



Unleash the blogs



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An online presence is essential for all veterinary practices, but is it worth the effort? (Hint: Absolutely!) **Kerryn Ramsey** explains further

IN THIS DIGITAL AGE, IT'S A SIMPLE business necessity for a veterinary practice to have an easy-to-read website and a contact point via an email address. The continuing growth of social media also means it makes great business sense to delve a little deeper into blogging and Facebook. Once dismissed as the domain of people with too much time on their hands, these sites now play a vital role in marketing and reputation management. In addition, they encourage word of mouth, share news with customers, and are a cost-effective way to improve revenue.

As of April this year, Facebook had over 13 million Australian users with over nine million Aussies visiting the site every day. Facebook is where people interact and share information. Blogs, on the other hand, are an opportunity for veterinarians to post information about their practice and other animal-centric topics.

So what's the difference between

Facebook and blogging? "It's hard to compare the two as they provide different but important benefits to a business's online marketing strategy," says Tracy Raiteri of Townsville Social Media Marketing. "With Facebook, the business is going to the target market; with a blog, the business is attracting prospects."

Setting up and maintaining a Facebook page is quick and easy. The page lets people know who you are and gives them a sense of your personality. Posts are usually short and can be things such as a birthday announcement, a cute pet photo or a timely warning about tick season. While a light-hearted tone is the way to go, you still want your practice to be seen as professional and to be providing valuable educational material.

Veterinary practices have a big advantage over other businesses in that most other professions—be it doctors, dentists, accountants or salespeople—want to

engage their own target audience on Facebook, but they have to walk a very thin line in regard to tone. Posts that are too cute or too funny can give the impression that your business is not serious enough about its work.

A veterinary practice, however, deals with animals—and animals are the benchmark for cute and funny on the internet. Tabatha Whitehead is the practice manager at Wilston Vet in Windsor, an inner-northern suburb of Brisbane, where she's responsible for the practice's successful Facebook page. "Our industry really has the double whammy—we can post cute or funny things about animals until our heart's content," she says. "The good thing is that these images are very popular and yet don't take away from our professionalism. We are very lucky in that regard."

Facebook 'likes' means that your page is directed at a targeted audience. If you are posting animal-related topics, they will reach, and be shared, by people interested in animals. As your Facebook numbers grow, the people viewing your page are exactly the people you wish to engage.

It's a good idea to post at least once a day and to respond quickly to any questions or comments.

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“Too many businesses spend too much time selling themselves instead of building rapport.”

Tracy Raiteri of Townsville Social Media Marketing, Queensland

A balanced mix of topics that are informative, humorous and that induce conversation will garner ‘likes’ on your page. When someone shares one of your posts, traffic to your page can increase dramatically. A common occurrence is for people to follow your page for a while and, if they like what you post, bring in their pet. That first visit can then lead to years of return business.

One thing to avoid is being too self-promotional. “On both Facebook and blogs, too many businesses spend too much time selling themselves instead of building rapport,” says Tracy Raiteri. “Businesses get better results if they concentrate on adding value and showcasing the results that their products and services provide. Remember, no-one likes to be sold but everyone loves to buy.”

While Facebook is quick, easy and doesn’t take much time to maintain, blogging is more labour intensive. It requires regular updates of longer, interesting topics. These could be handy

training tips, breed comparisons, pet care or medical breakthroughs. While blogs don’t need to be updated as regularly, a new post should be uploaded at least once every two to four weeks. And it must be maintained—a blog that hasn’t been updated in months makes your business look disorganised and uninterested.

“The biggest advantage of hosting your own blog,” says Lachlan Wells, digital marketing strategist of Optimising, “is that if your posts address common questions from clients, they can appear in search results when people google those questions. Your post will then be seen again and again by people who are actively searching for that subject.”

A relevant and useful blog will improve your search rankings because you can appear for a greater variety of keywords. Blog posts can be active for years while Facebook updates only last for a few days.

A great way to come up with content ideas is to find a topic that attracts a lot of search queries but is poorly addressed by other websites. “You can do this by simply typing the first few words of some basic queries into Google and seeing what it auto-suggests,” says Wells. “For example, when I type in ‘why do vets...’ it gave me ‘charge so much’ and ‘cost so much’. If I created a piece of content that addressed this topic more transparently than others, it could be really popular.”

Like Facebook, blogging is a chance for clients—and prospective clients—to get to know you. Dr Liz Chmurycz, owner/vet of Russell Vale Animal Hospital in New South Wales, runs a Facebook page and has been blogging regularly since 2005.

“One of the best bits of advice I received was to be yourself,” she says. “You need to set your own rules on what your online presence looks like and what it projects. So long as I remain true to my core values of compassion, kindness and tolerance, finding and writing posts is easy. I am someone who is passionate about the care of animals and I hope this comes across.”

Posting on Facebook and blogging is an effective way for your practice to be present



5 hot-ticket topics

Dr Liz Chmurycz, owner/vet of Russell Vale Animal Hospital in New South Wales, lists the most popular topics that encourage followers to respond to (or ‘Like’) her posts.

“We measure engagement on our Facebook pages, and we are ranging around 30 per cent (a stat I am happy with),” says the veterinarian. “I had heard at a seminar once that anything above 10 per cent is good. It’s the only statistic I measure.” Here’s the top five ...

1. Wins with awards
2. Lost and found pets
3. Medic alerts (such as snake alerts and what to do, tick alerts, etc)
4. Tips that help pet owners so they don’t need to visit a vet
5. Anything that relates to kindness and compassion, especially between animals and humans.

where clients gather—and these days, that’s in the virtual town square of social media. People want to know why you are different, what you have to offer and how you do things better than the competition. Clients don’t want to be customers—they want to build relationships.

An effective social media presence also allows people to find your practice at a moment’s notice. “People need to be able to see what you offer quickly on their mobile phone,” says Tabatha Whitehead. “If I need a business and can’t find their phone number after a quick search on my iPhone, it makes it impossible for me to contact them. If you don’t have a presence online and you can’t be easily found, you’ll soon disappear.” ➤