

E-mail Marketing in the Veterinary Practice

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“78 percent of adults are Internet users, whether that means broadband, dial-up, access from home or access from someplace other than home” (Hoorigan, 2009, p. 13). In a study of human patients, 84% of adults go online to search for medical information (Harris Interactive, 2007). It might be safe to assume that many of your clients are also searching the internet for animal health topics. If you have not considered a website for your practice, now is the time to revisit the topic or improve your existing website.

During the economic downturn, you have probably visited all the areas that you can cut costs. Have you tried relatively inexpensive electronic marketing options? Marketing is not unethical. The guidelines from the AVMA concerning marketing for advertising are provided below.

Advertising

Without written permission from the AVMA Executive Board, no member or employee of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) shall use the AVMA name or logo in connection with the promotion or advertising of any commercial product or service.

Advertising by veterinarians is ethical when there are no false, deceptive, or misleading statements or claims. A false, deceptive, or misleading statement or claim is one which communicates false information or is intended, through a material omission, to leave a false impression.

Testimonials or endorsements are advertising, and they should comply with the guidelines for advertising. In addition, testimonials and endorsements of professional products or services by veterinarians are considered unethical unless they comply with the following:

- 1) The endorser must be a bonafide user of the product or service. There must be adequate substantiation that the results obtained by the endorser are representative of what veterinarians may expect in actual conditions of use. Any financial, business, or other relationship between the endorser and the seller of a product or service must be fully disclosed.
- 2) When reprints of scientific articles are used with advertising, the reprints must remain unchanged, and be presented in their entirety. The principles that apply to advertising, testimonials, and endorsements also apply to veterinarians communications with their clients.
- 3) Veterinarians may permit the use of their names by commercial enterprises (e.g. pet shops, kennels, farms, feedlots) so that the enterprises can advertise under veterinary supervision, only if they provide such supervision.

The policies on veterinary ethics can be reviewed at <http://www.avma.org/issues/policy/ethics.asp>.

There are misconceptions in the medical field that marketing to patients is prohibited by HIPPA rules. For purposes of HIPAA, marketing is defined as “a communication about a product or service, a purpose of which is to encourage recipients of the communication to purchase or use the product or service, subject

to certain limited exceptions.” Under this general rule, a healthcare provider must obtain a patient’s authorization to use or disclose protected health information for marketing communications (45 CFR 164.501(1)).

Although we are not guided by HIPPA rules in veterinary medicine, obtaining authorization for e-mail communication is called “permission based” marketing. If you are not collecting e-mail addresses at the time of veterinary service in your practice, now is the time to start. Almost all practice management software has fields for at least one if not many e-mail addresses. Ask your clients if they would like to be included in e-mail and newsletter communications.

The Direct Marketing Association serves organizations that market directly to the consumer. The American Medical Association does not have ethical guidelines pertaining to direct marketing to patients so the authors of “Marketing to Patients” in the *Journal of Academic and Business Ethics* suggest following the AMA code of ethics.

Marketers must do no harm. Marketers must foster truth and trust in the marketing system. Marketers must embrace, communicate and practice the fundamental ethical values that will improve consumer confidence in the integrity of the marketing exchange system. These basic values are intentionally aspirational and include honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, openness and citizenship.

The Direct Marketing Association has even more strict guidelines and includes a notice and an internet-based option for opting out of future e-mail solicitations. It is therefore not only ethical, but judicious, to adopt an ‘opt in’ strategy for medically-related online marketing strategies (Gray & Christiansen, 2009, p. 75).

Investigate options through your practice management software for exporting e-mail addresses and using services to send these e-mails such as www.constantcontact.com or www.vetstreet.com.

Did you know that with Butler Schein Animal Health’s DVM Manager, you can utilize the Marketing and Data Query feature to create targeted e-mail and mail marketing campaigns? For example, you may want to promote a Dental Special and this is the perfect way to identify those clients who may have never had a dental procedure completed on their animal. DVM Manager comes with a small package of marketing queries or you can contact our Customer Support Department at (800) 827-2243 and let them know what you are trying to accomplish. We now have over 100 marketing queries available.

Gray, D. M., & Christiansen, L. (2009). *Marketing to Patients: a legal and ethical perspective. Journal of Academic and Business Ethics*, 69-78.

Harris Interactive (2007). *Harris Poll Shows Number of “Cyberchondriacs” – Adults Who Have Ever Gone Online for Health Information— Increases to an Estimated 160 Million Nationwide, The Harris Poll #76, July 31.*

Hoorigan, J. B. (2009). *Broadband adoption and use in america (Working paper series no 1). Retrieved from Federal Communications Commission: www.broadband.gov.*