

Got Vets?

Veterinarians have long been a trainer's most coveted referral source. In the past, bringing by a basket of cookies from time to time and asking to keep some cards or brochures on the counter could assure a steady stream of new client calls. But today's dog training business requires a much more substantial and creative marketing plan. For one thing, there are many more dog pros than there used to be and as the industry has grown, dog owners have been flooded with doggie brochures, fliers, and ads. As a result, it's become hard to get their attention with such traditional means. Vets' responsiveness has changed, too. Many are more discerning than they used to be. They want to know about the skills, education, and professionalism of the trainers they refer to. Others are unwilling to play favorites, allowing anyone to leave materials in an increasing mountain of business cards and competing messages.

How, then, do you create lasting, effective referral relationships with veterinary clinics?

Offer Something Useful

The thought of asking a stranger to promote you can deter all but the most gregarious, and granted, that's an awkward starting point. Instead, offer something, rather than ask for help. For example, a professional newsletter full of training tips and dog-related articles will likely be welcomed into a clinic's waiting room. It's a rich resource *and* reading material for clients that are waiting. No doubt the vet and office manager will be much happier with this than with yet another brochure.

Another approach is to build a vet folder or packet (these can be used at shelters and other places of adoption as well) —a branded piece with useful information for getting off on the right paw with a new puppy or dog. There might be advice for successfully surviving the first

couple of weeks and setting routines for the future, some simple training tips, and of course information about your services. Providing a sharp-looking folder with real information to local vet offices gives them a value-added product to offer each new client, as well as existing clients struggling with training or behavior issues.

Both of these marketing projects have a powerful edge over the old standbys. Because the newsletter changes seasonally, owners have a reason to pick it up each time they visit the office. It's not just the same old brochure they've already read. And the folders are a serious endorsement—not just a card on the counter, these have been handed to the owner as part of their starter package, or in response to a behavior complaint. And because both the newsletter and folder have so much good information, neither are likely to be tossed out or misplaced, as happens with most cards and brochures. When a frustrated dog guardian decides six months down the road that they need assistance, they are going to go looking for that packet or newsletter, not online or anywhere else.

The rich content and aesthetic delivery of these projects showcase your expertise and professionalism to veterinarians. The more they trust and respect you, the more often you will be actively referred to. No business card convey such insight.

Keep in Their Line of Sight

Once you've gotten a toe in the door, don't let the vets and their staff forget about you. Stop by on a regular basis to drop off additional newsletters and/ or folders, or whatever other creative ideas you've pursued. Try to time your visits with the least busy time of day for each office, to increase the chance of saying hello.

Build on the relationship by offering to give short training presentations during staff meetings on topics of interest and usefulness to vet techs and office personnel. This allows

everyone to become more closely acquainted with you and your knowledge, and thus more likely to remember to hand out those folders and actively refer people your way.

Take another step by sharing behavior reports with vets. Ask your clients' permission first, then send a copy of your assessment and recommendations to each client's veterinarian as a professional courtesy. If they are already referring to you, they have all the more reason to continue. If you don't yet have a relationship with the vet in question, he or she will gain familiarity with your expertise and professionalism through these reports, making it easier for you to bring your marketing materials in to the office. You may find that in many cases doctors will contact you for referral materials once they see the kind of work you do.

Reinforce Referrals

As mom always said, be sure to say 'thank you.' Skinner taught us that the more you thank people, the more there will be to be thankful for. And from Pavlov we know that the more we give, the happier people will be to see us. How to thank elegantly?

The oldest trick in the book is to bring along some goodies when you stop in to refresh your materials. Store-bought is fine; homemade makes the bigger impression.

In the beginning, send cards thanking the office for each referral. Have stationery on hand so you can practice good timing. As the referrals grow in number, send a monthly card to say how much you appreciate their ongoing support. Occasionally spice things up by sending a bouquet or food basket or something fun and dog-related. Another idea is small denomination gift cards to a café within walking distance of the clinic. Changing what you send from time to time will keep the gesture from seeming routine or insincere.

Deepen the Relationship

As you receive more referrals from a particular office and the respect and trust grows, expand your relationship. One simple way to do this is to offer an additional marketing project. If you began with folders, add a newsletter. If you started with a newsletter, what other complimentary project might you pursue? With each product you put yourself in front of potential clients more frequently and give them additional opportunities to see how your services might benefit them. (And any new marketing project can be used in other venues, too.)

If you are ready to move to a new level, you might suggest a joint project. For example, if they have the space perhaps a vet's office would be open to hosting a series of community lectures. You gain additional marketing exposure and they get new potential clients coming in to their space.

I have also helped several of my clients build in-office consultation services with local vet practices, where the trainer or behaviorist has specific office hours at the clinic. This way vets can go a step beyond referrals by actually scheduling an appointment with the trainer to take place right in their office. An owner might come in complaining about some disturbing growling, for example. After ruling out medical causes, the vet can recommend training, suggesting the owner make an appointment on the way out to see the resident trainer. You can't get a better endorsement than that and, of course, the client is more likely to make the appointment in that moment than if they leave the office with a brochure or business card to think it over.

Getting Started

The question I am most often asked in regard to setting up referral relationships with vets is "How do I get started, who do I talk to?" First, choose and produce your marketing literature so you have something in hand. Go the extra mile to make sure everything is polished and

professional. Definitely use a designer, and consider hiring a writer if that's not your strong suit. These costs will pay off.

Next, find out who in the office to talk to. In most cases, it is the office manager who makes decisions about what to display in the waiting room and who gets to talk to the doctor. Call or email the office to set up an appointment with the office manager so you know you'll be talking to him or her when they have time to focus. You might grease the wheels by sending samples of your material ahead of your meeting. Remember—you aren't asking for anything; you have something of value to offer. You needn't even use the word "referral"—those will come naturally from whatever literature you leave behind.

Sometimes you can go right to the vet. For example, if you have reason to take one of your animals in, bring samples of your materials along. Offer to leave them for her and ask to set up an appointment to talk about them.

If even these softer approaches make you nervous, you can be subtler still. Send behavior reports on a frequent basis to break the ice—that way the veterinarian will already know who you are. And as I said earlier, they may even contact you first. You may also have loyal clients willing to help. If you have a client who raves about you to friends and family, they would probably be delighted to tell their vet about you and take a copy of your materials along on their next appointment.

Strong vet relationships, though not as easy to come by these days, remain a key ingredient to a successful training business. Make a commitment to start working on yours today.

Veronica Boutelle, MA, CTC, is the founder of dogTEC. Need help jumpstarting your vet marketing? dogTEC can help with personalized coaching, designer and writer referrals, the dogPRO cd, and the new dogTEC Newsletter Subscription Service. www.dogtec.org or info@dogtec.org