

The use of new technologies on an everyday practice

In the XXIst century veterinary practice there can be a tendency for accumulating fancy equipment or “big boys toys” which often only one member can operate, instead of investment in more accessible tools that can be used by the majority of the members in the veterinary clinic and on a more regular basis.

Nowadays, clients present in the consult room with print outs of internet articles of what they think their animal has. They also tell you about loads of treatments that are available here and there. We will all agree that most of the time these diagnoses and treatments are not necessarily correct or appropriate for their animal.

If the owners are utilising the internet then so should we. In addition to the good old text books, researching in this modern way is essential and improves the quality of the service, as well as making our job more exciting.

To have broadband (or wireless) access in the practice is something so simple yet so feared, bosses fear vets will spend hours in the internet checking personal emails and organising their next holidays. However, in my experience this is not the case and but still this facility is not nearly as extensively employed as is necessary. For example, there are specialised webpages that charge an annual fee per practice with forums and online CPD, as well as the latest scientific research, that can be used to the advantage of the veterinary practitioner.

It should not be seen as unusual that somebody other than a new graduate is researching particular condition or surgical procedure. The use of internet should be complimentary to the books in the shelf, as it would also allow us to be in contact with a varierity of professionals dealing with the same condition and that share their experiences.

Continuing with the triple W world, I am going to focus now on what we can offer to the clients using it, as well as what can offer to us.

It is important to have a webpage for the practice that is interactive and regularly updated. Almost every practice have a basic webpage with details about how to get there,

consulting hours and some information about their vets but we could be providing so much more.

The webpage could be assigned to a member of staff and should be presented as a reward and not a chore as it is current almost seen. The maintenance and further development of the site should be incentivised for the chosen member of staff.

Among the variety of services that the webpage could offer I would like to mention the following:

- Book appointments:

As part of a larger membership scheme, clients would access their own private section and would be able to book themselves in the slot of their convenience and where possible the vet of their choice. Nowadays clients have a very busy life, but they can access the internet via the phone, blackberry, at work, home etc It will make the process easier for them and will also take some workload off the receptionists. Owners will be able to book the appointments even after closing time, so it is important that the e-bookings spots are allocated before closing time the previous day to avoid nasty surprises.

- Order prescriptions:

As above, management of chronic diseases (Heart conditions, Thyroid problems...etc) could be streamlined by offering the opportunity of repeat prescriptions on line or in their client section. This should improve efficiency for both clients and the practice. We can then post the medication back, together with a reminder of when the next blood test or examination is required.

- Order food:

According to a recent study by one of the major dog food companies, up to 60% of pet owners would follow their vets advice regarding diet. If they can order the food over the internet and even have it delivered to home, the veterinary practice overcomes one of the major advantages the supermarkets and pet shops have over us, easy access. On top of that, it allows the veterinary practice to have a "virtual" stock of different brands at different prices that adapt to all the client possibilities.

- E-Newsletter:

As I mentioned before, this can be assigned as a reward to a member of the staff. E-mail is so widely used these days as a primary form of communication that it should be regularly utilised as a way of relaying information and reminders to the clients. On the

newsletter several topics can be included, from health advise. specific disease articles, pictures of the clients' pets, to offers of the month or specific discounts if they choose to have dental treatment for instance or even where the vet is going on holidays so they know that their usual vet will be away. The newsletter must be a bridge of communication between the practice and the owners, so they feel they belong to us, that we care for them. This strong bond will make the swapping of vets more difficult and the solving of conflicts much easier.

- Health advise:

A section of the webpage can be used to answer the owners questions regarding their pets health. Giving advise for minor things over the internet, does not lose potential earnings but proves that we care for their animals and we are not only interested in seeing their pets to make money. As mentioned before, this service can be provided only to certain clients that would be part of another scheme, so they need to sign in their client area to access it.

Our feedback questionnaire can be available in the reception at the time of the consult, but also we would need to have an e-questionnaire.

In the webpage, there could be a special area, in which owners have the chance of checking their patients with a webcam. On long hospital treatments, owner do not always have the time to come to visit when it is suitable for the staff. Bearing this in mind, we could set up a specific kennel or consult, in which the hospitalized animal is taking into at certain time, for the owners to connect for a certain amount of time (5 - 10 minutes depending of the condition) and watch their animals. Otherwise a video can be recorded and emailed so the owner is aware of the progress of the treatment.

It is also important to consider the use the social networks (facebook, myspace, twitter...), as they are another way of communicating with the clients. Pictures of the new puppies and kittens, team building exercises, open days... can be included on them. It will another way, although clearly not the primary one, to demonstrate that the company likes to keep in touch with the new generations.

The webpage (unless a member of the staff has a special interest on web designing), due to the complexity that can achieve, will need to be contracted with a special service that can update it regularly.

After having mentioned a few of the advantages of having an interactive webpage, I

would like to mention a couple of other current popular ways of communicating, like email and text messages.

We need to get those contact details from the owners at the time of registering or when setting up the system. It is also important to explain to them why we need those details. All the staff need is to be trained in the use of the computer system in an adequate manner.

Sending emails and texts allows a more proactive communication. This will allow the practice to send reminders not only by normal post once a year for the booster, but also to remember flea and worming treatments, blood tests for ongoing chronic patients... We need to know our clients and they will have to make the decision regarding how they like to be reminded. We may be surprised how many of our more mature clients use the new technologies nowadays, so do not make the decision for them.

This aspect of using the new technologies can also be part of a marketing strategy, as it implies a reduction in the use of paper resources. To encourage our clients to sign up to the use of the electronic reminders, we can offer a discount to the owner of the cost of the stamp and stationary at the time of paying for the booster.

The programs to send text message to mobile devices from the internet are cheap and easy to use. This could mean that in a busy day at a normal clinic we could give updates on the condition of their hospitalized pets, when to come to collect them after a routine surgery or if their tablets are ready, for example.

Communication breakdown is one of the main complaints by the owners and not having enough time is the usual response of the vets. Using the new technologies can bridge that gap that will help both parties to be in contact.

These are just a few of the ways to apply the internet and mobile phones into everyday practice. It might sound Hi Tec, but in the same way that nowadays no practice can be conceived without a fax machine, in the near future these other methods of communication will be natural to all practices. At the end of the day, your GP, phone company or pizza delivery company send you text messages to remind you of your next appointment, when the line will be connected or to let us know that our dinner is on its way.

I would like to talk now about a few gadgets that can be helpful in an everyday clinic and that do not mean a huge challenge to be used by a vet that is not computer friendly. The goal is to improve the communication of the vet with other vets and the clients.

In every consult there is almost for certain a screen for the vets computer, but a second one (or making the other one visible to the clients on request) would be very helpful. On these screen, the vet can show the client x rays, EKG's, blood tests, microscopic pictures... An image is more eloquent than a thousand words and it is also easier to understand. It is also important to have a device that would allow the vet to draw pictures or plans, as again, around 90% of the information that human beings process is through the eyes.

Obviously, we would need to have the means to obtained those pictures. A camera for the microscope is a relatively cheap and simple way to do that. We can then show the owner picture of those urinary crystals, skin mites or faecal parasites.

Another piece of equipment that has become natural to a veterinary clinic has been the x-ray machine. Many places have been using the same one for the last 20 odd years because the partner thinks it makes perfectly good x rays. And it probably does, but what if we could send those x rays to a specialist and get a diagnosis within 24 hours. Or if we did not have to assign a dark room for the developer, as well as having to store, change and warm its liquids. By turning the old 'processing' room into an additional consult room or ops room could offset the cost of investing in a new digital system. That is a matter for another article, but I would like just to mention that your old machine and cassettes can be recycled, needing only to invest in a new developer and films.

The ultrasound machine is another "toy" that is present in a lot of the clinics. It is common for them to come with a printer, but their images can also be added to the computer system, to be stored or sent. We have to remember too that when using the ultrasound for a pregnancy diagnosis, owners will impressed to take home a picture of one of the puppies as they do with their own children.

A paper scanner that would allow us to store the reports received by fax quickly and efficiently and that would also allow to convert the EKG and other results into an image that can be send to specialist or to be shown to the owner at the consult time is also a cheap investment to update your clinic.

A digital camera (instead of using the one on your phone) can also be a good investment. How to judge the improvement on a corneal ulcer if different vets do the original and the check up consult, for example. Good clinical notes will help, but two images next to each other will be the best comparison.

A portable bar code reader machine is something commonly used for stocking and de-stocking goods. It works as simply as using the bar-code in each of the products in a

clinic (bottles of drugs, boxes of tablets...) to set up a software that will control the figures and order products automatically when it reaches the minimum level. Certain products will be accounted individually (bottles of drugs) and other can be accounted on groups (boxes of bandages).

These are just a few ideas in which with a reasonable investment, the outcome in the long run will be beneficial. It does not mean that you can apply all of them in your clinic, but the ones you try, will make your life much easier.

Biography

Ignacio Mérida Isla, MBA, DVM, MRCVS. Qualified in Veterinary Medicine in the year 2000 at the University of Saragossa (Spain). He then moved in the University of Utrecht (Holland), where he spent a year researching about dairy cows fertility. In the year 2002 moved into the UK and worked as Emergency Vet for 3 years, before starting working as a full-time small animal locum all over the country. In 2007 he started developing his consulting company Assis Veterinary Business Advisors which aims to help vets to improve their business and their work-life balance. He finished his MBA in the year 2009.