Building the Client-Centered Hospital

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Today’s market is demanding and competitive. Create your own success by developing a strong core business; then build a hospital that puts your clients’ needs first. Author’s address: Animal Arts, 4250 Broadway, Suite E, Boulder, CO 80304; e-mail: heather@animalarts.biz. © 2012 AAEP.

1. Introduction
As equine veterinarians, you are trained to be clinicians. As clinicians, your success is measured with skill, with specialized training, and most importantly, with results. The problem is that your clients have little to go on to judge your competence as a clinician. Results count, but few clients are sophisticated enough to understand whether the result they received was typical. Your clients’ perceptions can be skewed by other factors related to the experience they receive. Bad experiences, broadcast to the world by a few clients, can destroy the credibility of a practice.

To compete in a demanding market, you must be business people first and clinicians second. This is especially important as your Generation Y clients grow old enough to become serious consumers. Generation Y is the largest and most educated generation of Americans to date. This group of consumers is both sophisticated and fickle. With the world at their fingertips, they can quickly see their options, communicate their opinions, and consult with others. You will need to take excellent care of these clients to earn and maintain their loyalty.

In the past, many equine practices built their buildings with a perfunctory approach. The hospital, like the practitioner, was inwardly focused and pragmatic. In the past, practices succeeded with bland and functional facilities.

Today, you face many obstacles to success, from oversaturation of the market to higher expectations from your clients. To compete, it will be essential to develop a strong core business and to build a hospital that puts your clients’ needs first.

We will briefly outline the steps that you must take to strengthen your business; then, we will review a number of successful hospital design trends that maximize the client experience.

Key Points

Evaluate Your Business
Before beginning a design process, do some diagnostics. The following industry metrics are indications of a healthy equine veterinary practice.

Profit
A healthy equine practice will generate from 45% to 48% gross profit before paying physicians and purchasing equipment.1 Net profits, or return on investment for the practice owners, should be in the range of 2% to 3%.

Cost of Supplies
The cost of drugs and medical supplies should be between 20% and 22% of overall gross revenue.2
Practice Growth
The recession notwithstanding, your practice should be growing at a rate that exceeds inflation. It is advisable to invest in your own personal internal improvements as part of preparing to build a hospital.

Lay the Groundwork for a Customer-Focused Practice
Assuming you are starting with a profitable business, here are some simple steps to do a better job of giving your clients what they really want.

Hire “People” People
Many of your staff work for you because they like horses, not because they like people. Unfortunately, the human brain can easily detect false friendliness, and this can be more off-putting than open hostility. Hire people who genuinely like other people, and put these employees on the front line.

Offer Complementary Services
It strengthens an equine business to offer ancillary services that your clients want and seek elsewhere. Become the resource to your clients and the go-to source for the whole health and well-being of their horses. Only you can decide what services make sense for you and your market, but, by providing services such as acupuncture, chiropractic care, dental services, and podiatry, you can anticipate what your clients want and offer it to them.

Develop a Strong Brand
Your clients are searching for authenticity. For example, if you say “we offer the latest technologies,” but you have a terrible Web site, will that message ring true? Work hard to figure out who you are and how you positively differentiate yourself from others. Then broadcast this message consistently in all that you do and say.

Emphasize Convenience
In our multitasking world, nothing is more valuable than convenience. This translates to:

- Offering online services such as consultation and scheduling.
- Providing prompt service.
- Bundling services so that clients can maximize their time.

Reach Out
You may not like the idea of distracting yourself with social media, but social media is one very effective tool to build your business. It is important that you do it and that you do it in a way that reinforces your brand. If you are new to social media, learn from others who are already doing it well.

Build the Client-Centered Hospital
I still have enough idealism to believe that good buildings really can change lives. You can change your own life as well as the well-being of your practice by creating spaces that are both effective and memorable. Let your clients inspire you.

The ideas that I have outlined below have little impact on construction costs. We understand that dollars count, especially in an equine practice. Looking at the experience from your clients’ point of view is simply a different way of approaching the same project.

You can incorporate most of these ideas if you are renovating instead of building new. As an example, a campus master plan can work around existing buildings. This is frequently done by universities. The one caution here is to have a long-term goal. You may wish to spend less money on interim fixes with long-term investment in mind.

Create a Master Plan
This idea is as good for you as it is for your clients. Few equine practices master-plan their facilities and map out future expansions. This lack of planning can lead to confusion and chaos. Here are some practical tips:

- Lay out traffic flow to clearly separate vehicles, horses, staff, and clients.
- Create circular turnarounds so that clients do not have to back trailers.
- Clearly delineate where clients should park and unload.
- Use architecture to clearly communicate where clients should check in. Some practices build a covered porte-cochere at the entry to allow clients to safely and conveniently check in. Similarly, covered unloading and lameness assessment areas provide protection from the elements and comfort for a newly arriving patient.

Transition Your Receptionist to a Greeter
If you have hired a personable greeter, she should give clients her undivided attention:

- Establish separate phone answering and callbacks from the client area.
- Do not create a barrier with a desk, or worse, a hole in a wall behind which a receptionist lurks. Instead, create the experience that your client wants. What if your greeter and your client sat down in two comfortable chairs without a desk? What if your greeter met your clients at their trucks?

Keep Your Clients Comfortable
Bored and anxious clients do not want to be holed up in a waiting room while their horse is undergoing a procedure. This is partially why they often get in...
The surgery view window is a famous example of opening a view to the action. Here are some other ideas for keeping your clients comfortable and engaged:

- Create outdoor waiting porches where clients can sit outside, out of the way.
- Open glass views to busy but innocuous areas of the hospital such as the lab. Physical transparency is a nice metaphor for practicing ethical business and for having nothing to hide. It is amazing how much clients appreciate watching the routine bustle of a busy hospital.
- If you provide a procedure view window, be sure that it is set up so clients can comfortably sit and watch.
- Design your diagnostic imaging spaces with room for a client to watch from the safety of an out-of-the-flow, shielded window.

**Downplay Chaos**

Too much frenetic energy is a bad thing to communicate to your clients. Use your design to create and encourage a calm and peaceful environment.

- Provide a quiet consultation room to review images and talk with your client.
- Separate exam areas from one another to protect client privacy.
- Use sound wall barriers in your facility, and reduce reverberant noise within equine exam areas with the use of absorptive ceiling materials.
- Provide staff circulation areas that are completely separate from the client areas.

**Design a Greener Hospital**

In our changing society, greater emphasis is being placed on designing greener, more sustainable buildings. Whether or not you decide to pursue a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) registered project, building a greener hospital has many proven benefits for you and your business, including:

- Justifying the design of a more energy-efficient building that costs less to operate.
- Appealing to your community and world-oriented younger clientele.
- Better health and productivity for your staff, which has been well proven and incorporated into evidence-based design concepts in newer human hospitals.

Although there are many important applications of green design, one of the most compelling concepts is the idea of bringing the outside in. Many equine practitioners love being outside. So do horses, and so do your clients. Why not design a building that keeps the weather at bay while still allowing for a strong connection to the out-of-doors?

- Use daylight whenever possible. You simply cannot go wrong with this idea, provided that it is implemented properly to minimize glare and heat gain. Daylight has been demonstrated to improve morale and productivity in a work environment, to shorten recovery times in a medical environment, and to increase sales in a retail environment. Most horses prefer to be outside, so they respond more favorably to environments that are more natural. Have your building designed with an abundance of natural light, brought in from high windows. Artificial lighting accounts for about 30% of a building's utility costs. You will recoup what you spend installing effective daylight systems over the lifetime of your building.
- Develop “quasi-outdoor” spaces. In all but the most unforgiving climate, a workspace that is shielded from the weather but visually connected to the out of doors will be preferred by your patients and clients. These spaces are very efficient to operate and can reduce the overall energy consumption of the hospital. In your true indoor environments, supply a sufficient amount of fresh outside air to minimize odors. Ten air changes per hour are recommended in equine exam areas, and more in procedural areas.
- Reconnect with the knowledge passed down by generations about how to design healthy barns in your climate. A healthy barn is better for your patients, and it is also better for your clients, who will know whether or not their horses are stressed.
- Orient the building to take advantage of the path of the sun.
- Use materials that are effective in your climate.
- Horses appreciate quiet environments that are naturally lit and well ventilated. Too often, hospital wards are located in noisy, chaotic areas, and are lit with artificial lighting.
- Horses should be sufficiently separated from each other to reduce social stress and to prevent the spread of disease.

**Incorporate Alternative Energy Technologies**

Demonstrate to your clients that you are committed to a mission that is broader than your practice. A great example of this is the movement to incorporate photovoltaic panels into the design of commercial buildings. These panels can be placed either on buildings, or if that is not possible, on grade. Although there is a significant up-front cost for these systems, over time they can offset ongoing building lighting costs. If you are interested in this or other new technologies, visit with representatives from...
the companies that provide these products early in the design process to see if they will work for your location and your project. Many of our clients who cannot currently afford to incorporate photovoltaic panels are instead designing their buildings to be “solar ready.”

Build With Local Building Materials and Practices

One interesting concept is the idea of incorporating materials and building traditions that are local to your area. For example, in Denver, we have a world-class block masonry plant. Not only can we obtain locally manufactured concrete block, we can develop a relationship with the representative who can give us data about the product, such as its structural capacity or recycled content. Concrete block masonry happens to be a great product for the construction of animal care facilities, and there are many good masons in our area.

In North Carolina, we have incorporated sustainably harvested wood into our projects, which helps us to create inspiring, warm, and evocative interior environments. Challenge your designers to use your local building practices to create a more inspired design.

Use Color

Small animal practices have learned that creating a colorful environment is invigorating to the staff and is very powerful for the clients. Challenge yourself to be as professional with your interior materials as you are with the rest of your hospital. Follow these tips:

- Hire a professional to put together the color scheme.
- Keep clinical areas lighter to prevent shadows and contrast.
- Use neutral colors for expensive materials such as flooring and cabinetry. Be expressive with paint, which is easily changeable.

2. Discussion/Conclusion

Questioning your assumptions and looking for ways to provide what your clients really want will help you create a strong, client-centered equine practice. The last few years have brought difficult times for equine practices. In every difficulty, there is growth. The equine practice of tomorrow is no longer inward-facing. Build a practice that reaches out, faces competition head on, and strives to do better.

References