Social Networking as a Means to Improve Practice Profitability

Mike Pownall, DVM

In our current economic reality, a successful veterinary practice will maintain the clients they have and strive to acquire new ones while trying to minimize advertising expense. Social networking is an ideal method of achieving these goals. Having a solid foundation with these new platforms will help equine practitioners adapt and respond to future changes. As they become more comfortable in this new environment, their ability to engage current and potential clients will improve driving practice growth and profitability. Author's address: PO Box 459, Rockwood, Ontario, Canada N0B 2K0; e-mail: mike@mpequine.com. © 2010 AAEP.

1. Introduction
Social networking is an effective communication tool that any equine practitioner can use to increase sales, reinforce client loyalty, and minimize promotional expenses. There are many platforms that can be used to facilitate communication and grow a one-person or group veterinary practice. Contrary to some assumptions, these social networking platforms are not just for keeping up with high school friends or talking about what you had for lunch. Whether it be a blog, Facebook page, Twitter account, or a YouTube video, there are limitless ways in which a veterinary practice can build lasting relationships with established or prospective clients. Effective subscribers are using them to communicate about the services their veterinary practice offers, events they are holding/attending, and create educational opportunities. Horse people are also using various sites to discuss and review veterinary practices. Not all comments are complimentary, and the nimble veterinary practice needs to know how to respond to minimize negative reviews. Because the depth of social networking is so vast, a coherent plan must be instituted to maximize the efforts of a veterinary practice as they venture into the world of social media.

2. Presentation of Topic
The purpose of this presentation will be to discuss the general reasons why engaging in social networking is necessary to stand out in the competitive veterinary marketplace. It is no longer enough to just have just a website for informing your clients. There are numerous channels that horse people are using to educate themselves about veterinary medicine. To aid in understating the variety of platforms available, we will review the terms and philosophy of various forms of social media. Another concern we will address is how to maintain patient confidentiality in this open and transparent environment. We will analyze the more popular social networking platforms and how they can be used to increase practice profitability. Examples of their uses by
veterinary and non-veterinary industries will be used as case examples.

- Facebook: Understand the usefulness of Facebook for promotion of your business. Should you create a group or a fan page? How many and what kind of followers or fans should your practice have? How often should you update it? How do you attract new followers or fans?

- Twitter: What is Twitter and how do you communicate in 140 characters or less? How can you use it to drive traffic to your web site?

- Blogs: What is a blog and should your practice have one? Who should blog and on what subjects? What are video blogs and podcasts and can they work for your practice?

- YouTube: More and more people are using this video site to view instructional videos. Does your veterinary practice need its own channel?