives. No one else is going to let them know that you're starting a practice, and many of the pharmaceutical companies have startup programs that can really help out.

You will also need a plan for advertising and marketing. In my experience, word of mouth has been by far the best method. I believe that I have been fortunate in this, but I have been able to build my business only through word of mouth, without any other advertising. I already had a good reputation in the area and there is a need for what I do. This is probably not the case for everyone, and you may need to develop a marketing strategy. This could include social media, a website, a Google page and local advertising.

Things that have helped

There are a lot of factors that have helped me to be successful so far. This starts with the need for what I do in my area. I have been told so many times that clients are extremely grateful that I will come to them rather than them have to haul an animal to a clinic. I also already had an established reputation with a lot of ranchers in my area from working at a local clinic.

I believe that having experience and a solid set of clinical skills is essential before going solo. I had about 4 ½ years of clinical experience since graduating veterinary school, but I had 14 years of experience working in veterinary clinics and had been around multiple species of animals for my entire life. While having the clinical skills to handle everyday scenarios is essential, I have also found that having both personal and professional support systems is key to success. I do not hesitate to refer or consult on cases that are out of my league. Having colleagues to call for the species I do not regularly work on has been very helpful, as well as having local clinics to refer to if patients need to be hospitalized or worked on in a tilt chute.

Technology is also very beneficial in staying organized as well as simplifying some daily tasks. Anything that can be automated should be automated to save yourself time. Having a good, easy-to-use practice management software streamlines billing, records and client reminders. The government is moving

toward all electronic health papers, so finding a software system you like for that will be necessary. I also use a calendar app to schedule all of my appointments.

I was selected last year for the AABP Practice Management workshop, which has been very helpful. They teach financial and accounting skills as well as human resources. Even if you do not have any employees, I have found that the human resources skills can also be applied to clients on a daily basis.

There are a couple of different loan forgiveness programs for veterinarians through the USDA. If you have a lot of student loan debt, these could be very helpful in staying financially afloat while you start your own business. Also keep an eye out for state grants. I was awarded a grant from the state of Oklahoma that paid for a little over half of my portable chute. It provided the cash flow necessary to enable me to serve many new clients who had pens but no chute, and be able to do so safely.

I have to attribute the majority of my success to my clients! Without them, I would not have a business at all, and I truly have a lot of great clients.

Finally, I highly recommend a buddy for all those hours on the road. I have a Blue Heeler that goes on every farm call with me and helps to work cattle at some of them. Without him, driving around all day, every day would get pretty lonely.

Things that make it hard

Solo practice definitely comes with a lot of challenges to go along with the rewards. One of these challenges is always being on call. This was one of the biggest obstacles for me, because I saw a lot of after-hours emergencies at the clinics I had worked at. I was used to being on call every other week but could not imagine living like that all of the time. Before starting my practice, I spoke with a friend and former co-worker who also does solo mobile practice in my area. He told me that he saw fewer emergencies since he had gone out on his own, that clients were generally more respectful of his time, and that he felt that he had more freedom to talk clients through what were truly emergencies vs. what may be able to wait until morning. Talking to him helped me to overcome the fear of being on call all of the time, and I have found that it has been much the same for me as it is for him.

Imposter syndrome has been a huge discussion point the last few years, and it is definitely real. Keep in mind that you are better than you think you are, and that your clients have faith in you. If they did not believe in you, they would not have called you in the first place. Be confident, but also be humble, and do not be afraid to consult with another veterinarian or refer the case if it will truly be served better elsewhere.

Non-compete and non-solicitation clauses in existing contracts can complicate starting your own practice. My contract only had a 5-mile non-compete clause, but it also had a non-solicitation clause. I was careful to not reach out to any clients that I knew from the clinic, but with patience I have ended up with a lot of them finding me and using me for their veterinary work.

Things I do right

There are a few things I believe I have personally learned to do well that are likely to be helpful for other veterinarians who are starting their own practices. One is keeping a low inventory on hand and keeping my overhead costs low. Cash flow is key, and

having a high inventory turnover rate will help with that as long as you can keep up with the inventory management. I typically keep enough vaccines, dewormers, etc. to work about 200 head on short notice. Drugs that I use infrequently, I only keep the bottle I am working out of on hand. Drugs that I use more frequently, I typically have the open bottle as well as one backup. I keep very low inventory of controlled drugs, basically ordering them as needed. Drop shipping has become extremely helpful for me as I have gotten busier.

Always respond to clients and potential clients, and follow up, even if you referred the case. People are immensely grateful just to know that you care enough to make sure they got their animal taken care of. Many of my clients will text me if they need something, and they know I will always text or call back as soon as I can. With that being said, you also need to determine and maintain boundaries with your clients. Every time you communicate with your clients, you are training them. It is also okay for boundaries to be different for different clients. I always respond to emergencies as soon as possible. When it comes to non-emergencies, I do have a handful of clients who I will respond to for anything, any time of any day. For the majority, if they contact me outside of what I consider reasonable hours, I either respond the next day or politely tell them that I will get back to them the next day. This has never resulted in a problem for me, and I believe it has helped me maintain my sanity while being my own secretary.

It is also very important to remain true to yourself while building your new practice. Do not forget about your hobbies, your friends and family, your animals, and whatever else you love to do. You are a veterinarian, but you are not ONLY a veterinarian.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let's return to those scary questions from the beginning. Your business probably will succeed. You will most likely be able to pay your bills. It is a lot of work, but if you love it, it rarely feels like work. And yes, people are probably going to call. Probably even more than you can handle at times.

I hope that this discussion has been beneficial in determining whether or not solo practice is for you, and if you think it is, I hope it is a good starting point for you to work from in starting your practice. While it was the scariest thing I have ever done, quitting regular practice and starting my solo mobile practice is also the best thing I have ever done.

I will end with a quote from a sign at the first place I ever bungee jumped: "If you can't jump, push yourself!"

