Running a busy veterinary practice is extremely time-consuming. Between managing staff, balancing the books and juggling our day to day work. Finding time to do extra things such as developing and fostering relationships with our clients can be challenging. Yet as business-minded people we understand how important these valuable relationships are to the success of the practice. One of the easiest ways to engage our current and potential clients is through social media platforms; namely Facebook and Twitter. To fully understand the value these resources present, we must first take a look at each platform, explore the differences between them, and then review some practical tips for harnessing these tools for your practice.

What is Twitter?

In simplest of terms, Twitter is an online network of people from all over the globe who are sharing real-time information about things they are interested in. The information is delivered in the form of “tweets”, which are limited in size to 140 characters. Users “follow” each other to receive these tweets. From a business perspective, it is a tool that allows you to reach a broad audience through providing valuable information that will interest and engage your followers. It’s essentially a huge online networking tool, the goal of which is to achieve as many relevant followers as possible in order to build a solid online presence and become a valuable resource to the community.

What is Facebook?

Facebook is basically an online community of friends who stay connected and interact with one another over the web. Each user can create their own “page”, or identity, through which they can share information, pictures, videos and just about anything with those who “like” their page. Businesses can harness the power of Facebook to build relationships, share information, market their product or service and develop valuable viral marketing – the online equivalent to word of mouth. Facebook allows you to foster existing client relationships and develop new ones and provides your practice with a more personal face for the public to interact with.

What’s the Difference?

Like Twitter, Facebook is an online community made up of people from all over the world. In terms of interaction, however, the two have wholly different cultures. Facebook provides a little more flexibility in terms of content since you can post a wider variety of media and it doesn’t have the same character restrictions imposed by Twitter.
Given this, it is sometimes perceived as a bit more personal. However, because Twitter is more real-time in nature, it can be used to deliver information in a faster, more efficient way. Both platforms have their own unique benefits and provide invaluable ways to create and foster relationships, as you can now engage with your clients, and potential clients, on a level more personal than could be achieved within the confines of your physical practice. The bottom line is the more people you reach, the higher your client acquisition will be and the more successful your practice will grow.

Best Practices

In order to be effective in your social media endeavors, you’ll want to implement a system of devoting 20-30 minutes per day among your Twitter, Facebook and blogging activities. Not only does this help you commit to the task, but it also provides consistency, which is critical to social media success. Keep in mind that you can (and should) schedule regular content, which ensures a constant flow to your audience. Also, elect someone on your team to social media editor to ensure it all gets done!

The ultimate goal is to use your social media platforms to connect with other users in the industry, such as local pet businesses; reaching your community on an entirely new level. Here are some tips on how you can best use these tools to benefit your practice:

Twitter Tips

Tweet often – the more you tweet, the more people will follow you

Tweet regularly – build tweeting into your regular work schedule so it becomes routine

Sharing/Retweeting (RT) – Twitter is a networking tool, so don’t be afraid to share the love. Retweeting something interesting (copying and sharing it for your followers to see) is a great way to develop business relationships while also providing valuable information to your audience. For instance, if a pet health company that you follow posts a relevant tweet that would be of use to your readership, you can retweet it for your followers to see. Of course, you’ll want your tweets to be RT’d too, so keep them short and make them memorable.

Be yourself – There a millions of others tweeting, so you’ll need to add something unique and personal if you are to stand out and be heard

Don’t over follow – It can be tempting to hop on and follow as many people as you can, in hopes of them returning the favor. However, this tactic can quickly become overwhelming. Take the time to select users who interest you, and see who they are following. Remember, it’s a work in progress.
Share interesting facts – Tweets that are engaging, relevant and memorable easily go viral (i.e. are shared by others), which can gain you more followers. Surely you have plenty of interesting and helpful tips you could share that you’ve learned over the years in your practice.

Use hashtags (#) – Tweets that contain the symbol “#” connect to a certain subject. This is helpful when you’re attending a conference or tweeting about a topic that lots of people are interested in at the moment. For example, “At the #CVMACConvention”. People who search for that hashtag will see your tweet. You can make up your own hashtags or find them in other people’s tweets.

Direct messages (DM) - You can send private messages to users who are following you by starting a tweet with D (for direct message) or by using the message function.

Use Twitter to highlight other media such as blog posts- When you blog something new, tweet the link to share it with your followers.

Include your Twitter handle on your blog, Facebook profile and email signature – it will get you more followers.

Facebook Tips

To truly harness all of the benefits of Facebook you must first understand the platform’s ecosystem. There are three main parts to effectively cultivating this system for your practice:

Build your page – this is essentially the online identity or “face” of your practice.

Engage your audience – provide interesting, relevant and useful content that will encourage people to “like” your page and recommend it to their friends.

Amplify your message – since your activities are published on your page for all to see, by interacting with your audience and encouraging them to interact with you, you are essentially creating valuable word of mouth or “viral” marketing.

Next you will want to incorporate the 3 guiding principles that make Facebook so effective for veterinary practices. These principles involve:

Building a social-based strategy – if your practice’s social media efforts are to be effective, you will need to build it into your broader marketing strategy, rather than treat it as something on the side.

Creating an authentic brand voice – as vets it is often difficult to showcase our personality or that of our practice during the short interactions we have with clients in our day to day work, so use Facebook as a solution to this dilemma by being real, honest and straightforward with your audience.
Interacting – Facebook is essentially a place where people go to socialize with each other so be sure that you are engaging your readers with two-way communication to add a face to your practice.

Nurturing your relationships – give users a reason to follow your practice and reward them for doing so by providing fresh, interesting content and offering things such as discounts or promotions.

Continuing to learn – veterinary medicine is all about continuing education – your social media activities should be no different. Use the tools Facebook provides to analyze and learn about your fan base so that you can continue to develop an effective marketing plan that gets results.

It’s important to remember that the main purpose of Facebook is to develop and foster relationships, and as such your goal in building your Facebook profile is to deepen these relationships and establish trust and loyalty. If you do this successfully, your loyal followers will share their experience and recommend you to their friends, thereby increasing your fan base and ultimately your client acquisition. This can be accomplished through:

Regular interaction and communication

Showcasing the true personality of your practice

Asking questions and being responsive to your audience

Rewarding your fans by providing promotions or simply thanking them

Take advantage of the public nature of Facebook by using it to amplify word of mouth and recommendations. Always think of your Facebook activity in terms of sharing. Provide fresh, interesting or funny content, encourage people to share it, and suggest others “like” your Facebook page by including the icon on your website, blog or email signature. Use the page insight tools Facebook provides to analyze and learn what your followers are most interested in and develop your marketing plan accordingly.

Finally, use the light-hearted, personal nature of Facebook to have a little fun and show your personality to your followers. Some ideas for great content include:

Health/recall alerts
Seasonal health issues
Humorous videos
Funny pet stories
Surveys
A word of caution should be given due to the nature of our business: beware of confidentiality issues and be sure to educate your employees to make sure they understand their role in the social media activities of the practice.

That said, when used properly Twitter and Facebook can play a key role in the marketing and success of your veterinary practice. They allow you to easily reach a much broader audience, with which you can communicate, interact and engage with on a more personal level than ever before. The tips provided here will help you to establish an effective social media presence and develop and foster valuable relationships and client loyalty which will inevitably promote valuable word of mouth marketing, expanding your clientele and making your practice more profitable.

*Please contact Michael DVM (Managing Director DVMelite Veterinary Web Development for further information: mwarren@dvmelite.com