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Veterinary practice marketer

Justin Phillips is marketing manager at White Cross Vets and the Veterinary Marketing Association's (VMA's) Young Veterinary Marketeer of the Year. Here, he describes what he does and why he believes other practices should embrace marketing to improve their quality and client care

THIS month marks the start of my second year at White Cross Vets and I can honestly say I've never been happier. I arrived here after spending 10 years in marketing, predominately in the office supplies industry, and found it refreshing that success is measured by quality of care rather than targets and spreadsheets.

I'd always taken our family pets to my local veterinary practice and while chatting in reception during a visit I learned that they were looking for someone to fulfil the new role of marketer. My initial reaction was 'vets don't do marketing', but as I discovered more about White Cross Vets' listing in the *Sunday Times* Best 100 Companies to Work For, I knew it was something I wanted to be involved in. After all every business needs to market itself.

What does a practice marketing manager do?

There aren't many of us about; so far, I've met only a handful of practices with dedicated marketers. My role is hugely varied, but can broadly be classified into four main categories:

- **Client acquisition.** New clients are the life blood of any practice and even in an established practice a constant stream of new clients is essential to replace the ones who move

Justin (right), along with Steve Wright of Candid PR, which won the VMA's award for the best public relations campaign

away or whose pet is euthanased. We always have a headline campaign in place to attract new clients, while I manage our PR activity and all digital communications including the website, blogging, search engine optimisation and social media.

- **Client retention.** Increasing compliance is the best outcome for both the pets under your care and for your practice. To this end I manage reminder programmes, monthly e-newsletters, educate our clients about the benefits of our Complete Wellness Plan and undertake client surveys. Listening to what clients really think as they leave your practice provides the most powerful insights and should be used as a driver for change.

- **Internal communications.** Family owned, our practices have a strong set of core principles; we think of ourselves as a family practice (separated by a few hundred miles)

so keeping in contact is very important. To achieve this we have a monthly team newsletter and a twice-yearly printed magazine *Connected* (the latest issue can be found at bit.ly/1KrWCFs), dedicated to recognising achievements and sharing news between team members.

- **Brand development and measuring return on investment.** Developing our brand is important – all the photography features members of our team, their family and their pets. Measuring and reporting on campaigns is integral to everything we do; by identifying what has worked, and what hasn't, we develop a cycle of continuous improvement to reduce waste and increase effectiveness.

Building solid foundations

There is so much pressure and hype to adopt the latest technology that it's easy to forget that the basics need to be in place first. For example there is no point racing ahead to set up a 'sexy' augmented reality app or an online store if your practice location on Google Maps is wrong or your practice signage is hidden behind a hedge.



An effective reminder programme is the bedrock of any veterinary practice; it's our duty to inform clients when preventative healthcare is required, and it is fundamental to the economics of the practice. As an example, in the past two years we've evolved from posting handwritten cards to sending automated text messages. In 2014 we sent over 190,000 text message reminders and in 2015 we expect this to double. This has released time for some of our team members to concentrate on providing quality care and has significantly increased compliance rates, while costing the practice less.

VMA awards

Entering the VMA's awards last year kick-started a fantastic 12 months for me. I would encourage anyone who is passionate about their marketing role, or who has a rising star in their organisation to enter this year's awards (www.vma.org.uk/ – the closing date for nominations is January 31).

Winning the Young Marketeer of the Year award opened a number of doors that have enabled me to spend time with leading figures in veterinary marketing, including Jeff Brant, DVM, MBA, learning about

Banfield Pet Hospital's approach to marketing veterinary practices. Dr Brant is the co-founder of Banfield, the world's largest veterinary group, with more than 800 veterinary hospitals in the USA. He also founded the Optimum Wellness Plan, the original veterinary healthcare plan, a scheme with more than one million pets enrolled.

At the North American Veterinary Conference in Orlando, Florida, this month, I was invited to meet 'America's veterinarian' and author, Marty Becker, who has written 22 books (and sold seven million copies combined). I was also invited to speak at the VMA's annual seminar in November, which was a fantastic experience.

With the financial winnings from the award, I put the £500 cash prize towards a three-week holiday in Vietnam and Cambodia, and I used the £2000 bursary for three one-day workshops to sharpen my digital marketing skills, which are becoming an increasingly important aspect of my role at White Cross Vets.

Outlook for 2015 and beyond

With my marketing budget agreed for 2015/16, my aim is to do more with the

same. This means continuing the shift away from traditional print advertising towards PR, and social and digital strategies. We have three new practices to launch and there will be a big focus on removing barriers to care, and supporting our practice teams to do what they do best – provide our clients and their pets with exceptional, quality care.

On a personal note, I hope this year starts with practice owners taking the decision to reinvest 2 to 3 per cent of turnover in marketing, rather than waiting until a new corporate practice opens up in competition. I believe there is a huge opportunity to recruit talented marketeers from outside the veterinary industry. There should be a focus on attracting results-orientated pet lovers who are used to working with a tight budget. While veterinary practices can teach new recruits about the intricacies of the industry, and help them by allowing them to spend time in reception talking to clients, what most practices can't teach them is the fundamentals of marketing, coupled with the latest techniques that deliver results across digital and social media.

doi: 10.1136/vr.h327

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Veterinary Record 2015 176: i-ii
doi: 10.1136/vr.h327

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