

It's All About That Brand

Client Service and Branding Go Hand-in-Hand

by Jen Reeder

WHAT DO YOUR CLIENTS THINK WHEN THEY hear the name of your practice? Do words like “outstanding,” “caring,” or “cutting edge” spring to mind? If people have positive associations with your practice—the ones you want them to have—you’re successfully promoting your brand.

Building a brand through the lens of client service has never been more important. Animal hospitals face competition with other local practices as well as “Dr. Google,” telemedicine, and discount veterinary services in “big-box” retail stores. By creating a carefully thought-out brand, you’ll attract and retain clients by giving them what they expect: top-notch service.

Allison Habetz, CVPM, chief of operations at AAHA-accredited Lafayette Veterinary Care Center in Lafayette, Louisiana, said when she joined the 24-hour practice eight years ago, the brand was centered around the owner rather than the hospital itself. However, the owner was bringing on partners and associate veterinarians and wanted to shift the focus to the practice.

At that time, Habetz explained, “If you said our name around town, people might not recognize it. But if you said, ‘Andy Plauche’s practice,’ they would. A legacy veterinarian is a beautiful thing for that veterinarian, but it’s really hard on everyone else involved—the clients and the team and the community—when that veterinarian leaves.”

Photo courtesy Blum Animal Hospital





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The entire staff met for about three hours to answer questions like, “Why do we do what we do?” and “What do we want to do here?” The consensus: being a client-centric practice that prioritizes the client-patient bond.

“It became really easy to represent that in our brand because we knew exactly who we were,” Habetz said. “That’s really what branding is. It’s not about slapping your logo on a billboard. It starts with the team and a cohesive identity, and then it grows to spreading your word and keeping your same imagery with that each time. Now, we’ve established this commitment to excellence in conjunction with our logo and our name.”

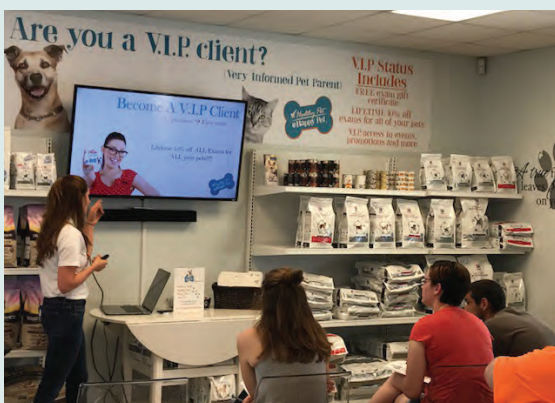
Habetz said the practice keeps that commitment top of mind through the year with Facebook posts celebrating work anniversaries for team members—their most popular posts—as well as photos of staff with new patients, notes about vaccine clinics or issues like heartworm prevention, and stories of pets who came in very sick but are heading home well.

“Part of branding is putting yourself where you’re going to interact with people,” she said. “If you have friends but you never interact with them, they forget about you, and we feel the same way with our clients. We can’t just send them a reminder to come see us once a year.”

Stacey Santi, DVM, helped AAHA-accredited Riverview Animal Hospital in Durango, Colorado, with a “brand refresh” when she became managing veterinarian. She started by determining the three words people associated with the practice.

“I always said that I was fine if we were the most expensive, but it better be followed with we were the best and we were the friendliest,” she said.

Now, as the founder and CEO of Vet2Pet App Builders,



First photo: ©Dr Marty Becker, Second, third, and fourth photos: ©Veterinary Medical Center of Fort Mill,

she encourages practice owners and managers to think of just three words they'd like people to associate with their brands. Then, sit in the lobby for 10 minutes, as a client might, and see if the same three words come to mind. They might not.

"I've seen so many practices with a different level of service in the front of the house versus the back of the house—the front of the house is typically not as good because they're paid less, they're trained less, they have higher turnover . . . the first impression is the front desk," Santi said. "I'm a strong believer that they need to be paid more, and they need to be trained more."

In addition to having a strong front of house, Santi said it's important to make sure there's consistent brand messaging in email blasts (which should be well designed and free of typos), social media, and a digital presence. Her company offers custom apps to help translate a practice's brand onto clients' cellphones. But she's been surprised by how few choose to include app options, like offering same-day pharmacy refills.

"Veterinary practices need to stop treating pet owners like clients and start treating them like customers," she said. "The modern-day consumer is much savvier. They have access to more tools, and they want an experience. We need to roll out the red carpet."

Julie Reck, DVM, owner of AAHA-accredited Veterinary Medical Center of Fort Mill in Fort Mill, South Carolina, said veterinary medicine is changing rapidly, and brick-and-mortar practices need to evolve to stay viable.

"The days of customer service being enough to sustain a veterinary practice are numbered," she said. "The way I'm branding my practice is in the realm of surpassing customer service and delivering customer *experience*."

To that end, she implemented the Healthy Pet Happy Pet Experience. It's a two-step process: After a client brings in a pet for an exam, they're invited to attend free 45-minute seminars that cover grooming, nutrition, and training. Once clients attend the three core classes, they achieve VIP (very informed pet parent) status, which entitles them to a 10% lifetime discount on exams and discounts from local pet businesses.



First photo: ©Dr Marty Becker, Second, third, and fourth photos: ©Blum Animal Hospital



Photos: ©Blum Animal Hospital

Reck also “cobrands” by promoting that the practice, which she opened “from scratch” in 2011, is accredited by AAHA and certified as a Cat-Friendly Practice and that every member of the staff is a Fear Freesm—certified professional. “The synergy with all of this, I’m finding, is gaining a lot of momentum for my practice,” she notes.

Marty Becker, DVM, built a well-known personal brand, in part by writing numerous bestselling books and appearing on *Good Morning America* for 17 years. When Mehmet Oz (also known as Dr. Oz) introduced Becker on his show as “Dr. Marty Becker, America’s Veterinarian,” the moniker stuck. Then, a lecture by Karen Overall, MA, VMD, PhD, DACVB, CAAB, changed his life.

“She talked about fear being the worst thing a social species could experience and how it caused permanent damage to the brain [and] that we in veterinary medicine were causing repeat severe psychological damage to pets,” he said. “I was so heartsick. I’d always thought of physical wellbeing but not emotional wellbeing.”

So Becker founded Fear Free, LLC to “take the pet out of petrified” by offering continuing education on the topic for veterinarians and their teams. It launched on March 31, 2016. Since then, nearly 20,000 veterinary professionals have registered to become Fear Free—certified professionals.

Becker plans to expand the Fear Free brand to include homes (by emphasizing enrichment), animal shelters, boarding, grooming, training, and end-of-life care.

He suggests veterinary practices be the first at something in order to stand out in a crowded marketplace, such as being the first animal hospital with a Fear Free—certified veterinarian in your area. “Once you can say, ‘We were the first,’ you’ll never lose it,” he advised.

Bill Schroeder, senior vice president of InTouch Practice Communications, a veterinary marketing agency based in Indiana, said a key to branding is being consistent in every action that happens within the practice without seeming stagnant.

He suggests adopting a concept he refers to as “always/sometimes/never.” If part of a practice’s brand is to refer to clients in a professional manner, then staff will

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start by *always* calling them Mr. or Ms. and their last name. But *sometimes* a client might prefer to be called by their first name, so it's OK in that instance. However, employees should *never* address a client with "Hey, cutie" or "Hey, dude."

"A practice should really start with determining who they are and validate what the community wants," he said. "Identify a unique value proposition—something you bring to the market that is different from anyone else."

One way to determine this is to not only survey clients but also read online reviews of the competition and identify common themes, he noted.

Julia Georgesen, DVM, co-owner of AAHA-accredited Blum Animal Hospital in Chicago, said communication is key to building loyalty and trust with clients. "We like for people to know what we're doing to stay on top of what's happening in veterinary medicine," she said. "We do spend time educating clients."

The practice has had a strong brand since opening in 1952, but it doesn't rest on its laurels. Georgesen said one of the slogans—and goals—is "excellence and compassionate care every day. We try to go above and beyond for every client. 'No' just shouldn't be an answer."

Kelly Baltzell, MA, the CEO of Beyond Indigo Pets, a veterinary marketing company based in Minnesota, said branding is much more than a name and a logo. Still, it's crucial to have a strong foundation in place. For instance, owners should consider how a practice's name and acronym will sound when spoken aloud by the front desk or a radio DJ, and make sure the domain name for the website makes sense when the letters are squished together—and isn't X-rated.



First and second photos: ©Veterinary Medical Center of Fort Mill, third photo: ©Blum Animal Hospital, fourth photo: ©Dr Marty Becker

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From there, train your team to understand the brand and prioritize marketing it in person and online. (As Baltzell quipped, “Google is your new lobby.”)

“One of our clients trained the staff to take license plate numbers of cars as they drive up and enter them into the practice information software so they can look up the person and greet them by name as they walk in the door,” she said. “That creates an instant bond and relationship with that person.”

She said branding needs to be so successful that if a mom at a Girl Scout meeting happens to mention the family is getting a new puppy, another mom will recommend the practice and explain why. Then, the potential client needs to get a positive impression when she Googles the animal hospital after the conversation.

“What’s the buzz that you want people to have about you or that people are going to leave in reviews about you? What is the tone? What is the culture? It’s sort of like dating: Everyone dates and hopes for the best. But in the first few days and weeks and months, unspoken rules are being drafted about the relationship,” she said. “What are the unspoken branding messages that you’re giving people every step of the way?”

Though promoting a brand might be an anathema to veterinarians who prefer to focus on practicing medicine, it cannot be ignored in today’s competitive market. In that case, Baltzell suggests tapping a trusted employee to manage the brand. That commitment will engender a loyal clientele. “It’s easier to retain the clients you have through relationship building and building that brand than going to access new ones all the time,” she said. “They’re your best advocates.” ❀

4 Ways to Cobrand with AAHA

AAHA-accredited practices are an elite group, so don’t be afraid to toot your own horn! Here are four talking points to share with your clients courtesy of Katherine Wessels, AAHA’s director of member experience and communications:

- Did you know that accreditation for animal hospitals is voluntary? Surprising, isn’t it? Nearly 60% of pet owners believe that their pet’s veterinary hospital is accredited, when it is not.
- State and provincial regulations can vary widely—in fact, some states don’t routinely inspect hospitals, going in for an inspection only when a complaint is filed by a pet owner. AAHA accreditation is considered the standard for veterinary excellence; it does not vary between states or provinces (AAHA accredits hospitals in both the US and Canada).
- AAHA accreditation requires hospitals to undergo a thorough review by veterinary experts every three years. The accreditation process is rigorous and time-consuming, and not every veterinary hospital wants to go through the lengthy process! You can take pride in the fact that your pet receives care from a hospital accredited by the American Animal Hospital Association.
- Do you know where to turn during a pet emergency? Did you know that all AAHA-accredited hospitals are required to offer emergency services or referral to an appropriate emergency practice 24 hours a day, seven days a week? AAHA hospitals are passionate about making sure pets get the care they need.



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She takes her dogs, Rio and Peach, to the first animal hospital in her town to achieve AAHA accreditation.