

Internal marketing and how it can make or break marketing projects

Frank O'Sullivan, MVB, MRCVS

INTRODUCTION

Internal marketing refers to the process of motivation and empowering the employees of a veterinary practice to work as a team for the overall wellbeing of the clients, their animals, and the veterinary practice itself.

Many veterinary practices attempt to promote and market existing and new products and services to clients and customers, but do all employees 'sing from the same hymn sheet'. Has your veterinary practice a strategy to help employees focus on the alignment of the practice organisational goals?

VETERINARY AND FARMING DEMOGRAPHICS

In veterinary practices, traditionally, the business model is not focused on 'telling and selling' but rather building positive relationships with clients where veterinary services add value to peoples lives, independent of purchase.

In Ireland, the numbers of veterinary practices are relatively stable at 660, and there are approximately 1,300 vets in practice. Farm animal practices currently serve Irish farmers in a relatively positive agri-trading environment. Food Harvest 2020 provides ambitious milestones for success in agriculture hoping to increase food exports to €12bn and primary output to €6bn per annum. The current success in agri-business is founded with farm produce as the raw ingredient. Our international customers are ever more aware of the need for premium animal health, welfare and food safety pre-farm gate. Despite excellent farm and agri-food exports and a positive outlook, the marketing ethos of Irish veterinary practices remain subdued. Traditionally, vets in practice had superfluous clinical and obstetrical work in the spring, and state regulatory TB testing and meat inspection duties provided turnover and income during the summer and autumn months. Thus, the typical farm animal practitioner really felt no need for marketing campaigns, as there was always plenty to do.

Small, family-run farms with an older farmer owner demographic did not demand herd health services and, accordingly, opportunities in fertility, herd health, reducing SCC and calf health were ignored by most veterinary practices.

In recent times, that has all changed, a reduction in TB and brucellosis testing, together with changing EU food legislation and reduction in meat inspection fees means

that regular income from government services is falling. Back on the farm, herds are expanding in size but the number of herds are reducing so efficiency is the order of the day. The traditional clinical work is disappearing both because of increased education of the farming body towards disease prevention and better highly skilled farm management.

THE INTERFACE

Marketing herd health plans is now imperative for veterinary practice survival. However, lack of internal marketing is the most common reason for failure of external marketing and why good ideas fail to come to fruition.

In the *Veterinary Ireland Journal*, February 2013, in an article 'Marketing Herd Health for beef and suckler herds' it describes the need for a number of pre-requisites, in particular that every member of the practice team should buy into the 'herd health' concept or at least refer marketing opportunities to the other key herd health personnel in the practice.

Attempts at internal marketing may be frustrated where administrative or veterinary staff feel they are already too busy to take on the extra work that successful marketing may bring in. Therefore, a farmer query to the practice concerning herd infertility may elicit a brief dismissive response and miss an opportunity to promote fertility scanning, metabolic profiles, or nutritional assessment. Instead the failure of some practice members to support the practice mission means the farmer is advised the 'let the bull out' and all problems will be solved. Opportunity lost! Similarly discontent may be evident when different pricing structures are applied.

Managing change is always challenging and many traditional practice owners associate preventative vaccines and medicines for the reduction of the clinical workload. They are slow to engage with herd health, especially if this means adoption of new technology. New initiatives by the younger vets are often frustrated by a lack of senior support, lack of financial funding or personnel endorsement. In this instance, lack of internal marketing effectively kill off projects and lowers team moral.

PERSONALITY PROFILING AND MOTIVATIONS

In our practice, we conducted a survey on factors affecting motivation and the results were both unpredictable and

amazing, in that nearly all staff listed job satisfaction near the top together with the need for challenges at work and recognition for a job well done. Salary and financial goals were well down the list.

Our interpretation of this information is that all members of staff were very keen to a) understand what the goals/targets/key projects of the practice are and b) they have a need to contribute to development and implementation of these projects. This demonstrates that understanding and contributing to various projects enhances job satisfaction and promotes the success of these projects via positive internal marketing. Personality profiling of all staff members allowed individuals to understand their own and colleagues character and personality attributes and accordingly allocate them to appropriate different roles in the team. For example, why the accounting secretary just loves the analytic and detail approach, why some staff really enjoy interacting with people and forming relationships, why some vets appreciate the organised approach, hate being late and love being organised and others embrace the challenge of tough physical battles and accept difficult encounters. Personality profiling allows us, during project management, to place our team for maximum effect. Practice projects accordingly are allocated to the personnel with the appropriate skills to enhance delivery, so, for example the reflective organised type vets lead on the herd health planning. Also, the vets and staff with excellent people skills meet and greet as part of practice open days, the accountancy accurate types arrange debt control and so on. However all must support each other as part of successful internal marketing. Practice projects and protocols are less effective when there is poor staff understanding of the objectives. Promoting dog food sales, pet insurance or indeed worm and flea treatments during consultations may be part of the practice wish list but it is not unusual to find that some vets are more successful than others in this regard. Similarly, with the promotion of services to clients that utilise x-ray and blood machines, unless there is an agreed internal marketing approach there will be significant variation in usage linked to individual members of staff. Effective internal marketing provides for facilitating 'collective positive peer pressure' for all in the practice to contribute to the particular campaign and have a positive effect on practice turnover.

Internal marketing, where all staff develop and agree practice protocols, will likely mitigate against excessive variation in approach in the small animal consult. New practice services, in particular, need focused internal marketing or they may be doomed to failure (or even internal sabotage!). In 2012, the State Laboratories ceased carrying out parasitological analysis and many farm animal practices have filled the void by establishing practice parasite labs. Vets, if practice internal marketing is working well, as part of their daily farm visits will consult and communicate with farmers, and will provide information about the practice parasite service and promote the sending of samples into the lab. On the other

hand, if one staff member, for example, in conversation with sheep farmers suggests dosing with a particular anthelmintic and that faecal testing is of little value, then this lack of consistency will soon filter through the farming population to the detriment of the veterinary practice parasite lab project.

Regular marketing meetings, with measurement and monitoring of what members of staff are using or promoting, will help keep the minds focused.

CONSISTENCY OF APPROACH

Cellcheck, is an Animal Health Ireland strategy charged with reducing somatic cell counts in Ireland where in 2009, one fifth of herds bulk milk screens were over 400,000 cells/ml. The technical know-how is well established for reducing SCC, but previous efforts to lower SCC have been frustrated by inconsistency in messages and approach. The farming community sensed this disparity in recommendations which were often influenced by advice prompting commercial product sales and accordingly farmers with SCC problems tended to 'cherry pick' pieces of (often contradictory) advice that suited them. They were looking for that 'golden nugget' to reduce SCC. This segmented approach nearly always failed.

Cellcheck, considering this lack of consistency, following a successful model used in Australia ('Countdown Downunder') focused on: 1) establishing best science for reducing SCC: and, 2) Focusing on 'internal marketing' among the service providers where vets, farm advisors, milking machine technicians went through several stages of training on how work as a multidisciplinary team, delivering a holistic common message with a best practice based approach.

Early results are very promising, and this example demonstrates that positive internal marketing within organisations is critical to project success. Sporting organisations also have developed very strong internal marketing to support key concepts. The Gaelic Athletic Association wished to change their goals for young players from 'winning competitions at all costs' to 'enjoy the game and build self esteem'. The method used was to bring all the key coaches to central conferences: a) to allow them design and tweak these new goals; and, b) decide how to collectively implement this behaviour change at pitch level. With this collective collaboration, some of the ideas were fantastic. Internal marketing was the key to organisational behaviour change.

A HIERARCHAL STRUCTURED APPROACH

In veterinary practice marketing, projects and services are necessary to support the business and to achieve overall goals. These goals may be to increase uptake of scanning and fertility service, encourage adoption of somatic cell count reduction programmes, avail of discounts for direct debit sign-up, or engage with dental care or canine weight management programmes. In the small animal practice, we become carers and take responsibility for the health of the pet. The family focus is often around these cats

and dogs and so many life lessons are learned during the relatively short life of the family pet, joy, fun, loss, bereavement and, to be honest, positive mental lift for all the family. The veterinary practice is the guardian of these cherished animals and internal and external marketing plans and projects revolves around all the veterinary team informing our clients that we care. Internal marketing is where we create a brand harmony within the practice, where all practice members understand what makes up the brand and have a shared belief about what the practice intends to be.

However, to achieve this, all employees must be allowed contribute to designing and enacting the values that make up the practice, and to set the goals to achieve this. Only then, will all take responsibility for actions to achieve the goals. Effectively, internal marketing necessitates internal communication of the veterinary practice strategy.

Veterinary practices however, need a mechanism to allow internal marketing be a constant part of that business rather than an adhoc approach that falters over time. See Fig 1.

A hierarchical structure is of value to achieve this and consists of the following;

1) Why – ‘what is the practice vision or mission’; the practice leaders/owners may design this,

but the overall mission statements needs to be shared and understood. For our farm animal practice our mission is ‘Healthy farms – healthy profit – healthy food’ and ‘to deliver services relevant to farmers for increased profit and peace of mind’.

2) What – covers the

objectives and goals i.e. it segments practice activities to set specific goals. For example, the practice might decide to provide and market lameness programmes, establish excellent credit control, adopt fertility management systems or train farmers in grassland management.

3) How – gets down to the details of how to achieve the what! i.e the actions needed, e.g. Identify five farms to apply a lameness programme, measure the base line productivity on these farms and carry out a lameness audit and mobility scoring.
4) Who– the staff or people

Pro-performance, choose Pro-Rumen

Pro-Rumen™

Pro-Rumen helps maintain healthy ruminal flora, keeping your cattle in peak performance and is an aid to normal rumen function post antimicrobial (antibiotic) therapy. Pro-Rumen can also be used after treatment of Ketosis, Coccidiosis, Digestive upsets, Scour, Metabolic disorders, Mastitis, Bloat, Ruminant stasis and Cereal/Protein Poisoning.

Pro-Rumen contains a unique formulation of vitamins and minerals together with active yeast which acts by supporting the activity of beneficial rumen bacteria.

Vetoquinol
Syrac & Filian

Please see website regularly. For further information please visit www.vetquinol.com



Fig 1: Making projects happen

responsible for these actions, (using Standard Operatory Procedures (SOPs) and specific job descriptions) i.e. the systems and tools needed to deliver. For example, schedule Tuesdays and Fridays for vet A and vet nurse B to arrange farm visits and design details of mobility scoring.

A hierarchy of questions emerge. In order to answer question 4 you need to answer question 3. The answer to question 3 you need to answer question 2, to answer question 2 you need to answer question 1. This pyramid starts with the why, ie the mission and vision.

This pyramid approach is a graphic representation of the practice strategic plan and by putting various elements of the strategic plan onto the pyramid allows staff to

contribute to the project whilst understanding the big picture. We use the pyramid to convey the plan with regular meetings, ensure external marketing as a positive support.

CONCLUSION

Internal marketing is much more than a support for marketing projects externally. It provides a mechanism where all staff get a chance to contribute to policy and its implementation, It increases self esteem and improves work motivation. Internal marketing is the gel that keeps practice together. The positive ideas coming through the internal marketing process will invigorate not only the employees but also the clients, the animals and the practice itself.

Reader Questions and Answers

1. **HERDS ARE EXPANDING IN SIZE BUT THE NUMBER OF HERDS ARE REDUCING WHAT IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY?**

- a) Speed
- b) Cost effectiveness
- c) Efficiency
- d) Accountability

2. **WHAT IS THE MOST COMMON REASON FOR FAILURE OF EXTERNAL MARKETING AND WHY GOOD IDEAS FAIL TO COME TO FRUITION?**

- a) Lack of funds
- b) Lack of staff
- c) Lack of internal marketing
- d) Lack of initiative

3. **IN VETERINARY PRACTICE MARKETING, WHAT IS NECESSARY TO SUPPORT THE BUSINESS AND TO ACHIEVE OVERALL GOALS?**

- a) People and funds
- b) Structures and plans
- c) Projects and services
- d) Support and leadership

4. **VETERINARY PRACTICES NEED A MECHANISM TO ALLOW INTERNAL MARKETING BE A CONSTANT PART OF THAT BUSINESS. A HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE IS OF VALUE TO ACHIEVE THIS AND CONSISTS OF THE FOLLOWING:**

- a) Why, when, where, who
- b) Why, what, where, when
- c) Why, what, how, who
- d) Why, when, what, where

ANSWERS: 1. C, 2. C 3. C, 4. C.