How to Go Green by Adopting Sustainable Business Strategies in Your Practice

Barbara G. Crabbe, DVM

Setting up a recycling program at your veterinary practice requires a minimal amount of effort and offers many advantages including a valuable marketing strategy, team building, and the knowledge that you are “doing the right thing” by taking steps to reduce your carbon footprint. Author’s address: PO Box 526, Beavercreek, OR 97004-0526; e-mail: bcrabbedvm@aol.com. © 2013 AAEP.

1. Introduction

In 2009, our equine practice made the commitment to “go green” by adopting an extensive recycling program. Living and working in Oregon, where protecting the environment is a priority for many residents, our initial goal was simply to “do the right thing” by taking steps to reduce our carbon footprint and protect habitats for both wildlife and future generations. We could never have anticipated the many other rewards this commitment would bring.

In 2010, we were recognized with a BRAG (Business Recycling Awards Group) award by our local county. Our practice was written up in the local media, and our clients began to recognize and appreciate us for our efforts. Not only has our recycling program become one of our best marketing tools to date, it has had the additional benefit of contributing to a strong sense of teamwork among our employees. All of our doctors, technicians, and support staff have taken a sense of ownership in the program and enthusiastically help with sorting, delivering, and otherwise participating in our group recycling efforts.

2. What Can You Recycle?

It has been estimated that 100,000 marine mammals and one million seabirds die each year from eating plastic. These facts make recycling of the many plastic products that pass through a veterinary practice worthwhile. We have found ways to recycle almost every piece of plastic we see, including plastic syringe casings, needle caps, and shaving bags.

Paper makes up 37% of the waste stream in the United States and is one of the easiest and most common products recycled. In most states, paper can be mixed in a single bin and often picked up as part of a curbside recycling program. In addition to recycling, paper waste can be significantly reduced by maximizing the use of computerized records.

Other products that are fairly easy to recycle include wood, metal, Styrofoam packaging, electronics, and print cartridges. The list is practically limitless, and we were surprised to learn how easy it was to locate places to recycle these different items. For example, all old electronic items (working or not) can be dropped off at your local Goodwill. Within the first 6 months of initiating our recycling plan, we have reduced the waste at our practice to a half can weekly, whereas we typically fill two large recycling bins.

3. Setting Up a Recycling Program

The first step to setting up a successful program in your practice is to identify a recycling coordinator. This individual should be someone who is already
enthusiastic about recycling and protecting the environment and should be well organized. The recycling coordinator can then begin by researching what products can be recycled in your area and where they are accepted. A very helpful resource for gathering this information can be found at www.earth911.com. This website offers a recycling center locator that covers states nationwide. When beginning a program, it is wise to start with a limited list of items to be collected, such as paper, plastics, glass, aluminum cans, electronics, and inkjet/toner cartridges. You can always add to the items recycled as the program develops.

The next step is to determine how items will be collected and how they will be transported to a recycling facility. We have found it best to set up separate bins or collection areas to minimize the amount of sorting necessary before transport. For example, we collect all of our hard plastic syringe casings and needle caps in small containers placed inside our ambulatory vehicles and at strategic locations in our clinic. These small containers are dumped into bags when full and transported to the recycling facility. Plastic shavings bags are collected into large bags kept in the barn area and joined with other miscellaneous plastics collected in bins in the offices and treatment areas that are placed next to paper bins. Electronics and print cartridges are collected in boxes placed by printers in our business office. By having multiple collection areas in convenient locations, employees are encouraged to recycle rather than dispose of all recyclable items.

Transport to recycling facilities occurs in a variety of different ways and may require some creative thinking. Many commercial waste haulers offer recycling services in addition to basic garbage service, so your first step should be to contact your garbage company to find out what recyclable products they will pick up. We have several clients who have joined us in our efforts and will occasionally stop by to pick up items for return. In turn, we will occasionally collect items from these clients. Sharing these duties not only simplifies transport, it has helped us foster relationships with these clients who share our concern for the environment. Finally, our doctors will occasionally transport items in the practice vehicles when drop-off locations are convenient to routes taken during farm calls, and staff members willingly transport items on their way to and from work.

4. Outside the Box

In addition to our in-clinic recycling program, we have expanded our efforts to include equine-oriented events in our area with the formation of “Team Green.” We have arranged to set up recycling bins at horse shows and have coordinated a group of junior exhibitors to collect, sort, and return aluminum cans, glass, and plastic bottles. In Oregon, these items can be redeemed for cash, and we have started a scholarship fund with the proceeds earned that is earmarked for training scholarships for the Team Green members. This program has given us a great deal of visibility in the equestrian community and resulted in a significant amount of additional recycling.

In 2012, we went one step beyond our recycling mission to join our county’s “Adopt-A-Road” program and have committed to clean up and maintain a county road clear of trash and debris. As we look to the future, we look forward to discovering even more sustainable business strategies we can adopt to help us “go green.”

Helpful Resources

- www.earth911.com
- www.practicegreenhealth.com
- Goodwill Industries: www.goodwill.org