

10 Tips for a Healthier Business

Everybody talks about the economic crisis and how it is affecting their business, the veterinary profession is no exception to this. It is important to admit that there is a problem and that help is needed, this is always the first step to overcoming any crisis.

In the following article I will try to give some ideas to help face this crisis in the best way with the available means.

Let's start by understanding the goals of any company. These goals can be summarised in the following way:

- Produce benefits
- Satisfy clients
- Keep employees happy

The three goals are as important as each other and especially in these crisis times. Every tool available must be applied so the goals are reached and the business fulfils its full potential.

In a time when clients think twice before spending money, it is fundamental that client satisfaction is maximal. The clients must see the added value that we offer with our services. They should understand that when they buy a bag of food from us it is not just some biscuits they can get at half the price at the supermarket. Instead there is a service that comes along with it that they cannot get anywhere else, which includes professional advice on nutrition, weight control and more specific dietary therapy. Communication is key and the whole team has to be involved. We must invest time in properly educating the team so they also understand the products and know how to communicate this to the client. This investment will always bring benefits and even more so nowadays.

It is clear that a company needs to produce benefits to remain a viable business. Due to the inflation, we need to increase revenue yearly just to break even, so at the beginning of the year we need to plan how are we going to achieve this. This is done by

implementing business projection models and then, vitally, communicating the aims and targets it to the whole team.

Lastly, employers must have adaptability and a safety net factored into their business plan to allow for unexpected changes in the economic climate and changes in working conditions. Huge companies have closed despite everybody doing their job correctly. Circumstances change and what at some point was acceptable (to work 37 hours and get paid for 40), may not be acceptable in the current conditions. The whole team needs to know the situation and push that extra bit. The key to giving your best is motivation and this requires a decent salary, time off, sick leave etc. We need to know what really motivates our employees to help them to deliver the service to the best of their abilities. This will ensure they continue working for us for longer and the longer they stay, the more they identify themselves with our company. The more they identify, the harder they will work to prevent it from failing, as the failure will not only be of their company but of themselves.

We also have to remember that the majority of people were doing the 'right thing' during the first (and only) voyage of the Titanic, the band was playing music, the waiters serving drinks, engineers checking the machines... and despite all that, the ship sunk.

In this case there was a leadership problem, whoever took the decision about the speed and course. This can also be applied to our clinic, we need to consider carefully the decisions we make. We cannot change strategy each month because the results are not the expected ones, but rather choose more wisely in the first place.

Once the company goals are understood, and hence the goals for a clinic, let's see how can achieve them:

1. Be pro-active

Our clients are out there (I hope nobody has met a client who wants their dog put to sleep because they cannot afford to feed it). But clients are delaying their visits, spending less per visit and waiting for things to go wrong before seeking help. We are

obliged to get out there and find them, we need to stop hiding in our clinic, waiting for the pets to get sick and focus more on the prevention. Prevention is more than vaccination and parasitic treatment, as it is also preventive neutering, regular blood tests in chronic or elderly patients etc. We need to educate the owners that the first way is false economy and this cannot be done without our next point, communication.

2. Communicate Information

Vets, just like any other care service providers, have a duty to better educate our clients so they can do the best for their animal. Communication is our best ally on this mission. This communication must not only be during the consult. We must remember that owners receive a huge amount of information in the short period of time that a consult usually lasts. Besides, they usually have lots of distractions, for a start their pet! That is why we must have tools ready to help them better understand the overload of information. For example, we could provide 'take-away' info leaflets for the most common complaints. If we want the owners to use anti-parasitic treatment regularly, we should provide them with an info sheet that talks about the flea cycle or the diseases carried by ticks.

Another useful tool is regular informative campaigns. These campaigns give a dynamic and modern image to the clinic, as well as making our clients more faithful to us, educating them and helping them to focus on a specific problem that they may have been meaning to address, such as dental care. These campaigns can also contribute to the bonding and motivation of our team. Vivaly, as secondary effect, more educated clients will spend more money as they will be more likely to use more services. Campaigns can be combined with discounts or promotions that help with the motivation.

3. Use of new technologies

In the era of communication, with the Internet, mobile phones etc we cannot look the other way. We need to use all these resources to communicate with our clients. Besides, using emails is cheap and allows us regular contact. It can be used to forward those informative campaigns, as well as vaccine or worming reminders. Setting up the system will cost money, but it is a small investment if we compare it with how much traditional mailing costs. Using a technology that most of us have in our phones, "bluetooth", proximity marketing can be achieved in our waiting rooms, or share our "wi-fi" with the clients to make waiting times less boring.

4. Re-visit your relationship with providers

In this time of reduced consumption, we must minimise expenses and a large chunk of the expenses in a veterinary clinic are from those products we buy from providers. This ranges from the vaccines and drugs, to stationary and utilities, to food and accessories. The best way to approach this is a retrospective study of what we spent in the past and then use this data to negotiate future orders. There are shopping groups or co-operatives that will allow you to avoid some middle men, hence, they can offer you a better price. Remember that drug companies do not offer the same price per vaccine to the practice that buys 100 to the one who buys 10,000.

5. Design an annual plan

It is clear that if you are travelling abroad, the normal protocol is not only to decide the destination, but also how to get there, where to stay, local currency... in otherwise a complex plan is formulated. Our clinic is like a continuous trip, which means that we need to do a periodic plan, based on our broad business plan. In this way, we will apply the appropriate tools to, for example, increase the number of clients opting for preventive surgeries or increase the revenue by increasing the percentage of sales of food.

This plan needs to be agreed by everybody and be relevant to the current situation. Then we need to establish the best way to achieve the goals and then ensure the goals are being achieved. If this is not the case we need to work out how to get back on the right path.

6. Review your finances

We need to start by checking our finances and where we spend the money. If we do not know where the money is spent, how are we going to know where to save it? Use the tools you have (from a computer to a simple pen and paper, both are equally useful) and check every penny you spent in a set period. Once you know that, you will know if you can save some money (change your electricity provider, your phone...). The same can be done for the revenue. Check where the money is coming from so you learn which areas of your business need to be improved. When designing the plan this will show us where to invest the marketing money, for example.

7. Listen to the team

You never know where the next good idea may be coming from. In the regular meetings with our team, it is important that everybody gives their points of view and ideas

to improve the current situation. At the end of the day, everybody working in the clinic is experiencing the effects of the same economic crisis. It is important to listen actively, which is another requirement of a good leader as it helps to motivate the team.

8. Be a leader

As a leader, it is important to set an example. You need to be the first to accept changes and be flexible. A good leader not only listens to the team, but also communicates with it. It is better if the employees understand that they are not working harder so you can go on holiday to a far away country, but rather in these crisis times the revenue has decreased and they need to work harder so everybody gets paid and there are no personnel reductions.

9. Look for synergies

Everybody is facing the same economic situation, perhaps it is about time to reconsider a collaboration, which previously did not seem to be viable or favourable. One of the best options to increase revenue is being able to offer more services. It would be very expensive for a small practice to hire a cardiologist to improve the revenue but perhaps hiring one between several local clinics could be cost effective. The same principle could be applied to an ultrasound machine, which can be very small and portable, allowing the expense to be shared. Every collaboration (or even association) will allow cost reductions.

10. Ask for help

Every change involves effort and a rare resource in the veterinary profession, time. Besides, a fresh pair of eyes can always help to bring a new point of view. There are companies and people which can help you to make those important decisions and to elaborate that plan that is going to benefit your business significantly or develop those informative campaigns or give you the tools to check your finances... the list is endless

In summary, there is no magic formula to face the crisis, but we can best use the tools available to deal with it. It is difficult to win the lottery, but if you don't buy a ticket it is impossible.

As Albert Einstein said: "It is insane to do the same thing over and over again and expect a different outcome"