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August 2017
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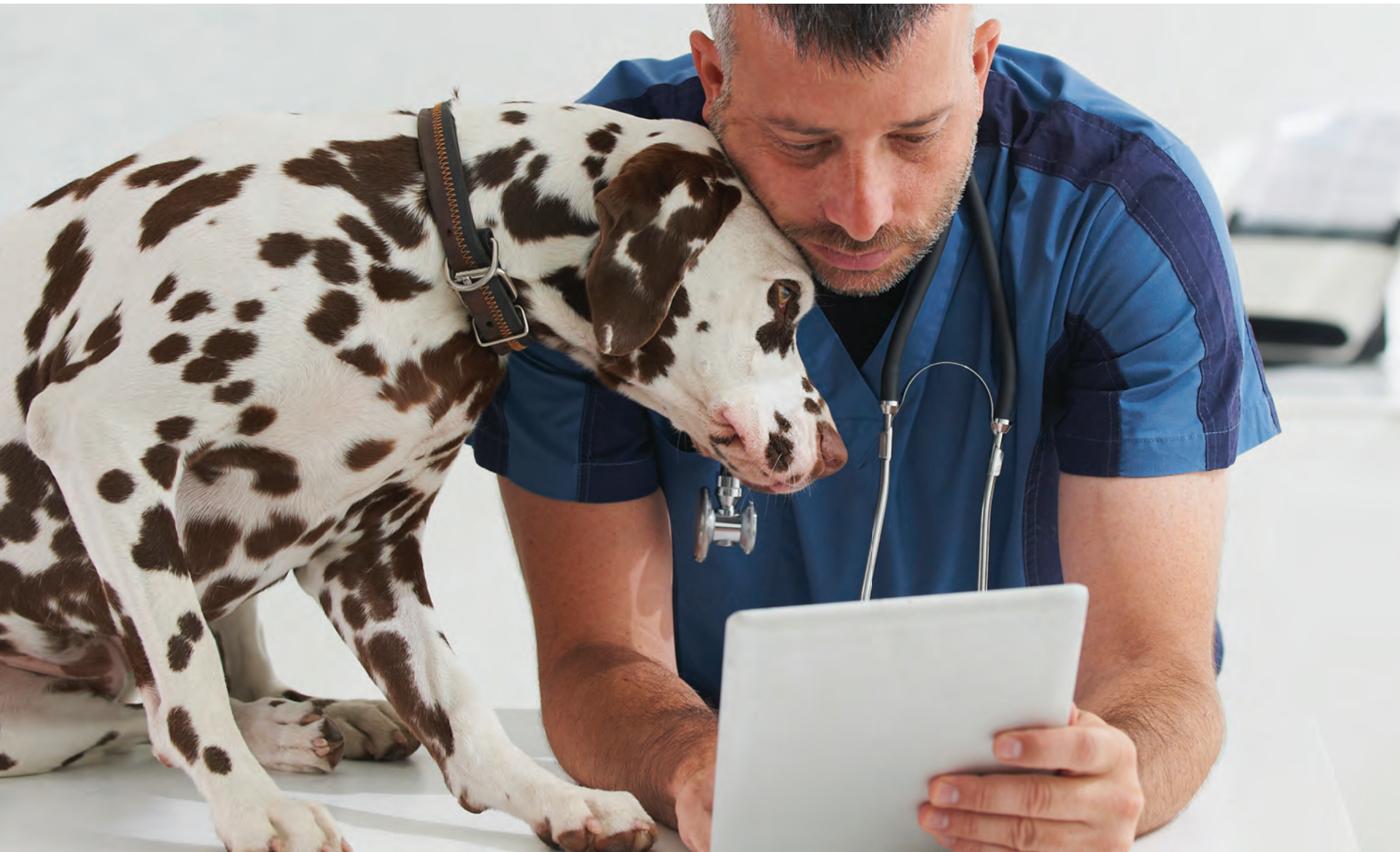
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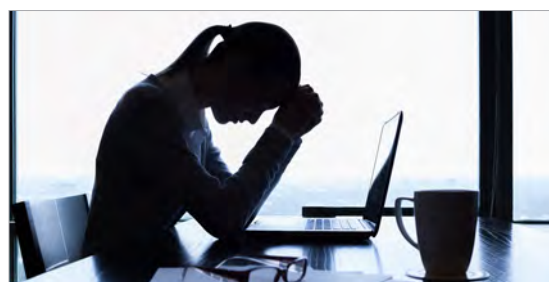
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The Challenge of Perfectionism



Mike Hennessy Sr.

What does it mean to thrive in the veterinary profession? According to Betsy Charles, DVM, MA, executive director of the Veterinary Leadership Institute, thriving is a state of well-being in which people

realize their own potential and can cope not only with the normal stresses of life, but also with the professional challenges they inevitably face. One of those challenges is perfectionism, and it's a problem many veterinary professionals grapple with.

At the 2017 WVC Women's Veterinary Summit in Las Vegas in July – an intimate conference focusing on resilience, leadership, self-care, financial wellness and entrepreneurialism – Dr. Charles gave a keynote address on “cracking the perfectionism code.” The obsession with being perfect, she said, stems from the need to feel included. For veterinarians, the “club” they want to belong to is the club of veterinary medicine. If you make a mistake, you risk being excluded.

The training for medical professionals promotes perfectionism, Dr. Charles continued, but once veterinarians get into practice, they're faced with myriad confounding situations that demand outside-the-box thinking. “Yet, many veterinarians are scared to be creative because the result might be failure,” she said. “And failure will mean they are not good enough, no longer worthy of being part of the club.”

Brené Brown, noted speaker and research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, who has studied

vulnerability, courage, authenticity and shame for more than a decade, echoes Dr. Charles' sentiments. The problem with perfectionism, Brown said, is this: “When perfectionism is driving, shame is always riding shotgun and fear is the annoying backseat driver.”

In this issue of *Veterinarian's Money Digest*[™], Brian Faulkner, BSc(Hons), BVM&S, CertGP(SAM), CertGP(BPS), MBA, MSc (Psych), MRCVS, explores the perfectionism trap. He notes that there is a fine line between perfectionism and narcissism. Narcissism is rooted in a shame-based fear of never feeling extraordinary enough, he says, whereas perfectionism is rooted in the belief that mistakes and imperfect outcomes reflect personal flaws and inadequacies. Turn to page 21 for Dr. Faulkner's insight on escaping the perfectionist trap.

Perfectionism plagues many in the veterinary profession, but we all know that being perfect is impossible. Therefore, Dr. Charles concluded in her keynote address at the Women's Summit, to overcome perfectionism and thrive in practice, veterinarians must realize that failure is *not* failure. Rather, it is an opportunity to learn and grow. “There will always be patients who die and patients who don't respond to the treatments we prescribe,” Dr. Charles noted. “What we need to do as a profession is give ourselves the freedom to make mistakes. Doing so unlocks our ability to be creative and come up with solutions.”

Happy reading!

Mike Hennessy, Sr.
Chairman and CEO

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2 Clarke Drive, Suite 100, Cranbury, NJ 08512
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Group
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When to D.I.T.C.H. a Client

The customer is always right, right? Well, maybe not always. We highlight five types of "bad" clients who might prompt you to say enough is enough.



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NEW COMPANION ANIMAL CHART OF ACCOUNTS NOW AVAILABLE

By Kerry Lengyel

The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA)/Veterinary Management Groups (VMG) Chart of Accounts (CoA) – the new standard for classifying and aggregating revenue, expense and balance sheet accounts in small animal veterinary practices – is available, for free, to the profession.

The AAHA/VMG Chart of Accounts is endorsed by several key veterinary organizations and industry partners, including the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), Veterinary Hospital Managers Association (VHMA) and VetPartners. This effort was spearheaded by the AVMA's Economic Advisory Research Council (EARC), using previously created materials from AAHA and VMG.

Veterinarian's Money Digest[™] spoke with the co-chairs of EARC's Veterinary Procedural Terminology Council (VPTC), Bruce Truman and Tracy Dowdy, whose efforts were instrumental in bringing the new CoA to the profession.

A POWERFUL FINANCIAL TOOL

Practice financial statements often lack detail, and practice management systems are not consistent in how they collect data, noted Dowdy, founder of MRG Consulting in Grapevine, Texas. "As a consultant who has looked at thousands of financial reports, I find it extremely difficult to help my clients because their data are not good."

If all practices use the same terminology, then financial statements will be more uniform, and it will be possible to truly compare costs and revenue across the board – ultimately making for better business. This new CoA uses standardized accounting codes that can help practices better measure and organize their finances to be in line with accepted accounting principles.

According to Truman, who is the founder of BLT Technology and Innovation Group in

North Plainfield, New Jersey, and president of VetPartners, the new CoA is more robust than what was previously available. "What's so important about this offering is that we haven't just updated and expanded the CoA," he said. "We've created field definitions that will help veterinary teams learn these new terms and codes so they can use them effectively. It's a very powerful financial tool."

Dowdy concurs, noting that the detailed field document will allow inventory and book managers, accountants and practice managers to easily determine revenue categories for all practice items and services. "And bookkeepers entering in invoices and revenue will know where to put each item," Dowdy added. She also noted that human health care developed a standard CoA in the mid-1970s, not for insurance purposes but for analytics.

"Leading corporate practice groups have their own key performance indicators, their own software systems, the ability to closely monitor and manage their practices and to see key metrics in their system," Truman said. "But private practitioners don't have those tools and so they have no standard way of reporting this information to evaluate and monitor their practice health."

REMOVING BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

"We're really trying to push the easy button for the conversion to happen in practice," Dowdy said. That's why the CoA is available in PDF, Excel and even QuickBooks formats.

However, Dowdy does believe there may be barriers to implementing the new CoA across the board. "We're going to have to give practitioners a resource for bookkeeping or

A COOPERATIVE EFFORT

Creating the AAHA/VMG Chart of Accounts and Field Definitions was a huge cooperative effort between AVMA, AAHA, Veterinary Study Groups (VSG), VetPartners, and the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association (VHMA). The chart and definitions are available on the AAHA website (aaha.org/coa).

Some practices simply look at the top-line numbers and income but don't really know what to do with the information.

accounting firms that can do the conversion very quickly," Dowdy noted. "The VPTC is working to solicit partners that will perform this service for minimal cost."

Another obstacle is that practice owners are not managing their business based on metrics, but rather on emotion. "Some practices simply look at the top-line numbers and income but don't really know what to do with the information," Dowdy said. "We need to build awareness that numbers tell a story, but if the numbers aren't being entered into the practice management and financial software accurately and consistently, then practices won't be able to analyze the story and the numbers." The VPTC's goal is to have all companion animal practices using this standard CoA within 2 or 3 years.

A BROADER VISION

The broader vision of having a uniform CoA is to monitor practice health at the regional and national levels. "If all practices are using the same CoA and field definitions, then we will be comparing apples to apples from one veterinary practice to another," Truman said, "and veterinarians can better assess the financial health of their own practice and the industry as a whole."

Dowdy noted that they are only in the early phases of this undertaking. "Once everyone is on board, standardizing all data will be the next phase of our project," she said. **VMD**



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Advice Unleashed

Tips and insight from business, financial and practice management experts.

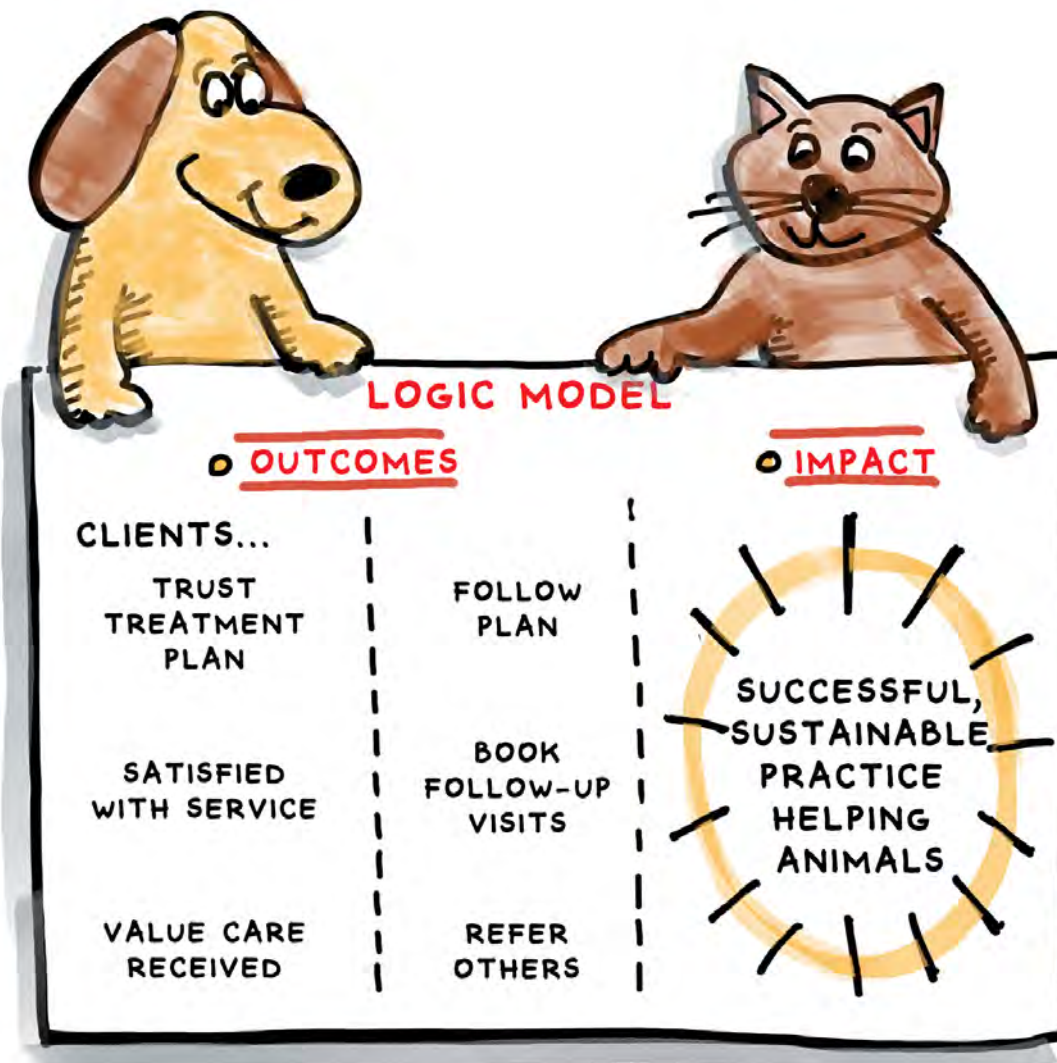
Measuring Impact: Start Small, Take It Slow

THE PROCESS OF MEASURING the impact of your practice starts with sketching a logic model, says **Caryn Ginsberg, MBA**, a strategic visualist at Priority Ventures Group in Arlington, Virginia, a firm that helps businesses and associations reach their goals by thinking visually. “Start by thinking about the ultimate impact you want to create,” she advises. “Then ask yourself what key client behaviors are required to get that result. Finally, step back and evaluate whether you are delivering the services your clients need to develop the attitudes and knowledge that will create that desired behavior.

“For example, if you want to ensure that clients book next year’s visit before they leave your practice today, then they need to feel that they’ve just had a good experience and that it’s important for their pet to see you regularly,” Ginsberg says. Ask yourself: “Are clients seen promptly? Are they able to make appointments within a reasonable amount of time? How are they treated by staff?” The answers to these questions will let you know if you’re delivering the services that will mold clients’ positive attitudes and beliefs and ultimately create the impact you’re looking for.

Opportunities Ahead for Women

LAURA MALONEY, MBA, principal at the consulting firm Adisa, which helps individuals and teams achieve the impact they desire, believes that leadership for women has changed greatly in the past 20 years. She cites the recent movie “Hidden Figures” as an example of how far society has come. “It’s hard to believe that in our lifetime, women couldn’t be scientists or doctors,” she says. “So, I think the world has changed significantly, even though it may feel like we’re kind of slugging it out, and even though you still see [a] majority [of] male boards of directors in a field that is largely female driven. Change has been slower, but I think there are a lot of opportunities ahead for women. Women are coming into their own and feeling their own power.”



Hiring the Right Receptionist

RECEPTIONISTS SHOULD BE HIRED for their attitude and ability to deal with people, says **Brian Conrad, CVP**, practice manager for Meadow Hills Veterinary Center in Kennewick, Washington. “I always ask candidates why they are applying to my hospital, and overwhelmingly the answer is ‘because I love pets,’” he says. “But I’m always waiting for someone to come in and say, ‘It’s because I love people,’ because for every minute a receptionist spends with the pets, he or she spends probably two minutes with the people, and I think many receptionist candidates fail to realize that. I can teach and coach just about anybody as long as the person has the correct attitude and work ethic, is a ‘people person,’ and realizes that the only reason we exist is because of the clients and the pets.”

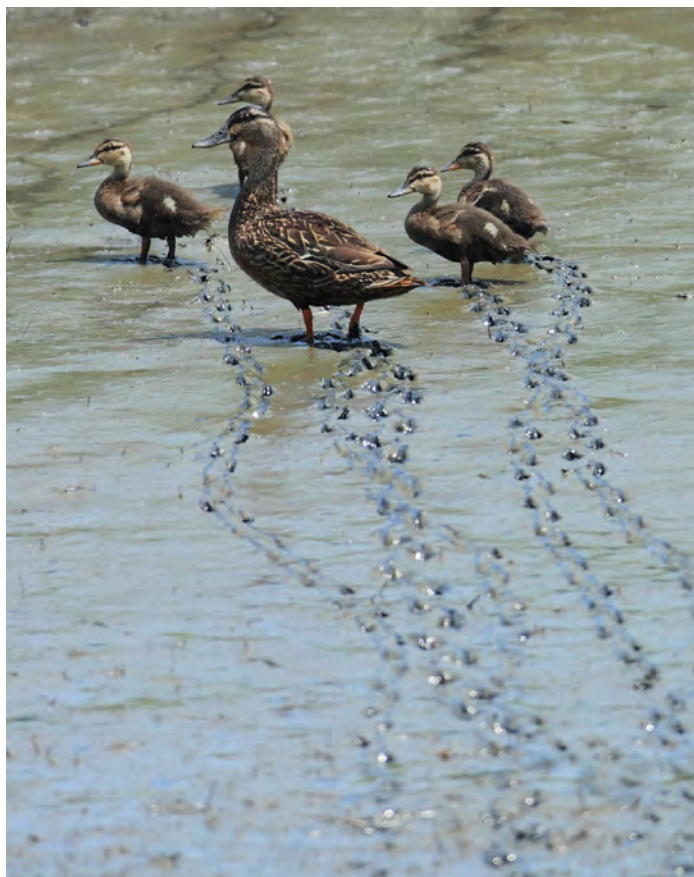
Easing the Student Debt Burden

VETERINARIANS CAN BETTER MANAGE their student debt in several ways, says **Tony Bartels, DVM, MBA**, a consultant for the Veterinary Information Network. “Income-driven repayment is a huge tool that folks can use, particularly when they’re just getting started,” he says. These federal repayment programs allow you to base your student loan payment on your income. “[That] can be huge when you have a debt-to-income ratio that’s greater than two, which many graduating veterinarians have,” he says.

Another tool at your disposal: Public Service Loan Forgiveness. “This program can help pay your loans to zero without a taxable forgiveness at the end if you do the right kinds of things – work for the right kind of organization, make the right kind of payments toward your loans and utilize the right repayment programs,” says Dr. Bartels.

The Advantages of Mentoring

TO CREATE A TOP-NOTCH TEAM at your practice, be sure you have a sound mentoring program in place, suggests **Amanda Landis-Hanna, DVM**, senior manager of veterinary outreach for PetSmart Charities. “I’m always intrigued by the different ways hospitals cross-train,” she says. “Some of the most effective hospitals I’ve been in have provided really extensive mentoring programs to make sure the associate veterinarians are continuing to be engaged [and] challenged and learn new things, but so are the veterinary technicians, practice managers and receptionists. We’re all part of the same team, and we all deserve to be challenged and to be constantly improving. Providing a solid mentoring program can be a really great way to do that.”



Find a Better Motivator

“THE MOST COMMON MOTIVATION PROBLEM in veterinary practice is not understanding what motivation is,” says **Wendy Hauser, DVM**, assistant vice president of veterinary relations for Crum + Forster Pet Insurance Group. She says that most veterinarians use extrinsic motivation – the carrot-and-stick approach – but that works for only so long. “It’s actually a very poor-quality motivator,” she says. “People can only be motivated by themselves, so what we need to do is ask team members what motivates them. When we match their tasks to align with their core values and with what motivates them, then we’ll have better performance.”



Changing Mindsets

WHEN DEALING WITH A VETERINARIAN who is resistant to change, **Kristen Cooley, BA, CVT, VTS (Anesthesia/Analgesia)**, an instructional specialist at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine, says you have to look at the situation from that person’s perspective. She recommends finding the barriers and then trying to break them down. “Just to get somebody to make a change can be difficult,” she admits. “Whether you’re successful depends on how you approach it. You need to be careful to not blame, to not be combative and to not reach out in a way that would make the veterinarian feel like he or she is doing something wrong. Make it seem as though the change is their idea, or make it profitable to the practice.” **VMD**

Attention, Students: Hone Your Financial Skills

MIKE CHADDOCK, DVM, EML, associate dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Michigan State University, explains why veterinary students should master basic personal finance skills before entering college: “Students just starting veterinary school have a responsibility to know a little bit about personal finance. What does it cost to live? What does it cost to buy groceries? What is a checkbook? What is a credit card? How do I reconcile my credit card statement?”

“Now, I’m not saying that none of them know how to do this, but if I were sending my children to school today, these are things that I would teach them at home,” Dr. Chaddock says. “So, when they come to school and all of a sudden they’re faced with taking out a student loan, understanding the payment schedule and trying to understand the interest rates, they have this knowledge coming in. That would be very, very helpful, and that doesn’t only pertain to being a veterinarian – that just pertains to growing up.”

Will You Retire Rich or Poor?



The answer may depend largely on your level of financial literacy.

By Phil Zeltzman, DVM, DACVS, CVJ, Fear Free Certified

Selena Maranjian, a longtime writer for the financial services company The Motley Fool, recently presented a fascinating yet simple three-question quiz¹ that two-thirds of a sample group couldn't ace. (See **The Three-Question Financial Quiz.**)

Before you read any further, please take the quiz and write your answers somewhere – on a piece of paper, your cell-phone, your tablet, your computer or even your hand. Just write them down somewhere so there is no confusion. Rest assured that nobody will know. It will be our little secret.

Here are some statistics reported in the article.

- Only half of Americans aged 50 and older answered the first two questions correctly.
- Only one-third of Americans answered all three quiz questions correctly.
- Results were generally similar among the broader American population as well as people outside the country.



Phil Zeltzman, DVM, DACVS, CVJ

- Eighty-one percent of Americans with a high school degree couldn't answer all three questions correctly.
- Fifty-six percent of Americans with college degrees didn't get all three questions right.
- Answers were similar among people “in relatively rich countries with well-developed financial markets, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, Japan, Italy, France, Australia and New Zealand.”
- Performance was markedly worse in Russia and Romania.

The authors of the original study concluded that people who couldn't answer the questions displayed “widespread financial illiteracy.” Because financial illiteracy is one of my (very few) pet peeves, I was very interested in this whole international socio-financial experiment. The questions were designed about a decade ago by Olivia Mitchell, a Wharton business school professor at the University of

Pennsylvania and executive director of the Pension Research Council, and Annamaria Lusardi, a George Washington School of Business professor and academic director of the Global Financial Literacy Excellence Center.

“In a quest to learn more about wealth inequality, they’ve been asking Americans and others these questions for years, while studying how the results correlate with factors such as retirement savings.

The questions are designed to shed light on whether various populations ‘have the fundamental knowledge of finance needed to function as effective economic decision makers,’” wrote Maranjian.

So, why should you care about the questions? “Because, not surprisingly, the more you know about financial matters and money management, the better you can do at saving and investing and the more comfortable your retirement will probably be,” continued Maranjian.

In case you were stumped by the questions, let me explain the correct answers.

Question 1. Suppose you had \$100 in a savings account and the interest rate was 2 percent per year. After 5 years, how much do you think you would have in the account if you left the money to grow?

If you make 2 percent on \$100, you will have \$102 at the end of year one. During year two, you will still make 2 percent, but on \$102. This is called compound interest. So you will have a bit over \$104. During year three, you will still make 2 percent, but on \$104, so you’ll have a bit over \$106. And so on. So, for sure you will have more than \$102, which means that answer A is correct.

Fifty-six percent of Americans with college degrees didn’t get all three questions right.

Question 2. Is this statement true or false: Buying a single company’s stock usually provides a safer return than buying a stock mutual fund.

If you invest \$1,000 in a single stock – say, Microsoft – your risk is high. If anything happens to Microsoft, you could lose a lot of

money. However, if you invest \$1,000 in a mutual fund, which contains dozens or hundreds of stocks – perhaps Microsoft, Apple, Coca-Cola and McDonald’s – your risk is lower because it’s spread over multiple companies. This has nothing to do with your return on investment or how much you’ll make. It has to do with diversifying, or not putting all your eggs in the same financial basket. So, answer B is correct.

(In reality, it’s a bit more complicated than that, because there are supersafe stocks and super-risky mutual funds, but let’s keep it simple for now.)

Question 3. Imagine that the interest rate on your savings account was 1 percent per year and inflation was 2 percent per year. After one year, how much would you be able to buy with the money in this account?

Say you make 1 percent on \$100 you put in your savings account. At the end of year one, you’ll have \$101 in your account. That’s what savings are for: to grow your money safely. But there is a silent thief that erodes your buying power every year – it’s called inflation. If inflation is two percent per year, you will physically have \$101, but in reality you can buy only \$101 minus 2 percent, or roughly \$99. So, answer C is correct.

HOW DID YOU DO?

The three questions in this quiz are designed to test people on three basic principles of personal finance: compound interest, diversification and inflation. In other words: How does money grow? How does

diversification reduce your investing risk? How does inflation silently shrink the value of your money over time?

Based on multiple conversations, I’ve concluded that many veterinarians, technicians and managers find these topics incredibly boring. That may be, but regardless of how you

The Three-Question Financial Quiz

1. Suppose you had \$100 in a savings account and the interest rate was 2 percent per year. After five years, how much do you think you would have in the account if you left the money to grow?

- A. More than \$102
- B. Exactly \$102
- C. Less than \$102

2. Is this statement true or false: Buying a single company’s stock usually provides a safer return than buying a stock mutual fund.

- A. True
- B. False

3. Imagine that the interest rate on your savings account was 1 percent per year and inflation was 2 percent per year. After one year, how much would you be able to buy with the money in this account?

- A. More than today
- B. Exactly the same
- C. Less than today



feel about the questions, whether you know the answers can affect your personal savings and investments year after year after year.

Here’s the conclusion of the study: People most likely to ace the quiz are affluent. Mitchell and Lusardi attribute one-third of America’s wealth inequality to “the financial-knowledge gap separating the well-to-do and the less so.” Poor financial knowledge leads to poor financial decision making, which leads to money wasted or lost, which leads to delayed or not-so-rosy retirement.

The solution? Educate yourself. It may not be sexy, but it could change your life. **VMD**

Reference available at VMDToday.com.

Dr. Zeltzman is a board-certified veterinary surgeon and serial entrepreneur. His traveling surgery practice takes him all over eastern Pennsylvania and western New Jersey. You can visit his website at DrPhilZeltzman.com and follow him at [facebook.com/DrZeltzman](https://www.facebook.com/DrZeltzman).



Is Business Debt Consolidation Right for You?

Planning for the future can be tough if you're saddled with multiple debts, interest rates and payment schedules.

By April Brissette

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the monthly due dates, minimum payments and outstanding balances on your mortgage payments, business loans and business credit cards? You're not alone. Many veterinarians are in a similar situation, one that is often compounded by veterinary school debt.

The reality is that it's nearly impossible to operate a veterinary practice without taking on debt. First, there is the startup loan, which often comes with a relatively high interest rate due to the elevated risk in the lender's eyes. It also costs money to run the day-to-day business; furnish it with technology, supplies and equipment; and pay your staff. Then there are the unexpected expenditures, such as replacing broken equipment or a staff member's departure, which inevitably sneak up and for which plans have not been made.

If you're a veterinarian with many business debt obligations, consolidation could benefit your practice in the long run. Debt consolidation allows you to combine multiple payments into one to make paying debt off easier, faster and more cost-effective. To see if it's a good option for you, take inventory of your current outstanding balances, interest rates and loan terms to get a full picture of your business's debt.

WHY CONSOLIDATE?

It can save you money in the long run.

Estimate how long it will take you to pay off each loan, and crunch the numbers to see how

much interest you'll end up paying. The numbers can be staggering when you factor in the compounded interest and see the total amount you ultimately will pay the lender.

Consolidation loans often offer a fixed interest rate and flexible terms, providing a predictable monthly payment that could cost you less per month and, perhaps, less interest overall. By combining all your debt into one payment, you might even pay off more in less time.

It can be less of a management hassle.

Managing multiple balances, interest rates, and payment dates can be time-consuming, not to mention costly. Consolidation allows you to stop juggling multiple debts and instead make only one monthly payment to one lender. Most lenders also offer automatic payments, taking something off your plate and eliminating the risk of late-payment fees. Choose a payment date that is in line with when your practice account is typically at the height of its balance.

It makes it easier to forecast the future.

With more available cash and predictable payments, you could earmark the extra for ways to improve and add value to your practice and enhance the patient and employee experience. You might update your waiting room, upgrade computer software, provide new services, offer staff training or increase salaries. Another option is to create a fund to cover unanticipated events.

CONSOLIDATION OPTIONS

Two common consolidation options are credit cards and loans. Although a credit card may not be the ideal solution for wholesale debt consolidation, there are benefits to using one to consolidate accounts, especially if you can take advantage of a zero percent introductory APR period.

Debt consolidation loans offer an opportunity to pay off existing balances and potentially lower your interest rate. Depending on the structure of the financing agreement, a loan with a fixed rate can provide a single, fixed monthly payment and defined payoff period, allowing you to plan and budget more easily.

WORTH THE EFFORT

It can be challenging to plan for the future if you're preoccupied by multiple debts with varying interest rates and out-of-sync payment schedules. When you consolidate your debt into a single payment, financial planning for your business becomes much clearer, allowing you to build the value of your veterinary practice. **VMD**

April Brissette is the chief lending officer at Bankers Healthcare Group, the leading provider of financial solutions to health care professionals. For more information, contact her at abrissette@bhg-inc.com or visit bankershealthcaregroup.com.



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The Right Help at the Right Time

A look at veterinary relief work from both the practice's and the practitioner's perspectives.

By Meredith Rogers, MS, CMPP



Illustrator by Aleutic,
edited by Wassana Techadilok



According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the veterinary profession is growing faster than the average for all professions. As the number of veterinary hospitals grows to meet the increasing demands of pet owners, the need for relief veterinarians is only expected to increase.

Relief veterinarians fill a need for clinics that are temporarily short staffed, allowing for a practice to stay open when it might otherwise need to close or cut back on appointments, which can have a significant impact on the bottom line. Being a relief veterinarian can satisfy a desire to practice medicine on a flexible schedule, which can help establish a healthy work-life balance.

Whether you are looking to hire a relief veterinarian or want to become one, you

don't need to do it alone. Although you can use direct advertising, such as classified ads, numerous agencies that connect veterinarians to practices have popped up in recent years. Because the need for a relief veterinarian often arises at the last minute, employment agencies provide convenient databases of veterinarians with searchable qualifications. However, word-of-mouth is one of the most common ways veterinarians connect with practices looking for help, and once a practice has found a veterinarian who is a good fit, that person is at the top of the list whenever extra help is needed.

Here we present relief work from both a practice owner's perspective and the perspective of a veterinarian who has been providing freelance services for years. >>



Meredith Rogers,
MS, CMPP

HELP WANTED

CHALLENGE: You own a thriving practice, and everything is going well – until you get a call from your best associate. She has an amazing opportunity to travel to Africa to work with endangered species for three months, and she wonders if she could take a leave of absence. You don't want to crush her dream, but she's an integral member of your staff. How will you cover her client load, not to mention everything else she does for the practice?

SOLUTION: HIRE A RELIEF VET

A relief veterinarian is a licensed practitioner who fills in when a regular associate is absent. Think of relief veterinarians like substitute teachers. The need may be for only a day (e.g., if someone calls in sick) or for several months (e.g., maternity leave). A relief veterinarian may also be a good option if your practice sees a significant seasonal uptick in clients – for example, if the population swells as the temperature rises in a resort town or during foaling season in thoroughbred country. By not hiring a permanent associate, you avoid a substantial financial commitment in the form of payroll and benefits, and you don't need to worry about keeping the person busy during slow periods.

The duties of relief veterinarians vary with the hiring practice, but in general they must be able to perform the same functions as the absent associate. Thus, if you have an equine practice, you don't want to hire a relief veterinarian whose experience is with small animals only. Moreover, you'll need not only to communicate your medical protocols but also provide insight into your clinic culture, which is the most difficult aspect to convey to someone who will work there for only a few days. For example, if the majority of your clientele expects extensive diagnostics for seemingly minor issues, inform the relief veterinarian, because this may be a challenge if he or she is used to a more frugal approach.

As a practice that hires relief veterinarians, you need to be aware of the many legal and tax ramifications involved. How the government distinguishes between independent contractors and employees is not clear-cut. For example, a veterinarian who fills in for a few weeks at your clinic and then moves on is likely contracting, but one who regularly works for you even

once a week might be considered an employee. Not understanding the difference can result in the practice being liable for past income, FICA, unemployment insurance and other taxes, as well as benefits and retirement account contributions.

**PRACTICE PROFILE:
WE HIRE RELIEF VETERINARIANS**

Mark Helfat, DVM, owns Larchmont Animal Hospital, a state-of-the-art small animal practice in Mount Laurel, New Jersey, that provides a full line of veterinary services for dogs, cats and other small mammals; the practice also examines and treats farm animals, such as goats, sheep and cattle. Opened in 2000, the practice today consists of Dr. Helfat, a veterinarian who works two days a week, two technicians and boarding kennel staff. As a member of the American Veterinary Medical Association Board of Directors, Dr. Helfat often travels, necessitating the hire of a relief veterinarian on a regular basis. *Veterinarian's Money Digest™* spoke with him about the ins and outs of working with relief veterinarians.

How do you find relief help?

I have been using relief veterinary services for about 15 years. I have found most people through word-of-mouth from other practices and currently have two people I readily call on. As a member of the South Jersey Veterinary Medical Association, I am in contact with other veterinarians in the area, and we share names of people we've worked with who we've liked. Occasionally, someone will come into the office and drop off a card. I've looked at the classified ads on the *JAVMA* website, and they are sometimes helpful, too. Even though I give about two months' notice, it can still be difficult to fill shifts due to people's schedules.

A relief veterinarian may be a good option if your practice sees a seasonal uptick in clients.

I have learned to take time in hiring a relief veterinarian. First and foremost, the person must be competent. But, he or she must also get along with my staff and clients. I generally go on first impressions; taking the person out to lunch is a good way to get to know him or her.

How do you retain good relief help?

I compensate them well. I pay an hourly wage, and if they go over the allotted time – for example, staying late to address a walk-in – I pay for the extra time. I also let them use the practice and surgical suite to treat their own pets, and allow them to board their own animals in our kennel at no charge. These perks are greatly appreciated.

How do you provide compensation?

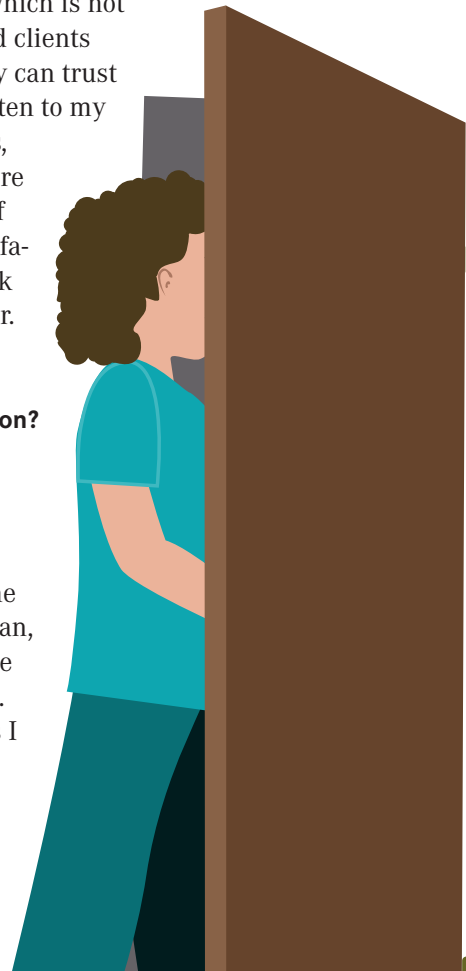
I hire relief help as employees, which means that I take out all payroll deductions, and they get a W-2 at the end of the year. Because I make the appointments, I feel they are more employees than independent contractors. This seems to be the safest legal way to go, at least in New Jersey.

What are the qualities of a good relief veterinarian?

Good relief veterinarians must have the experience to work comfortably on their own, so I don't hire someone just out of school. The person must be able to walk in the door and get along with the staff, which is not always easy, and clients need to feel they can trust the person. I listen to my staff and clients, and I will not hire someone back if I've received unfavorable feedback about him or her.

Do your clients accept the person?

Overall, most of my clients prefer me, but I have found that some request the relief veterinarian, which I don't see as a bad thing. That just means I hired well.



JOB WANTED

CHALLENGE: You've been working in small animal practice since you graduated from veterinary school. After working for a number of practices over the years, you now feel like taking a step back. You don't want to give up seeing patients entirely because you enjoy it, but you'd like more time to pursue other interests, like writing the great American novel.

SOLUTION: BECOME A RELIEF VET

If you decide that becoming a relief veterinarian fits in with your career goals, you will join the ranks of the independent contractor, the self-employed, the freelance – a rapidly growing segment of the workforce. Because of the fluidity of the work, it is difficult to know precisely how many veterinary professionals are considered independent contractors, but decade-old data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics assigns the designation to be 7 percent to 8 percent of the overall employed population.

Not every good veterinarian makes a good relief veterinarian. The role requires that you not only possess the prerequisite skills but also adapt quickly to unfamiliar staff, clients, work styles and overall clinic culture. A good relief veterinarian is respectful of how the clinic normally operates and doesn't assume to know better or undermine normal clinic routine.

Relief veterinarians are often (but not always) paid under an IRS 1099 form, and someone must carry the insurance and pay the taxes. If you are considering becoming a relief veterinarian, you should understand the difference between a sole proprietorship and an LLC

[limited liability corporation], as well as learn how to negotiate contracts, write invoices and excel at record keeping, just like any other small business requires.

PROFILE OF A RELIEF VETERINARIAN

Lisa Trachtenberg, VMD, is a practicing small animal veterinarian in the southern New Jersey area. A 2001 veterinary school graduate, she has been doing relief work for the past eight years. Dr. Trachtenberg shared with *Veterinarian's Money Digest*[™] her experience doing relief work.

Why did you start doing relief work?

I started when I had my first child. I didn't want to work full time, and relief work was a way to make extra money. Now that my kids are older, I work part time at one clinic and also have steady relief work that keeps me busy while still allowing me time to enjoy my family.

How do you find relief jobs?

Over the years, all my assignments have come through word-of-mouth. If you are a good relief veterinarian – meaning you are not just good at medicine but can also adapt to a practice and are friendly – people recommend you. I currently do relief work at only one practice that calls me first whenever they need help, but I used to work at several practices that knew they could rely on me. I have found that relief veterinarians are in high demand, and good ones should not have difficulty finding work.

Do the clients accept you?

I haven't really had a problem with clients not accepting me. Because a lot of scheduling is done in advance, clients who are uncomfortable with a substitute usually reschedule. I have actually found the opposite – that clients like me so much they want to follow me to my regular practice. I don't encourage this or tell them where I am, but with the internet, it's easy to find out.

Is it hard to adapt to different ways of doing things?

I find that the staff at the hospital I am entering

is grateful for the help, so they are very accommodating and open with information. For example, the technicians will often give me some background about a given client and patient before I enter the exam room. There are times when I wish I could do something in a way that differs from the clinic norm, but on the flip side, it helps if the clinic has protocols so that I don't have to think about certain decisions, such as whether I should do this or that diagnostic test.

What's the best things about doing relief work?

I enjoy seeing how each clinic works, both in terms of practicing medicine and managerially. I've learned a lot at each place I've worked, both good ways of doing things and also things not to do. Also, because a relief job can turn into part-time or full-time employment, it gives you a chance to observe a given practice and for them to see how you operate, to make sure it's a good fit before committing to each other. That's how I got my current part-time job.

What have you found to be the most challenging aspects of relief work?

I miss following up on certain clients, seeing the outcomes. I had one assignment where I had to keep trying to get paid. Needless to say, I didn't return there, and I let colleagues know that the practice was difficult in that way. Word-of-mouth and reputation work both ways.

Do you recommend relief work?

Yes! It's quite possible these days to make a living just doing relief work. In many cases, you can charge more per hour than you can working full or part time. If a number of clinics know they can call on you, you can have steady work – although in that case, scheduling across multiple clinics can be challenging. However, I would not recommend relief work for someone just out of school, because you often work alone, and you don't have the opportunity to learn from working up a case from start to finish. **VMD**

Meredith Rogers has a BS degree in animal health from the University of Connecticut and an MS degree in microbiology and molecular genetics from Rutgers University. She has more than 19 years of experience creating content for a variety of health care audiences. She lives in Kingston, New Jersey, and shares her life with a horse, a dog and a cat.



Improving Satisfaction Among Shelter Volunteers (and Perhaps the Rest of Us, Too)

Shelter survey results and suggestions can help veterinary practices keep team members happy and engaged.

By Karen Todd-Jenkins, VMD

Animal shelters perform critically important work for their communities. Although some shelter workers are paid employees, volunteers are often needed to help shelters meet their daily obligations and long-term goals. Unfortunately, some shelter volunteers experience dissatisfaction with their work, which can affect their work performance and the overall effectiveness of the shelter operation.

This year's Animal Care Expo in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, featured an interactive workshop that addressed some of the issues shelter volunteers face. The discussion also highlighted some of the things shelter volunteers say they like about the work they do.

This lively session was moderated by Steven Rogelberg, BS, MS, PhD, chancellor's professor and director of organizational science at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and two of the university's doctoral students, Eleanor Williams and Haley Woznyj.

The moderators presented data from a large survey of shelter volunteers conducted by the Volunteer Program Assessment (VPA). VPA is an online, validated, diagnostic survey that polls volunteer workers at nonprofit organizations regarding their feelings and attitudes, as well as their reactions to the volunteer program. The survey also gathers information about what the volunteers perceive as the

program's greatest strengths and areas for growth. After the volunteers take the survey, a VPA consultant works one-on-one with the shelter's volunteer coordinator and presents the shelter with a summary report.



Karen Todd-Jenkins,
VMD

To date, VPA has been administered to approximately 19,000 shelter volunteers at 175 shelter organizations to generate the data discussed in the current study. Once challenging areas were identified, the moderators worked with session attendees to develop solutions for addressing the issues volunteers face and improving the overall volunteer experience.

APPLICABILITY ACROSS FIELDS

Although the session focused on animal shelter volunteers, many of the challenges workers reported are shared by people who work in other fields. Veterinary technicians and assistants, support staff, receptionists and even veterinarians themselves may experience some of the same feelings about the work they do. Therefore, the recommendations discussed in the workshop can easily be expanded to help improve work satisfaction for veterinary team members as well. For example, one of the challenges that most organizations participating in VPA face is role ambiguity, which refers to not knowing exactly what is expected of a volunteer or staff member. "This is certainly a

feeling that veterinary staff might experience," Dr. Rogelberg said. He and his colleagues discussed a range of solutions for reducing feelings of role ambiguity, such as focusing on training, ensuring that job descriptions are accurate and regularly updated, and possibly creating duty checklists for each role.

The moderators also described how the VPA survey covered numerous areas of volunteer experiences, including daily routines at work, the work environment itself, interactions with other volunteers and employees, and feelings about the overall philosophy and mission of the animal shelter – much of which can be translated to the veterinary hospital.

THE GOOD NEWS

The good news is that survey respondents noted several positive things about their volunteer experience, including:

- Feeling that their work is meaningful to the organization's mission
- Feeling committed to the organization and its mission, and believing strongly in what they are doing
- Having confidence in the quality of their work at the shelter
- Feeling satisfaction with the volunteer coordinators at the shelter

WHICH AREAS NEED WORK?

Survey respondents also indicated several areas of concern, including:



The recommendations discussed in the workshop can easily be expanded to help improve work satisfaction for veterinary team members as well.

- Role ambiguity: volunteers often don't feel like they know what they're supposed to be doing and which tasks should be prioritized
- Feeling unrecognized and unappreciated for donating their time and resources to help the shelter's cause
- Dissatisfaction with relationships with paid staff members
- Dissatisfaction with communication at the shelter facility
- Lacking a voice or the chance to participate in decision making, and not feeling like their input has value

Once problem areas were identified, the rest of the session permitted attendees to break into small groups to come up with ideas for addressing the difficulties shelter volunteers face. Suggestions included:

- Reducing role ambiguity:
 - » Produce written job descriptions and a daily checklist of duties, so volunteers understand what is expected of them
 - » Improve training for volunteers before they start working, and offer retraining opportunities for volunteers who have experience but want to grow in the organization with additional duties and responsibilities
- Improving recognition:
 - » Promote volunteer appreciation by learning the volunteers' names, thanking them when they arrive for work and again

when they leave, and working to build a culture of mutual appreciation between volunteers and employees

- » Initiate a volunteer-of-the-month program, feature the selected volunteer in the organization's newsletter and present the designated volunteer with a plaque or reward
- » Recognize milestones, such as offering a small pin for completing a certain number of volunteer hours
- Increasing satisfaction with paid staff: Develop mentor programs (involving paid staff) to help volunteers better understand the organization and their role in it
- Improving communication:
 - » Create a weekly or monthly newsletter to let volunteers know what is going on in the organization
 - » Create a social media space (such as a Facebook group) where volunteers can communicate with one another
- Facilitating perception of voice: Conduct shift meetings and invite volunteers, so that both volunteers and other employees have a voice and an opportunity to participate, which will promote improved teamwork

THE VALUE OF VPA

The VPA originated from a partnership between the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the Humane Society of the United States. It is maintained by faculty and graduate students

at the university's organizational science doctoral program and its university partners.

In 1999, the VPA was created when its originators realized that euthanasias create stress for people who have to perform them or participate in them. This encouraged VPA to look at this issue and other factors that affect the daily lives and stress levels for shelter volunteers. Part of VPA's mission is to help managers of nonprofit organizations better understand and manage their volunteer programs by exploring the organization's strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of volunteers. The organization is subsidized by grants, so there is no cost to the shelter programs or other nonprofit groups for agreeing to be surveyed.

As suggested by the moderators, the workplace challenges described here are not unique to animal shelter volunteers. Through its extensive activities and surveys, VPA has provided services to help religious groups, hospitals, law enforcement agencies and other nonprofit entities. The strategies that evolve from these surveys can also certainly apply in the veterinary space as well, Dr. Rogelberg said.

Dr. Todd-Jenkins received her VMD degree from the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. She is a medical writer and has remained in clinical practice for over 20 years. She is a member of the American Medical Writers Association and One Health Initiative.

Creating a *Drama-Free* Workplace

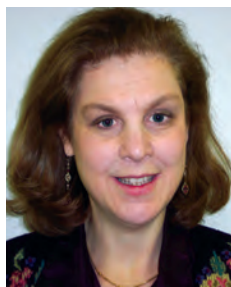
Ditch the conflict and develop confident communication to resolve workplace issues.

By Louise S. Dunn



It's OK to admit that sometimes we enjoy a little drama – on screen, that is. Reality shows, soap operas, game shows and even news segments feed our need for a little excitement as we watch tension build in on-screen relationships. Where we generally do not enjoy theatrics is in our daily lives, either at home or at work. Drama means conflict, and no one enjoys conflict.

In the workplace, drama results in job dissatisfaction and decreased productivity. Unnecessary drama may lead to symptoms of fear, anxiety and stress among staff, potentially jeopardizing the safety and well-being of patients. Even though many of us say that we hate drama and want to avoid it, the truth is that we often have trouble dealing with it appropriately.



Louise S. Dunn

LABELING DRAMA

It is easy to label coworkers as “gossipers,” “space cadets” or “drama queens” in an attempt to gain a better understanding of why they act the way they do (see **Labeling Drama Makers**). However, the crux of the problem may actually be the labeling process itself.

For example, labeling someone on your veterinary team as a “whiner” may feel like a step in the right direction for dealing with this person, but often the situation ends with the root cause of the conflict never being resolved, thus allowing the drama to continue – only now with a label.

Let's say the “queen bee” label is affixed to the manager at your practice. Every time the schedule is handed out, someone on the team makes a comment about how it is “par for the course” or “so-and-so always gets her way.” The label is assigned, but the drama continues. Labels do not solve the drama. Instead, they are used as a type of defense mechanism that fuels even more workplace drama.¹

Labeling Drama Makers

One of the problems with workplace drama is that it has too many labels. Consider whether these commonly used labels describe drama makers in your practice²:

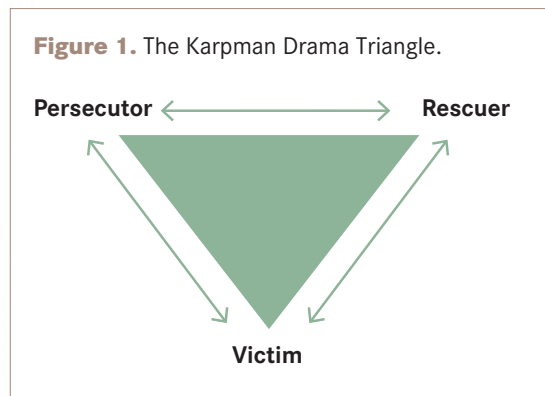
- **Drama queen or king:** overreacts to minor incidents
- **Queen bee:** uses power to bend rules to get own way, plays office politics
- **Whiner:** overreacts to perceived obstacles, whines and complains, never takes responsibility
- **Cynic:** points out failures of decisions made, sees only downsides of situations
- **Gossiper:** acts in passive-aggressive manner
- **Slacker:** lingers in break room, surfs internet, chats, avoids work by appearing busy
- **Space cadet:** makes off-the-wall comments, appears to not pay attention
- **Power grabber:** values titles and recognition, acts like manager
- **Challenger:** resents authority, relishes debates, adamantly holds to own positions

UNDERSTANDING THE DRAMA TRIANGLE

Workplace drama stems from a dysfunction in work relationships. If team members develop a deeper understanding of “drama relationships,” they can develop confident communication to resolve the real issues at hand. Familiarity with two theories can help: the Karpman drama triangle² and the empowerment dynamic.³

Karpman Drama Triangle

According to the Karpman Drama Triangle, any given drama includes three players: victim, rescuer and persecutor. These three roles interact with one another as represented in **Figure 1**.



The victim⁴ has a “poor me” mentality, does not take responsibility for his or her feelings, and actually sets the stage for a drama triangle to form. Victims have a need to involve others in their conflict; they feel powerless, helpless or hopeless; and they see themselves as unable to handle situations.⁵

The rescuer is a person who helps relieve the victim of that victimhood. This person has a “let me help you” mentality, setting out to assist but usually offering only short-term repairs that keep the victim dependent on the rescuer. Rescuers have trouble saying no, constantly try to fix other people’s problems, have a need to be the hero and are often considered control freaks.

The persecutor is a person, condition or circumstance that dominates and maintains a one-up position over the victim. Persecutors have a need to win every argument, are defensive and sarcastic, blame others, criticize harshly and justify their behavior.

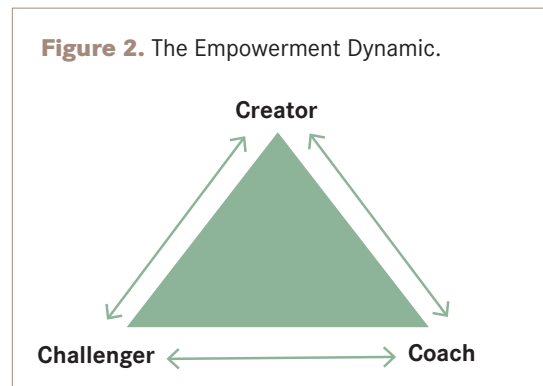
It’s important to note that a person does not always operate from the same position. For example, Jane (victim) has a problem with Ned (persecutor), so she goes to Pam (rescuer).

Pam talks to Ned, who didn’t realize there was an issue. Ned becomes frustrated and turns to Bill (his rescuer) and asks him to talk to Pam – and the triangulation continues. How might you break that cycle? Have Jane talk directly to Ned, or consider inverting the triangle.

Drama in the workplace leads to job dissatisfaction and decreased productivity.

The Empowerment Dynamic

Instead of viewing the drama triangle in negative positions, turn it into a more positive relationship. In the Empowerment Dynamic (**Figure 2**), the victim is now the creator, the persecutor is the challenger, and the rescuer is the coach.³



In this dynamic, the creator asks, “What do I want?” and thoughtfully evaluates the situation, then chooses appropriate steps toward an outcome rather than focusing on the problem. The challenger asks, “What is my intention?” and provokes others to take action, such as learning something new or making a decision, then provides an opportunity to choose a response or take action. The coach asks, “How do I see others?” and helps develop a vision and an action plan, then provides encouragement and support.

Notice the difference? There is no more “poor me” victim but, instead, an empowered team member taking responsibility for what he or she wants; no more rescuing but, instead, coaching, supporting and encouraging; no more negative persecutor but, instead, an opportunity or challenge.

PUTTING THE TRIANGLE TO WORK

Consider this scenario: Kathy has been labeled a “whiner.” As soon as Claire posts the schedule, Kathy starts whining about it. She complains to Dr. Bob, who goes to Claire and requests fixes to the schedule. Claire then adds

to the drama by deliberately giving Kathy shifts she doesn’t want. The drama cycle continues, with Kathy as the victim, Claire as the persecutor and Dr. Bob as the rescuer.

It’s time for a change. Kathy needs to think more like a creator, Dr. Bob needs to take on the role of coach, and Claire needs to step in as the challenger. How does this change look?

Dr. Bob must coach and guide both Kathy and Claire to identify what they each want to achieve, what skills or resources they require, what is and is not working for them, and what steps to take next.

Kathy needs encouragement to evaluate what she really wants and then choose appropriate steps, rather than complaining, to achieve a better outcome. Claire needs to admit to her intentions: Is she being passive-aggressive with Kathy, or does she intend to get Kathy to evaluate the situation and make a firm decision?

UNLOCK THE DOOR

It is never easy to deal with drama. The process becomes even more difficult when we label a single individual and fail to identify other players involved in the conflict. Look at any drama that occurs in your veterinary practice. Is there more than one person involved? Maybe you can begin to see at least three people involved in a drama triangle. Once you identify the players, you unlock the door to finding a quick and easy solution. **VMD**

References available at VMDToday.com.

Louise S. Dunn is an award-winning speaker, writer and consultant who brings over 40 years of in-the-trenches experience and business education to veterinary management. She is founder and CEO of Snowgoose Veterinary Management Consulting, which helps veterinarians develop strategic plans that consistently produce results.

The Benefits of Third-Party Financing

Offering clients additional payment options is a smart business decision that can help increase revenue, improve pet health and enhance client relationships.

By Maureen McKinney



Choosing between unexpected health care expenses for a pet or ending that pet's life is never easy. But pet health care costs are not trivial, and many owners do ultimately decide on economic euthanasia. This decision is difficult for both the pet owner and the practice team, particularly in light of the increasing medical and technological advances that make veterinary diagnosis and treatment more accurate and effective than ever before.

VETERINARY MEDICINE IS A BUSINESS

The fact is that veterinary practices simply cannot afford to treat every pet whose owners do not have the funds to pay. Extending credit or offering payment plans through the practice is becoming less and less common, largely because practices are unwilling to take on the risk.

But other, less risky options are available for practices that want to offer clients some way to alleviate the sticker shock of pet health care. The benefits of all these options are twofold: pet owners can afford the care their pets need and veterinarians can focus on delivering the best possible care.

Here we explore third-party credit cards, payment plans and loans, which are welcome alternatives for many pet owners who do not have cash or credit available to them. Many of these companies offer brochures and online advertising displays to help practices educate their clients about these offerings.

CREDIT CARDS

Private-label credit cards are offered by such companies as CareCredit, Wells Fargo and Citibank. Many pet owners are already familiar

with these types of cards because they are also used to finance human health care, such as dental, vision and other services. The practice must be enrolled for clients to apply for the card.

CareCredit, for example, is a credit card with a revolving line of credit that can be used repeatedly to pay at any location within CareCredit's network of enrolled providers. There are two basic financing options:

- Pet owners spending more than \$200 pay no interest if the debt is paid in full within 6, 12, 18 or 24 months.
- If a longer term is needed, the client has fixed monthly payments for terms of 24, 36, 48 or 60 months until the debt is paid.

Clients can apply quickly and easily, and credit decisions are usually made instantly. Once the application is approved, the cardholder can use the card at the practice multiple times as long as the purchases are within the approved limit.

The approval rate for third-party credit cards is often higher than for typical credit cards. Clients who are not approved are likely a poor credit risk.

PAYMENT PLANS AND LOANS

Other common options for third-party financing include payment plans and loans. Companies that offer pet owner payment plans include Vetary, CareCap, VetBilling.com, and Wellfund. Loans can be obtained from companies such as Scratch, PetLoans.com, MedicalFinancing.com, and LoanHero.

Payment terms and APR vary among lenders; some require automatic withdrawal from the client's bank account. Processing and con-

venience fees are often, although not always, paid by the borrower. Most of these companies do not require the practice to pay startup or subscription fees; others require the practice to pay a fee with each transaction. On the plus side for the practice, there are often no associated administrative tasks and the practice receives payment in full as soon as the service is rendered.

In most cases, in order for clients to take advantage of these offerings, the practice needs to be signed up as a partner. Once the practice is enrolled, clients can begin to borrow. In some cases the practice has the final say in whether to approve a client.

A WIN-WIN

Clients who can't afford to provide adequate care for their pets hurt your bottom line. Because you both want what's best for the pet, it behooves practices to offer clients third-party payment options as an alternative to shelling out hundreds or even thousands of dollars at one time. Practices that offer these financing options are able to focus their efforts on delivering care, not on whether clients can afford that care. Not only does the practice bring in more revenue because clients are able to pay for more and better care, but client retention and loyalty increase and health outcomes for patients improve. [VMD](#)

Maureen McKinney, associate editorial director of Veterinarian's Money Digest™ and American Veterinarian®, has written for HealthyPet magazine, vetstreet.com and the children's magazine Animal Tales.

Escaping the Perfectionism Trap

Self-doubt can undermine our confidence and put us at risk for depression, anxiety and more.

By Brian Faulkner, BSc(Hons), BVM&S, CertGP(SAM), CertGP(BPS), MBA, MSc(Psych), MRCVS

Diminished confidence and self-doubt can occur at any time during veterinary practice. Sometimes, a setback in one area (e.g., surgery) leads to diminished confidence and hesitation in other areas (e.g., decision making during office visits). It is when we experience self-doubt that we are most vulnerable to the grip of perfectionism.

PERFECTIONISM DEFINED

“Perfectionism” is a tricky term. Some erroneously connect it with the desire to achieve high standards by being thorough and paying attention to detail. These are all commendable, but there is a significant difference between perfectionism and striving for high standards.

Very few of the most respected achievers would promote perfectionism as necessary for success, simply because perfection doesn't exist. Research shows not only that perfectionist tendencies prevent progress and long-term success but also that

perfectionism is often a path to depression, anxiety, addiction and life paralysis.¹

These symptoms occur because at the root of perfectionism lies the need to hide personal insecurities and feelings of inadequacy.

UNCERTAINTY AND DOUBT

Humans have a unique ability to conceptualize, analyze and imagine the world in abstract terms. We can evaluate possible outcomes, develop theories and hypotheses around specific events, and then choose our response to those events. These skills make us the adaptable species we are.

There is, however, a downside to being able to anticipate outcomes of events that have not yet and may never happen. It is the psychological state of uncertainty or doubt.

Our brains never stop running through potential scenarios and trying to make sense of everything around us, so our perception of life is uncertain. Uncertainty can feel both exciting and uncomfortable. >>



Brian Faulkner, BSc(Hons), BVM&S, CertGP(SAM), CertGP(BPS), MBA, MSc(Psych), MRCVS



Although anticipating bad outcomes and choosing behaviors that will avoid them is a useful survival skill, it can become counterproductive if these thought processes become obsessive, especially when this obsession centers around what we believe failure says about us and what others think about us.

But why are we so worried about what others think of us? As humans, we are hard-wired to avoid isolation and the vulnerability of rejection. If we become obsessed by this need, we can become paranoid about managing anything that might threaten our inclusion.

For example, we might start to worry that others perceive us as lazy, undeserving, inadequate or not good enough. We may turn those feelings of doubt about whether we will be successful into an obsessive complex of self-doubt, in which we believe everything we do says something to others about our worthiness. Ironically, high achievers – such as veterinarians – are the most vulnerable to perfectionist tendencies.

PERFECTIONISM VERSUS NARCISSISM

Obsessions with ridicule or rejection, and the resulting self-doubt, can manifest in two ways: perfectionism and narcissism. Perfectionists and narcissists are underwritten by the same psychology – both are obsessed with being judged as inadequate. However, perfectionists and narcissists manifest these thoughts, feelings and behaviors in very different ways.

Narcissism is rooted in a shame-based fear of never feeling extraordinary enough. Narcissists, therefore, are constantly attracting attention, displaying their achievements (often on social media) with the

intention of getting noticed and impressing others to avoid feelings of rejection.

Perfectionists, on the other hand, are often self-denigrating because they see imperfect outcomes as revealing their personal flaws and inadequacies. Perfectionists refer to themselves in global terms, often using nouns and adjectives to describe their perceived worth, as opposed to the purpose or process of the work they are performing. For example, “I’m not a good [adjective] surgeon [noun].”

The deeper psychological impact of describing ourselves (and others) using nouns and adjectives is that it assumes our talents – or lack of them – are relatively fixed. Perfectionists and narcissists believe people are born (or not) with certain talents and abilities. In other words, you are lucky or unlucky [adjectives].

When perfectionists compare themselves with other people, they perceive others’ abilities as having more to do with a genetic lottery than with a process of learning and mastery. Because perfectionists are often self-critical, they assume that others are thinking the same: “I think I’m useless, and everyone else thinks I’m useless. You know what? They’re actually right. Maybe I shouldn’t even be a veterinarian.”

Perfectionists have a tendency to avoid, give up and procrastinate.

Perfectionists have a tendency to avoid, give up and procrastinate. They often start seeking out low-risk tasks to avoid the risk for rejection (e.g., being sued or fired). When perfectionists have a setback in one area,

they often begin to doubt their ability to perform unrelated tasks that they have been doing well.

They often encourage someone else to take a situation out of their hands, or they defer and refer tasks to avoid ridicule. However, they try to compensate for their sense of inadequacy by doing more of something they can do, such as working longer hours or accepting more than their fair share of swapped shifts. This is

done to try to relieve the burden they perceive they are to their veterinary team.

BREAKING THE PATTERN

The key to breaking free from the perfectionist trap is to recognize the difference between doubt and self-doubt and pay attention to how we explain our setbacks. We should focus on and develop purpose-oriented language using verbs and adverbs, as opposed to more judgmental, and ultimately potential-limiting, person-oriented language

CASE IN POINT: PERFECTIONISM IN PRACTICE

of nouns and adjectives that fosters perfectionist tendencies. For example, rather than start assuming “I’m not good enough” (i.e., self-doubt) because we feel uncertain about what’s going on with some of our cases, we can recognize the uncertainty (i.e., doubt) that is inherent in our work and conceive strategies to cope with or resolve it, such as perform a diagnostic test that eliminates potential suspects.

Everyone feels and needs to manage the doubt and uncertainty that are associated with day-to-day activities, but we must be aware of the potential to allow doubt to turn into self-doubt, because that is when we are most vulnerable to the grip of perfectionism. [VMD](#)

Reference available at [VMDToday.com](#).

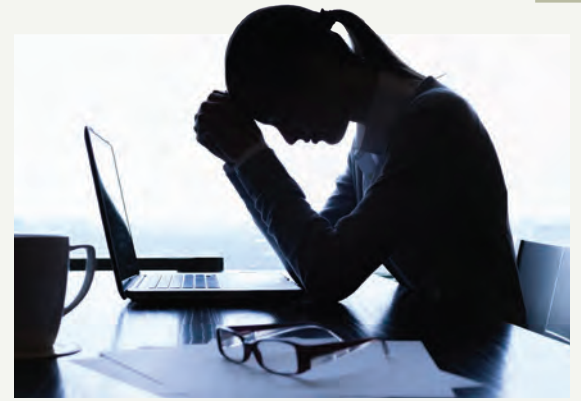
Dr. Faulkner currently divides his time between working in his own small animal practice in Suffolk, England, and coaching practice owners and managers. His consulting business, *The Colourful Consultation*, helps veterinarians proactively pursue the four essential outcomes of veterinary practice: clinical resolution, client satisfaction, financial resolution and colleague satisfaction. For more information, visit [colourfulconsultation.com](#).

The following anonymous transcript of a coaching session with a perfectionist, which took place following a postoperative bleed in a dog spay, highlights many of the thoughts, feelings and behaviors described in this article.

“I feel that my adequacy as a veterinarian is under constant review, and I only ever feel as confident as my last success or failure. If I do feel in control, either the feeling doesn’t seem to last very long or I am constantly assuming that it’s only a matter of time until I will or might mess up again. I admit that I am paranoid. I tell others that I like to do things correctly or thoroughly, but, honestly, trying to be perfect is a way of fending off judgment and ridicule. If I don’t make any mistakes, I don’t give my critics any opportunity!”

My critics are everywhere: clients, colleagues, even so-called friends. Everything I do when performing in front of clients and colleagues feels risky and like a “test” whereby I will feel better or worse about myself according to the outcome. I am always worrying about whether I am going to mess up when someone else sees me, watches me or reviews my work. I have always been more or less at the top of my class, and people are always telling me how smart and amazing I am, but I feel anything but amazing. I always seem to be living up to others’ expectations of me, and I am exhausted. If something goes well, the happiest I feel is relief, as opposed to any sense of elation or genuine satisfaction. I am just relieved not to have failed or embarrassed myself.

I feel threatened by others’ success. I know I shouldn’t, but I hate it when others do better than me – not because I am jealous but because it means I will have to push once again just to keep up, and I am already exhausted. My nightmare is not living up to others’ expectations. I feel like any feedback I receive is a criticism of my ability as a veterinarian and honestly, on really bad days, as a human being!”



Here are the core principles that can be applied in helping this veterinarian understand the situation and escape the perfectionist trap:

- There are significant differences between the emotions of doubt and uncertainty and the feeling of self-doubt.
 - » Doubt and uncertainty are inherent in veterinary work because veterinarians must make decisions in the face of incomplete information.
 - » Self-doubt is an assumption that one’s inability to overcome his or her feelings of uncertainty is due to some sort of personal inadequacy (which presumably others are not burdened with) – as opposed to recognizing the uncertainty that is inherent in the situation.
- The language here revolves around a mindset of self-doubt (and subsequent feelings of inadequacy) and the use of lots of (self-deprecating) nouns and adjectives.
- When we experience self-doubt, we start looking for strategies to manage these feelings. One such strategy is perfectionism: don’t make mistakes to give (presumed) critics a chance.
- Change the mindset and the associated language from being less self-focused and more process orientated. Ask, “What can I do to manage the inherent uncertainty in the situation” as opposed to, “What can I do to manage the self-doubt” resulting from my interpretation of the situation.

Arizona Goat Yoga classes are offered in a side pasture of owner April Gould's home in Gilbert, Arizona.



Roll Out the Mats and Bring on the Animals

Yoga is going to the dogs — and the cats and the goats and the horses and the bunnies and the llamas — with benefits for all.

By Kerry Lengyel

People everywhere are striking poses with all sorts of furry friends — from cats and dogs to goats, horses and more — with surprising benefits for yogis of all species. It's no wonder yoga with animals is gaining momentum across the country.

There is no such thing as a typical class because these unpredictable and playful creatures own the studio floor (or lawn). It can be a feat in itself to hold a pose as long as desired while a kitten or puppy paws at your ponytail and scampers under your legs. But therein lie the unique benefits. Yoga with animals is said to relieve the daily stresses of life and bring happiness to participants by boosting two of the so-called happy hormones: endorphins (from exercise) and oxytocin (from pet therapy).

CAT YOGA: "PURR-FECTLY" ZEN

Both animal shelters and yoga studios are joining the trend of cat yoga to provide relaxation for participants and promote cat adoption. Yoga with cats is more fun than serious practice as participants share their yoga mats — which seem like catnip for kittens — with their furry classmates. Humans get the feel-good benefits of bonding with cuddly cats, while the kittens enjoy stimulation, love, affection and socialization.

"You're not just doing something healthy for yourself," said Lisa Johns, manager of the Good Mews cat shelter in Marietta, Georgia. "You are doing a bit of good, too, for these shelter cats that will only get even more adoptable with the extra time and attention." Good Mews

holds its own cat yoga classes three times a month in the shelter's cage-free adult cat room-turned-yoga studio.

DOG YOGA: "UNLEASH" YOUR STRESS

Dog yoga — "doga," for short — allows dogs and their owners to bond through meditation, gentle massage and stretching. According to those who study and practice doga, dogs are pack animals, making them a natural match for yoga's emphasis on union and connection with other beings.

Owners and their pets work as a unit while performing doga. Owners help their dogs perform poses, and sometimes the dogs are used as props while their human counterparts perform their own poses.

Yoga with animals is said to relieve the daily stresses of life and bring happiness to participants by boosting two of the so-called happy hormones.

“People always ask me, ‘Do dogs need yoga?’” said Kari Harendorf, who teaches doga in Manhattan, New York. “I say, ‘No, you need yoga. But your dog needs your attention, and bonding with your pet is good for your health.’”

Doga poses include Upward Paw, in which owners lift dogs onto their hind legs for a gentle stretch, and Chaturanga, in which dogs, supported by their owners, sit with their front paws in the air.

Doga can be relaxing for both owner and pet; helpful for injured, elderly or obese dogs; and useful for owners trying to better connect with their furry friends.

HORSE YOGA: THE “MANE” EVENT

You might think that performing yoga on horseback seems like an extreme way to get a workout – and you’d be right. Even so, plenty of people are doing it.

“[Horseback yoga] is not a question of domination; it is a magical connection with an animal that’s bigger than you,” said Laura Garcia, an equestrian and yoga professional who combines the two as an instructor at La Donaira, a luxury resort in Spain.

La Donaira has more than 70 purebred Lusitano studs for yoga practice. This breed is said to be very tame and easily trained – the perfect yoga partner. To ensure the safety of all, classes are designed based on the participants’ riding

poses such as headstands and handstands on horseback.

“Whatever level you’re at [with your yoga practice], the relation you have when you’re in silence with the horse, when you breathe together and touch the animal – it’s amazing,” said Manuel Rosell, CEO of La Donaira.

GOAT YOGA: NOT “KIDDING” AROUND

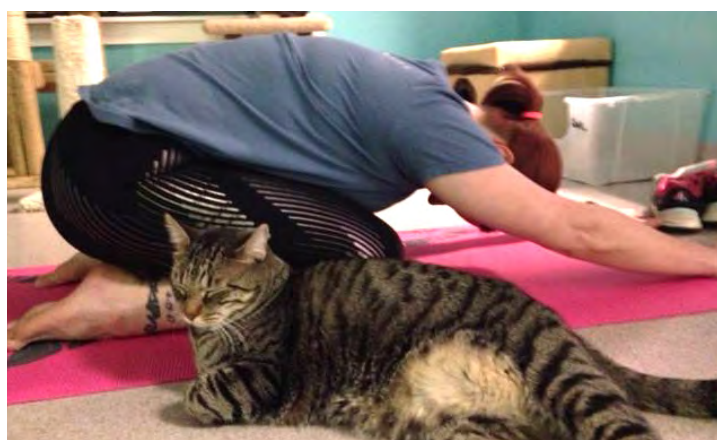
Yoga with goats caught fire in Oregon and Arizona, and now classes are popping up around the country. Lainey Morse began offering sessions on her Oregon farm after yoga instructor Heather Davis said it would be the perfect location to practice poses. Goat yoga classes take place several times per month, sometimes followed by wine tastings.

Arizona Goat Yoga was created by April Gould, who for years worked with her Nigerian dwarf goats, training them to go on her back while she performed push-ups, planks and squats. She partnered with fitness yoga instructor Sarah Williams to offer classes in a side pasture of Gould’s home.

The Wobbly Ranch, a goat sanctuary in Snohomish, Washington, offers weekly two-hour goat yoga classes. Participants go through an instructor-led class surrounded by wandering goats for one hour and can then stay for a second hour, if they wish. Goats roam freely, sometimes rubbing against the participants, lying down next to them or just eating the grass nearby. “This brings people a lot of joy,” co-owner Amanda Leone Carner said. “It brings the goats lots of joy, too.”

BEFORE YOU PARTICIPATE

Practicing yoga with, near or even on animals can be interesting, nurturing and fun, but it’s not for everyone. It can be distracting and even dangerous, considering the claws and hooves and teeth in the mix. If you give it a go, just do so carefully and with an open mind. Then, relax and enjoy! [VMD](#)



Practicing yoga with animals can be relaxing, nurturing and fun. Photos courtesy of Arizona Goat Yoga (top two images), Meow Parlor in New York, New York (third image) and Good Mews animal shelter in Marietta, Georgia (bottom).

and yoga experience. Students are taught to connect with the horse’s breathing, use the animal for support and stability, and hold



What Is Your Sleep Animal?

Working with your inner clock can make you happier, healthier and more productive.

By Kerry Lengyel

You know your spirit animal and you know your favorite animal, but do you know your sleep animal? In his book “The Power of When,” sleep specialist Michael Breus, PhD, explains that humans can be classified into four different types of sleepers – dolphins, lions, bears and wolves.

Commonly referred to as The Sleep Doctor, Dr. Breus is a diplomate of the American Board of Sleep Medicine and a fellow of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. He has been featured on such programs as “The Dr. Oz Show” and “The View” and is one of only 163 clinical psychologists with his credentials and distinctions with a specialty in sleep disorders.

Dr. Breus said our bodies and brains are designed to run on our individual biological clock time, and with a few tweaks to lifestyle and schedules we can get that clock back on schedule when our work–life balance is off track. Using his clinical experience, Dr. Breus identified four types of sleepers and named them after animals that have similar sleeping patterns and traits.

DOLPHIN

Dolphins are light sleepers who may suffer from insomnia. Actual dolphins sleep with only half of their brain at a time, while the other half is constantly alert so the animal can swim and watch for predators.

Dr. Breus recommended these types of sleepers wake up around 6:30 a.m. and immediately begin the day with a workout. They should eat breakfast an hour after waking and conduct creative work between 10 a.m. and noon.

Afternoons should include a short walk before working on difficult tasks, and put away technology an hour before bed, said Dr. Breus, which should be about 11:30 p.m. Dolphins only need about six hours of sleep each day.

LION

Lions are always up at the crack of dawn and energized throughout the morning. Actual lions rise before dawn to hunt while their prey is either asleep or drowsy.

These types of people burn out by early evening, though, which means most of their planning work should be done between 5:30 a.m. and 7 a.m.

Work should be put first in the afternoon, with the best time for a workout at 5 p.m. Technology should be put away 30 minutes before sleep, which Dr. Breus said should be around 10:30 p.m.

SLEEP ANIMALS: YOUR IDEAL DAILY ROUTINE

DOLPHIN	LION	BEAR	WOLF
6:30 a.m. Wake up; exercise.	5:30 a.m. Wake up; eat breakfast.	7:00 a.m. Wake up; do a few minutes of exercise.	7:00 a.m. – 7:30 a.m. Wake up with two alarms; jot down your thoughts.
7:30 a.m. Eat breakfast.	6:00 a.m. – 7:00 a.m. Do planning and big-picture thinking; meditate.	7:30 a.m. Eat breakfast.	7:30 a.m. Eat breakfast.
9:30 a.m. Have coffee.	9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Have coffee.	9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Plan your day.	8:30 a.m. Do a few minutes of outdoor exercise.
10:00 a.m. – noon Brainstorm; work on creative projects.	10:00 a.m. – noon Hold meetings.	10:00 a.m. Have coffee.	9:00 a.m. Plan your day.
Noon Eat lunch.	Noon Eat lunch.	10:00 a.m. – noon Work on difficult tasks; send work email.	11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. Have coffee; take care of busywork.
1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. Take a walk if you're feeling tired.	1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. Brainstorm; journal.	Noon Take a walk; eat lunch; take another walk.	1:00 p.m. Take a walk; eat lunch.
4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Work on intellectually demanding tasks; send work emails.	5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Exercise.	2:30 p.m. – 2:50 p.m. Nap or meditate.	4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Hold meetings; present ideas to coworkers.
6:00 p.m. Meditate or do yoga.	6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Eat dinner.	3:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Make phone calls; send emails.	6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Exercise.
6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. Eat dinner.	10:00 p.m. Turn off all screens.	6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Exercise.	8:00 p.m. Eat dinner.
10:30 p.m. – 11:30 p.m. Turn off all screens; take a hot shower or bath; read.	10:30 p.m. Sleep.	7:30 p.m. Eat dinner.	11:00 p.m. Turn off all screens; meditate; take a hot shower or bath.
11:30 p.m. Sleep.		8:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m. Brainstorm.	Midnight Sleep.
		10:00 p.m. Turn off all screens.	
		11:00 p.m. Sleep.	

A few lifestyle and schedule tweaks can put you in sync with your biological clock.

Dr. Breus said most CEOs and entrepreneurs are lions – they’re go-getters throughout the day but crash at night.

BEAR

Bears need a full eight hours of sleep per night and should wake up around 7 a.m. and begin their day with a workout. Real bears are active during the day and restful at night.

Naps are welcome during the afternoon, with most difficult work happening between 10 a.m. and noon. Bedtime for bears should be about 11 p.m.

WOLF

Wolves are not particularly morning people, and they do their best work during the evening hours. Real wolves come alive when the sun goes down, and the human wolf type is no different.

Wolves should wake up between 7 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. and should eat breakfast right away, followed by some exercise, planning and chores.

Dinner should be later for wolves – around 8 p.m. – than for the other types of animals, and before bed wolves should take a hot shower.

So, which sleep animal are you? [VMD](#)

The Five Pillars of Content Marketing

Stimulating interest and action among new and prospective clients is not as simple as it might seem.

By Naren Arulrajah

Content marketing is the backbone of modern business promotion today. If your veterinary content is not performing well, then your marketing strategy is not performing well. Of the many possible reasons why, one of the most common is a basic misunderstanding of content marketing.



Naren Arulrajah

You create some content and put it online. That's content marketing, right? Wrong. Content marketing is a strategic, multiphase process that can easily be derailed by a misstep at any point. Here is your guide to troubleshooting and optimizing every stage of your veterinary content marketing.

1. PLAN

The process does not begin with writing a blog post. First, you need to know why you are writing the post, who will read it and how it will turn that person into a new client.

- **Define your goals and priorities.** Do you want new clients similar to those you have? Are you hoping to break into a new market or expand your reach? Do you want to increase the volume of certain types of procedures or certain species of pets? Are brand awareness and reputation building your priorities?
- **Identify your target market.** In addition to demographic information, consider potential new clients' social media habits, lifestyles and interests. What do they want to know? What would they want to read?
- **Choose the best platforms.** Content can be distributed on social media, via email,

Once content is created, it needs to be optimized and presented in the best possible way at every step.

in a newsletter or on your blog or website, among other options. Wherever you publish, you want to build an audience. Choose your preferred channels, and provide fresh content regularly.

- **Develop a strategy.** Invest some thought into exactly what you want to accomplish. Do you want the viewer to visit your website or

subscribe to your newsletter? Does your content guide the person toward those actions? How will your website or newsletter convert that person into a client?

2. CREATE CONTENT

With a clear marketing strategy in mind, it's time to begin creating. Neither readers nor search engines will be impressed by poor-quality, low-value content. Whatever you publish should be well written, professionally presented and error free. Beyond those basic requirements, "quality" means compelling, engaging content that provides value to the reader. Choose topics that will interest your target market and provide useful information.

A common cause of content marketing failure is lack of skills and knowledge. The specific problems tend to differ between in-house and outsourced marketing teams.

In-house teams often lack writing, editing, design, social media and digital marketing skills. You and your staff specialize in veterinary medicine, not marketing. Effective in-house content creation usually requires either hiring people with the necessary expertise and experience or investing in training for your current team.

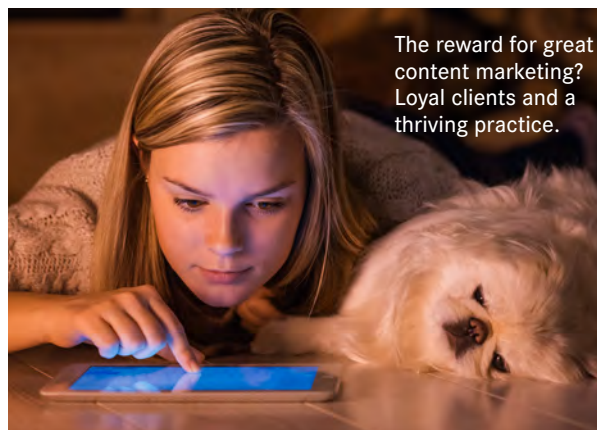
Outsourcing is a popular solution that can deliver and distribute timely, well-crafted content. Unfortunately, marketing professionals are unlikely to have extensive veterinary knowledge or be familiar with the details of your practice and branding. If you outsource content, choose a provider that specializes in your field, if possible. Work closely with the marketer, answering questions and conveying as much information as possible about your practice.

3. OPTIMIZE YOUR CONTENT

Like planning, this very important part of the process tends to be overlooked. Once content is created, it needs to be optimized and presented in the best possible way at every step.

- **Editing:** Verify facts, proofread text for grammar and writing style, and check video for sound quality and visual flow. If the content is destined for social media or a similar platform, verify that word count, image sizes and other specifications comply with the applicable requirements and best practices.
- **Keywords:** Targeted keywords should appear naturally in the flow of text. If they are overused or inserted where they seem out of place, readers will quickly lose interest.

- **Originality:** Is your content unique? If portions duplicate that of other websites, your search ranking will suffer. You might even be in violation of copyright laws.
- **Tone:** Effective content is user-centric. Its primary purpose should be to educate, entertain or otherwise provide value. The content placement, call to action and subtle mentions of your practice accomplish the goals of marketing. If the content is overly promotional and brand-centric, it will read like an advertisement. People seeking information are unlikely to read an ad.
- **Presentation:** The importance of visual impact cannot be overstated. People will notice images before they read the text. Choose pictures carefully and add infographics or other educational graphics to illustrate a point when possible. Break up long blocks of text with subheads and bulleted lists, because many people scan a page instead of reading every word.



The reward for great content marketing? Loyal clients and a thriving practice.

4. DISTRIBUTE YOUR CONTENT

Publishing your content is the simplest step in the process. However, simply "putting it out there" doesn't guarantee an audience.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is one of the most significant factors determining the performance of website content, which entails optimizing not only the article but also the entire website. The primary components of SEO include responsive design, compliance with web standards, strong backlinks, meta information, clean coding and fast loading time.

Similarly, content published on social media will perform better if your profile is optimized with your complete business information, a good header and profile pictures, and a significant following.

The final – and most overlooked – step in distribution is promotion and crossposting. Post links to your blog posts and website articles on your social media accounts. Include social sharing links on your website and in newsletters. If you publish a lot of content directly to social media, consider embedding a stream in your website. Promote your newsletter on your website and social accounts.

5. ANALYZE YOUR RESULTS

If planning, creation, optimization and distribution are done well, then your content should perform well. Unfortunately, between the high number of variables and ever-changing habits of internet users, success is never guaranteed. By analyzing the performance of each marketing campaign, you can identify what topics and types of content your audience prefers and which tactics are most effective.

Google Analytics can provide a wealth of information about what is happening on your website, and most social media platforms provide some analytic information. However, those tools may not give you the granular data needed to track the performance of individual pieces of content. Work with your IT and web development teams to implement advanced tracking strategies, including codes embedded in content, call tracking to identify the source of leads and split testing, which compares performance of variations of the same campaign.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

The next step is to go back to the first step. Take the information gathered from analytics and use it to refine your strategy. In reality, there is no final step in content marketing. It is a continual cycle that should evolve to keep up with trends, incorporate new technology and meet the needs of your audience. You will be rewarded with new clients and stronger customer loyalty to help your veterinary practice thrive. [VMD](#)

Naren Arulrajah is president and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a full-service internet marketing company that focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education and the online reputations of veterinarians/practice owners. If you have questions about marketing your practice online, call 855-598-3320 to speak one-on-one with Naren.

Social Media 101

Social media marketing is one of the best tools for building a successful business, but how can you get started when you're not even sure how it works?

By Kerry Lengyel



Social media is a great, low-cost way to promote your practice and see it grow dramatically in a short amount of time – and it’s not as daunting or difficult as you might think. If you’re unfamiliar with all the available platforms, you can still craft a strategy that’s right for you. Here’s how.

FIND THE RIGHT CHANNELS

First, you need to figure out which social media channels are right for your practice. You may find that your clients and your community are more active on one platform than another or that you don’t have enough time to manage all the available channels. To help you pinpoint your best approach, we explain how four of the most popular social media platforms work – and how each might be used to help you market your practice.

TWITTER

Twitter allows registered users to send short posts (called “tweets”) of no more than 140 characters in length. You can include hyperlinks, photos, polls or GIFs (graphics interchange formats) into any tweet, as well as use hashtags – expressed as a #keyword – to weave tweets into a conversation thread or connect them to a specific topic. With a real-time, continually updated Twitter feed, you can get information out to your clients the moment it becomes available.

Many businesses use tweet chats to connect and engage with clients and potential clients. Alert your followers that a veterinarian or technician will be tweeting from your practice’s account, fielding their questions about a particular topic and providing valuable insights. For example, you might create a tweet chat around the topic of Lyme disease: What is Lyme disease exactly, and how do pets get infected? What symptoms might a pet owner notice? How important is tick control in preventing this disease? You get the gist.

Twitter is also a great way to convey relevant news to your clients and followers quickly and easily. Did you just update your equipment or expand your service offering? Could a new Food and Drug Administration pet food recall affect your clients? Are you hosting an adoption event or open house? Tweet about it.

FACEBOOK

Facebook allows registered users to create profiles, send status updates, upload photos and videos, and chat with followers. By giving your practice its own Facebook page, you’re creating an interactive place where current clients can get to know you better and prospective clients can learn what your practice has to offer. When setting up your page, be sure to list your operating hours, contact information, client reviews and anything else you think might attract more clients.

Facebook Live is a relatively new tool that allows you to share real-time video broadcasts. You might take your followers on a tour of your practice, show them what a typical day is like or introduce them to some of your cute and cuddly patients (with permission, of course).

Facebook’s Events tool allows you to publicize an event, invite your clients or the public, and track who plans to attend. It’s an easy way to spread the word when you host a special adoption day, open house or pet training.

The more your staff is involved, the more the personality of your practice will come through.

INSTAGRAM

Instagram allows registered users to post images, slide shows or short (60-second) videos. To make posts searchable to those who may not be following you specifically, you can include a caption that includes hashtags and location-based geotags.

Instagram is a particularly fun, creative and visual social media platform to help you attract new clients. Who can resist an adorable photo of a puppy or kitten? Take photos of your sweetest patients and post them on Instagram. Your followers’ “likes” and comments will strike up a conversation on your account.

Giveaways or calls to action are great opportunities to give your practice a presence on

Instagram. Offer a discounted service to one lucky follower among those who like or comment on a specific post. Urge followers to sign up for your newsletter if you have one (hint: you should have one), or invite them to write a review of their experience at your practice.

PINTEREST

Think of Pinterest as one big bulletin board that allows registered users to share, categorize, bookmark and “pin” images to different “boards.” There’s an endless list of categories to search: DIY, crafts, food and drink, architecture, home decor, travel and – of course – pets. Pinterest enables you to engage with pet owners who are more visual learners and want to absorb knowledge in a different way.

Create boards on popular topics or conditions that your clients can then “repin” to their own Pinterest boards, sparking further engagement and education. How should you comfort a pet during a loud noise event such as a thunderstorm? What do new puppy or kitten owners need to know? How important is heartworm prevention? Write an informative article and pin it to your “Client Tips” or “Pet Owner Education” board. Then, if clients have questions after a visit, you can point them to your Pinterest page for more information or to reiterate what they learned at the practice.

Pinterest is full of personality, so create boards that demonstrate what makes your practice unique. If you offer holistic medicine services, create a board that includes articles, videos and other information that will grab clients’ interest. If you offer cancer therapies, create a board that tells pet owners how the available treatments will affect their pet.

DO IT RIGHT

Be Yourself

Your practice is unique, as are the individuals who work there. This won’t come across through your name, logo or practice sign, but it can shine brightly on social media. Social media platforms can tell the public who you are and why pet owners should visit you instead of your competitors. Create posts, tweets and boards that illustrate the unique personality of your team. Have fun, but don’t try too hard – just be yourself, and be as human as possible. >>

Your Online Toolbox



Be Responsive

Using social media is the fastest way to reach your clients, and it's the easiest way for many of them to reach you. You have allotted days and hours when your practice is open and someone will pick up the phone, but your social media accounts are open 24/7, so make sure you respond when someone sends a question or comment through one of your channels. Prompt responses convey that you and your practice are reputable, sensitive and reliable.

Involve the Whole Team

Because social media is all about creating an experience for your clients, the more your staff is involved, the more the personality of your practice will come through. Your clients want to know whom they'll be communicating with when they come to your practice, and showing them through social media will make them feel comfortable before they ever step foot in the building. This is particularly important for veterinarians looking to build relationships not only with their client base, but also their larger community.

Give It to the Expert

You don't have to be digitally savvy yourself to capitalize on social media opportunities. You just need a budding Mark Zuckerberg on your team. Focus more on this person's enthusiasm than expertise – someone who uses these social media platforms personally is a great choice. Just be sure you set up strict guidelines that mirror the public image you want to convey through your social media accounts. It also wouldn't hurt to review posts periodically before they go live.

READY, SET, GO!

Getting started on social media shouldn't be a huge challenge for you and your team, but it should be a learning experience. Think of it as a garden: Tend it and it will grow. You can't see the difference social media can make for your practice until you actually get online and get active. So, what are you waiting for? [VMD](#)

Kerry Lengyel is assistant editor – and resident social media expert – for Veterinarian's Money Digest™ (VMDToday.com) and American Veterinarian® (AmericanVeterarian.com).

ATTRACTING AND MAINTAINING FOLLOWERS

Your practice is set up and registered on one or more social media platforms – now what? It's time to get some followers and engage with them.

Get Their Attention

- **Post relevant content.** You run a veterinary practice, so don't post about politics or religion. Create interesting, informative and fun pet-related content, and the right followers will come.
- **Stay active.** Pick a posting schedule that's right for you. To stay relevant and keep your accounts active, you'll want to post at least once per day on Twitter and Facebook and several times per week on Instagram and Pinterest.
- **Use hashtags.** Hashtags run the show when it comes to social media, so use them as much as possible. You'll want to have one or two hashtags in every tweet or Facebook post, and as many as your caption will allow you to have in your Instagram posts. This is the best way to reach potential followers who may have never stumbled upon your practice otherwise.
- **Create a community.** Follow other social media users, including clients, colleagues, pet-related organizations and other local businesses. Retweet what they post, comment on and share their articles, and start a conversation. You're not alone in your quest to build a social following, and tapping into these other accounts will help you expand your reach.

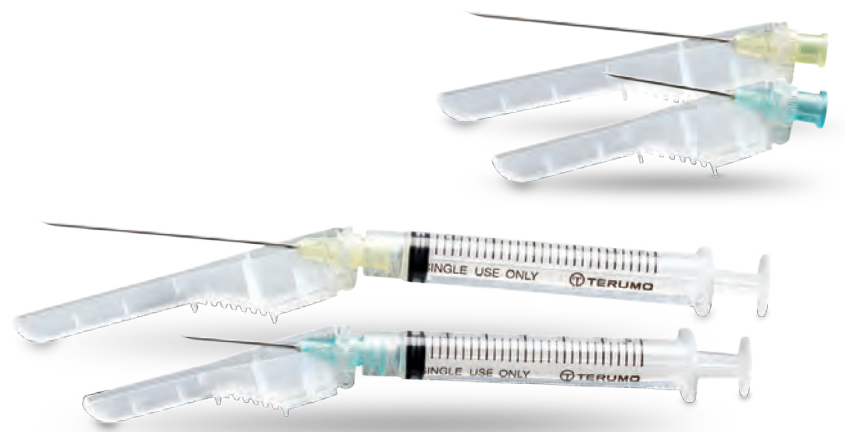
Simplify the Process

Several tools are at your disposal to ease some of the burden of regularly posting on your social media accounts. Tweetdeck and Hootsuite are two handy scheduling tools. Both have free and paid options; for most practices the free version should be all you need for excellent social media management.

- Tweetdeck allows you to schedule multiple tweets in advance. You can also like, retweet, quote tweets, search hashtags and more all from its simple, easy-to-use interface.
- Hootsuite allows you to schedule posts for multiple social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, Instagram, Wordpress and YouTube. In the free version of Hootsuite, though, you're only allowed to connect three social profiles.



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