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Number 1 in a series of 3:

WEAVING THE RIGHT WEBSITE MESSAGE

By Linda Wasche

The best veterinary websites go beyond basics to help build a distinguishable identity for the practice. Many veterinary websites share similar descriptions of facilities, staff credentials and services. The more effective sites become a “platform” for the practice.

Answer the following to plan or enhance your website.

1. What are you trying to achieve?

A website alone is not a client attraction tool. But it can help a veterinary practice:

- Build credibility
- Educate and inform
- Define and position

Identify website objectives for each audience. (See “target audiences” below.) Websites that convey practice character and beliefs help create a distinctive identity. On the other hand, change the name of the practice on many sites and you would never know the difference!

2. Who is your target audience?

Tailor website content and graphics to *types* of audience:

- Current clients (education, cross selling of services)
- Seeking a vet (new to area or unhappy with current vet)
- Other vets (referrals)
- Info seekers (could produce clients)

What information, programs and features will resonate with each? Further tailor website content to appeal to specific interests based on:

- Demographic groups (seniors, families, singles)
- Pet demographics (puppy/kitten, geriatric, breed-specific)
- Special interests (travelers, outdoor enthusiasts)

3. What perceptions do you want to create?

Many practice websites tell the visitor what the practice wants them to know. The best websites show them!

How you look and talk is often more important than what you say. Instead of saying that your practice emphasizes preventive care, offer information on pet nutrition and wellness. Instead of stating that you honor the human-animal bond, develop a special quiz for understanding your pet’s personality or create a memorial to deceased pets. Pay attention to your choice of:

- Photos/illustrations (lighthearted or serious, species of animal?)
- Terminology (pet owner or pet guardian; pet or companion?)
- Tone (friendly, serious, approachable?)

While clients want to know about your practice's qualifications, they also want to know what it will *feel like* to have you as their vet. Clients assume technical competence. Use your website to show them how wonderful it will be to have you take care of their pet!

Next month: Tips for getting the most from your website as a marketing tool.

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Number 2 in a series of 3:

TURN YOUR WEBSITE INTO A MARKETING TOOL

By Linda Wasche

To get the most from your practice's website, think of it as not just an electronic brochure, but as a living, breathing marketing tool.

Website folks will tell you to increase search engine visibility. Most practices (with exception of specialized regional centers) seek clients within a reasonable distance. Make sure your site surfaces in geographic searches, i.e., "vets" (county), "veterinary services" (city), etc., as well as in local directories.

Many websites are underutilized, however, not because they cannot be found, but because they offer little reason to seek them out. Effective sites provide reasons to visit -- and revisit.

Provide information.

Become a resource for pet lovers, rescue groups and other veterinarians by posting pet care tips, news and checklists. Tailor information to different target audiences. Frequently update with timely news and seasonal information. Publish an e-newsletter or e-bulletin with tidbits linking back to details on your site. Post links to noteworthy articles, studies and reports on other websites.

Collect information.

Marketing is as much about listening as it is talking. Gather useful information on website visitors. Do they have a dog, cat or rabbit? Do they have multiple pets? Who are they? How many get their pet's teeth cleaned, and so on. Ask visitors to supply information while registering for a free e-newsletter or to receive promotions and special offers.

Build a community.

Provide a *forum* for pet lovers with like interests. Set up a blog where visitors can ask questions, share experiences and post their pets' pictures. Allow local groups and organizations to post information to a calendar or events page. Link rescue groups with clients who might want to donate extra pet food or excess cages or supplies. Invite and post feedback. Consider on-line appointment booking for clients.

Promote your practice.

Use the site to energize clients and prospects. Feature specials on veterinary services. Tie in with national observances such as Pet Dental Health Month and Spay Day USA. Collaborate with local groomers and boarders. Conduct chats on veterinary topics or sponsor webinars and post to the site for future reference.

Next month: Increasing traffic to your website.

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Number 3 in a series of 3:

INCREASING TRAFFIC TO YOUR WEBSITE

By Linda Wasche

Once you are confident that your website will get tails wagging, actively promote it to build web traffic. Caution: make sure that your site is ready to wow. If not, better to get your site in shape before you tell the world about it.

To build website traffic, first do the obvious and make sure you are including your web address wherever possible: in advertising; on banners, giveaways, mailers, invoices, appointment reminders and in your lobby. Next, focus on two groups: 1) clients and 2) the community.

Reaching **clients** already familiar with the practice is easier. Plus you have a somewhat “captive” audience. Encourage clients to visit the website through:

- A fun giveaway item such as a pet t-shirt, human t-shirt, tote bag or other item that will be worn or used publicly.
- Appointment follow-up discount coupons for the next teeth cleaning (or other service) available only – you guessed it – on the website.
- Cost savings or other incentive for booking appointments on line (if you have this capability).
- Periodic mailings directing clients to new information, a small guidebook or other new items on the site.
- A lobby computer tuned in to your website.
- Touching quotations, poems, sayings and stories featured on your site that clients will want to forward to others (“viral” marketing).

Reaching the **community** that may or may not be aware of your practice is a bit more challenging. However, attracting visitors to your site is a great way to begin building interest and trust. Promote your website in the community through:

- Press releases to local media focusing on timely and newsworthy website content and features such as:
 - Pet nutrition guide
 - Seasonal pet care
 - Pet training tips
 - Traveling with your pet
- Contests and promotions that require website registration and that will post winners to the site, such as:
 - Pet photo contest
 - Pet costume contest
 - Essay or story contest (perhaps for kids)
 - Best pet trick
- Links on other websites for related services such as local pet grooming, boarding and supplies.