



IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

MEET THE AUTHOR



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Esther Klok has 24 years of experience as a veterinary technician. She works in a mixed practice that handles both small animals and horses. Most of the time she can be found working in the back, but she also enjoys the front desk and has convinced her boss she really needs to be there one day a week. She has also just started her own company, Improve on the Move. She loves giving lectures, teaching, organizing conventions, and writing and providing photos for magazines. And, because she obviously needs to do something with any leftover time, Esther and her boyfriend travel throughout Europe to compete for the Dutch team in single horse carriage driving.

Show What You've Got! Lessons in Public Relations

In the 25 years that I have been a veterinary technician, I have seen many things about the veterinary practice change—and fast. One thing is that we have to be much more active in getting clients into the practice. During the first few years of my career, our practice did not worry much about attracting clients. People just went to the veterinarian in their neighborhood. Back then, we had never heard the phrase: “You must think about your public relations and marketing.”

Now it's a different story. Of course, maybe not everyone at your practice feels the need to get more clients in the door, but I think many of us do. Then it's a question of how. There are so many ways to deal with public relations and marketing. Luckily, there are also many great courses you can take or professionals you can hire for the job. But don't forget: the practice already has some perfect tools: Us! Veterinary technicians!

I believe we can do a super job of public relations, and I'll tell you why.

ONCE UPON A DOG SHOW

About 15 years ago, I attended one of the biggest dog shows in Holland, which was in a city near our practice. While I was walking around there among so many dogs, I saw a few of our clients showing. And they *loved* that I was standing on the side and watching their performance.

After the show, these clients introduced me to their friends and breeders. We started to talk, and I had the opportunity to tell them about our practice and all the things we do.

A New Idea

The next day at work, I told my boss I wanted to go to another dog show. He said, “You are crazy!”

I explained that I had the opportunity to talk to many interesting people who might also be potential clients. In addition, I talked to people who lived near our clinic and were driving 1 hour to another clinic because they wanted a veterinarian who could give them “the whole package,” including



FIGURE 1. Where the idea began...a large dog show.

progesterone testing and everything else associated with breeding and birth. So I told these folks—potential clients!—that we offered these services *and* we were really good at them. They asked, “Can you really do this at your local clinic?” They wondered this because my practice is in a small country town, and they did not expect us to have those facilities. And because they did not expect us to have them, no one had checked our website to find out.

After I shared this story, my boss said it wasn’t normal for veterinary clinics to visit dog shows. But he also said, “Okay, give it a try, but it’s not a thing for me.”

The Value of Being a Showoff

When you can demonstrate your skills, then you have the opportunity to talk about a better salary. You shouldn’t just complain that you don’t earn enough money. In any profession, it’s all about what you deliver, and veterinary technicians can deliver so much. So, the way to earn more is to show your employer that you add value to the practice. Besides, I love a new challenge, don’t you?

BOX 1 Booth Checklist

- A long table (if not provided at the event)
- 1 or 2 tall tables (for monitors, brochures, etc; **FIGURE 2B**)
- Tablecloth(s) in your practice colors
- Banners
- Chairs for casual conversations
- Big picture frames with action shots of your practice
- A TV and a DVD player to show video clips of what your practice does
- A computer with access to the practice management system (if wi-fi is available)
- Electrical cables for your equipment
- Practice brochures with a description of services
- A fee schedule of the top 20 common services, like vaccination, heartworm and fecal tests, and common lab work (avoid procedures that require estimates)
- Paper and pen to write down questions, email addresses, and phone numbers (or an electronic means to do so)
- Something fun for kids to do (**FIGURES 4 and 5**)
- Something free (eg, food samples)
- A handy box with items like nails, adhesive tape, rope, etc, to build your booth
- A credentialed veterinary technician who loves to talk
- A veterinarian available who you can call for questions



FIGURE 2. Our booth setup at a local dog show.



FIGURE 3. A professional banner is a nice, eye-catching touch to a booth.



FIGURE 4. It's always good to provide some activity for kids, because they are often less shy than adults. Here, we placed a barrier where they had to reach through and guess what the object behind it was.

Now you may think, when your boss isn't into something, why should you try it? However, I think that in every clinic, each team member has a special gift that should be utilized. And because I love to talk, promotion is really my thing, and I love to show how great we vet technicians are.

SHOWTIME

In my pursuit of this new plan, I recruited a colleague. We prepared to set up a nice booth at the next dog show. We knew it needed to be cost effective to keep the boss happy (you know how they are!).

So we went to IKEA to get some cheap photo frames, and we printed up pictures of all the things we do in our practice. We also ordered two professional banners and set up a booth, which included the television from our waiting room so we could show a video of laparoscopic sterilization done at our practice (which we already had). We also took a box that we use to train farmers to birth lambs. On one side of our display, we put an instrument or item commonly used in practice, such as an otoscope, thermometer, bandage, or stethoscope. Then we played a game with the kids attending: if they could reach through and guess what the item was, they won a prize.

We had a great time! And, oh, how proud we were to highlight our practice and all we do. Every day, vet technicians work like crazy and do so many amazing things. So for my colleague and me, it was really rewarding to finally show a big group of people what we could do for their pets.

People Just Don't Know!

How did it go? Well, we were exhausted after 2 days. We talked to so many people and discovered that most of them didn't know what veterinary technicians—or our practice—could really do. Without that knowledge, many of them had never thought to ask their veterinary team about extra care for their pets beyond routine wellness procedures, like vaccinations.



FIGURE 5. The backside of the barrier in Figure 4.



We went to teach, but we learned a lot. One key point we learned was that pet owners may not have all the information they need to keep their pets healthy, but they want to learn. It is our job as pet advocates to give them that information.

So when we had the chance to speak with them, we shared things like:

- Dental disease can be painful, so yes, you can have your pet's teeth cleaned, much like what your dentist does to keep your mouth healthy. Yes, we can clean dogs' and cats' teeth! Pets are happier when they are not in pain.
- We can take x-rays quickly and in many cases have the results while you wait (especially if you think your pet has eaten your daughter's doll).
- We can do laparoscopic surgeries, including sterilization, so don't be afraid to have your pet spayed or neutered because you think a big incision is needed.
- We have a rehab program, and we're happy to work with our patients' physiotherapists, even if they live far away.

Finally, we invited pet owners to visit our practice, take a tour, and discuss the other services we offer. If they had questions we couldn't answer, we wrote the questions down with their phone number so that our vets could call them back later.

Reaping the Results

Two days after this first show experience, a breeder called us to ask if they could come in for a tour and meet our boss. They really loved the way we dealt with people and their questions at the show. Now, many years later, they remain a loyal client. They love their dogs and really do the best they can when it comes to veterinary health care. They also recommend our practice to the new owners of their puppies as the place to go for superior care.

At the show, we played a video of our way of taking radiographs, and many pet owners had asked about it. As a result, we have dog breeding clubs who visit us on Saturdays to have coffee and cookies and talk with one another while we take the radiographs needed for their dog breeding plans.

Finally, by showing all the things we could do with dental health, owners realized it's similar to their own oral health. When owners understand that the issues can be the same, they are more willing to do accept our recommendations. Many people did not expect us to have such a modern dental unit in our small countryside clinic. Now, only a few years later, we are well known for our excellent dental care programs.

Needless to say, all this has brought more money into the practice. And that makes everyone happy!

GETTING STARTED

Local Opportunities

Of course, you do not have to start with a big dog show. In your own community, there are plenty of opportunities. In our town, a street market is held every year. We always attend with our booth. People like to see that you are involved with the community.

We always bring our "front desk superstar" to this event because she knows so many of our clients and their pets by name! Owners love it when you know who they are and what procedures you have performed for their pet. And of course, at an event like this, they always have questions. That's when you realize there is a limit to the recommendations you can provide, and you might suggest they make an appointment to come into your practice to speak with the veterinarian. However, when we are at our community event, owners often decide on the spot that they should bring their pet in for an examination. We make sure we have internet access to our practice management system and schedule the appointment right there. We love the instant gratification of knowing that we are improving care for pets.

Dog "Events"

So many people love to "sport" with their dogs. They anticipate an event for weeks, and on the big day, they often feel the way they did when they were young and headed out on a school field trip—enthusiastic, a little nervous, and very excited.

What is better than experiencing that feeling with potential clients? You can be there with a booth and be a first-aid person for the dogs. You are building a bond with the owners, all while having fun!

If you think about it, I bet you can come up with several opportunities. These might include breeder action days, club meetings, and even competitions. What does your community have that you can use to your advantage? In many cities in Holland, you are allowed to swim with your dog in the local swimming pool on the last day of the season. Most of the pools have safe water conditions for the dogs, so



FIGURE 6. A "dog day" at the swimming pool. Another great outreach opportunity.



you can have a lot of fun at the pool together. If my clinic brings presents for all the dogs, like a healthy snack, we end up having plenty of "fans" that day.

Giving Back

Everywhere in the world, people want to help others in need, whether people or animals. In Holland, before Christmas, we have "the glass house," where 3 disc jockeys from one of the biggest radio stations are locked up for 1 week in a house of glass. They broadcast the radio program from there with lots of guests. It's on all the TV stations, and many people visit the house and enjoy the concerts they provide 24 hours a day. The goal every year is to earn money for a different charity. The disc jockeys ask all the Dutch people to join them in action. And all of Holland does! People wash cars, give dancing classes on the street, sell hot chocolate, and bake cookies, and all the money goes into the glass house, where they count it every day. For the practice where I work, it's a great opportunity to join the community in a common goal. One year, we brought a truck where we could microchip animals, and all the money went to the glass house project. Our practice participation was recognized in the newspaper and on the local TV stations. Now that's a win-win!



FIGURE 7. The microchipping truck for a community event. The money from the microchipping benefited the charity, but the public relations benefited the practice!



FIGURE 8. The practice's microchipping truck.

Horse Shows

Sometimes you have to think of opportunities a little bit outside the box. Even if you are not an equine vet tech, it still can be really interesting to go to a horse competition. In the winter here in Holland, we have big indoor competitions with lots of booths. Now, probably you're thinking, "But our practice doesn't see horses." Maybe not, but most horse owners and show competitors also own dogs and cats! And they are really interested in what you offer, because most horse owners are accustomed to special medical treatments, dentals, rehab, and all the things veterinary practices do.

At one of these local horse shows, we set up a big booth with lots of pictures and, of course, our television showing who we are and what we do in our practice. We ended up being very busy with owners who had questions. Our booth was crowded with people for most of the day. So try it! Take off your "blindness" and think outside the box!

CONCLUSION

Don't think of outreach as something that's difficult! As veterinary technicians, we are proud of what we do, so every opportunity you get to deliver a message about pet health, take it! Also, I personally feel that it's really important to give something back to your community. Taking your show on the road can be a great way to do that—and have fun at the same time. ■



FIGURE 9. Horse shows are another great opportunity for reaching dog and cat owners.



FIGURE 10. Team gear and team spirit go hand-in-hand for great public outreach!