

Marketing small animal theriogenology services—One perspective

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Abstract

Once a decision is made to add small animal theriogenology services to a practice, marketing strategies must be developed and implemented to attract clients to the new services. Marketing strategies for the niche market of theriogenology include start-up marketing methods, referral programs, internal marketing, and continued marketing. Marketing theriogenology services is a dynamic, ongoing process that never ends.

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1. Introduction

Marketing small animal theriogenology services presents a unique challenge. From alternative medicine to orthopedics, services offered by virtually every other veterinary specialty or special interest category can be consumed by the entire population of pet owners, without regard to the pet's age, breed (or non-breed) or reproductive status. In contrast, theriogenology services are needed by a relatively small demographic of dog and cat owners—those with intact animals. The vast majority of consumers of theriogenology services are breeders of purebred dogs and cats.

Marketing strategies commonly implemented for other veterinary specialties and special interest practitioners are not often useful as practice builders for theriogenology services. This epitomizes the concept of *niche marketing*. Niche marketing implies isolating a need that others in practice do not specifically address, and applying oneself to exploiting that small segment of

the market [1]. This allows streams of revenue to be brought in to existing practices with static growth and also allows the establishment of new practices in apparently static markets. This paper presents an experiential perspective on marketing of theriogenology services.

2. Start-up marketing strategies

Once you decide to offer theriogenology services in your practice, one important task is to promote that aspect of your business. Start-up marketing strategies are employed for acquiring those all important first clients for your theriogenology services. The most effective start-up strategies are those that target the breeder client directly. For established general and referral practices in which theriogenology services are a new add-on category, the simplest method is to search the practice's existing database for breeder clients. You have already established credibility and satisfaction with these clients. Therefore, a short message, delivered by email or the postal service, is often effective.

One simple and inexpensive way to contact potential breeder clients is to speak at local and regional kennel

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club meetings. Kennel clubs, like most organizations, are always seeking interesting speakers. When you speak at the meeting, take full advantage of your “captive audience.” As the speaker, you have a superb opportunity to share your knowledge and establish credibility with a room full of potential clients. Go to every speaking engagement with an ample supply of business cards and practice brochures. After making first contact with a kennel club, a mailing list of their entire membership can usually be obtained. A direct mailing to the membership can be done to introduce yourself and provide detailed information regarding your theriogenology services.

Another marketing effort that targets breeder clients directly involves attending dog and cat shows. You can become involved in an official capacity by volunteering to serve as the show veterinarian if your hospital facility is located near the show site. Unofficially, it can be fun and rewarding to attend a show as a spectator where there is great opportunity to interact and pass out cards to the participants. Attending shows has another added benefit; it affords you, the service provider, a wonderful opportunity to gain insight into the breeder perspective.

One marketing strategy that has not worked well for me is setting up a booth at the show site. Booth space is available for rent at most shows. Although it seemed a productive way to educate and network to potential breeder clients, my booth was just one of many, and could not be set apart from the others nor be distinguished as professional. The vast majority of booth holders were vendors selling everything from food bowls to novelty items. Another detractor to the booth strategy was the demographic of the typical booth visitor. Throughout the day, most visitors were show spectators and not show participants, and most were owners of neutered pets. My potential clients, the dog owners and handlers, were totally involved in getting their dogs and themselves physically and mentally prepared to enter the show ring. Booth attendance by breeders was poor until late in the day. A final detractor was the feeling of being tied to the booth space, which prevented other types of casual interactions and networking.

In contrast, one very effective show-related marketing strategy is to introduce yourself and your theriogenology services by way of an announcement in the show catalog. Every show participant will acquire and refer to the show catalog long after the show is over. While blatant advertisement may be viewed as taboo, a professional announcement is often well received.

There are many other shows and events, predominated in attendance by breeders, in addition to the better known American Kennel Club (AKC) and Cat Fancier's

Association (CFA) conformation shows. These include United Kennel Club (UKC) and Canadian Kennel Club (CKC) conformation shows, and hunt tests, field trials, agility trials, herding trials, and schutshund events. Most have an associated show or event catalog. Attending these events can combine a practice building task with a fun outing for the family.

In addition to methods that target potential breeder clients directly, another start-up strategy is to build your professional colleague referral base. A letter announcing the addition of theriogenology services to your practice sent to area veterinary practices can be effective. Besides general practices, letters should also be sent to emergency clinics and referrals centers. Most referral centers do not have on staff a theriogenologist or even an internal medicine specialist with an interest in theriogenology.

Referrals from colleagues can be generated by attending and disseminating brochures at local, state and regional veterinary medical association meetings. A more effective strategy is to arrange to be a seminar speaker at a meeting or continuing education event. You do not have to be board certified to be a speaker. Contact the meeting or association organizers and ask for your name to be put on a speaker list. Be prepared with a list of seminar topics about which you feel comfortable to speak. Again, attend speaking engagements with an ample supply of business cards and practice brochures.

Most practices have a website. A well-developed and maintained website is particularly important when the clients who have need the services may reside beyond the boundaries of the geographical node for your general practice. Simply stated, there are not that many veterinarians who take a special interest in theriogenology. Your practice may be the closest theriogenology practice for clients living counties and even states away. Access to your practice via the internet may be the contact point of entry for a significant number of new clients. It is also helpful to have your practice listed on the websites of other relevant organizations. For example, a listing of affiliated veterinarians is listed on the websites for Veterinary Perinatal Specialties Inc. [<http://www.whelpwise.com>] and the American Kennel Club [<http://www.akc.org>], not to mention the Society for Theriogenology [<http://www.therio.org>] and the American College of Theriogenologists [<http://www.theriogenology.org>].

3. Referral programs

Once you have launched your theriogenology services and have generated even a small client base, then the recommendation of a satisfied client or

professional colleague is often the most effective way of bringing in new clients [2,3]. Prospective clients usually view recommendations from current clients as highly credible. For veterinary practices as a whole, referrals generate 53% of new clients [2]. This number is likely even higher for the niche market of theriogenology serviced. Referrals are your single most important source of new clients [2]. For other veterinary disciplines, referrals are generated primarily from area practitioners who do not offer the specialized services needed for their clients. For those offering theriogenology services, referrals from colleagues, while invited and appreciated, comprise but a small proportion of referrals. The majority of new clients are referred for services from existing breeder clients.

Referral programs reward clients who refer others. One proven but simple tool is to send a thank-you note to communicate your sincere appreciation. A sample note might say:

“Thank you! We send you our sincere thanks for referring Mrs. Smith to our hospital. We appreciate the trust and confidence you’ve shown in us by telling your breeder colleagues and friends about our theriogenology services. We hope you and all our clients will continue to be well satisfied as we continue in our commitment to provide the highest quality care in a compassionate manner.”

In addition to thank you notes, sending highly valued clients a gift is a time-tested method to promote referrals. One tangible and memorable gift is a coffee mug featuring your practice name, logo and phone number. The mug is filled with flowers and sent to the client at his or her work address. Because the clients receive the gift at work, co-workers ask who sent the flowers and the mug will likely remain at the workplace to serve as a daily reminder of that very special “thank you”. You can also send clients other tangible items such as refrigerator magnets, pet photo frames, leashes and collars, movie passes and restaurant certificates.

There are, according to experts, referral gift programs that do not work. Coupons for services (e.g. referral thank you coupons), credits on accounts and discounted services do not work [2]. Less than 50% of clients redeem referral coupons or discounts. These referral programs may harm the clients’ perception of value with the notion that the ability to “give me a discount now implies that you are overcharging me at other times”. Service discounts, coupons and credits do not give the client immediate gratification. If they use them at all, they may wait months to redeem your “gift.” It is best to avoid referral programs that may harm the client’s perception of value for your professional services.

Another proven referral method is to give every team member a business card. This method works well in all service areas of your practice. For example, I have one full-time technician whose work effort is devoted totally to theriogenology service. She has her own business cards with her title imprinted as “theriogenology technician”. She is also a reputable dog breeder and has single-handedly generated several new clients by way of referral.

4. Internal marketing

Internal marketing takes place within the walls of your hospital. Internal marketing is a discovery process for your staff [4]. Any marketing effort must be sold to the staff members before the client walks through the door. It takes longer than simply telling the staff what to do, but it also reinforces client benefit into your staff members; your practice is the ultimate beneficiary. Training clients requires leading by example. For example, consider a practice that wants to increase its sales of nutritional products. Even after a nutritional training seminar sales did not increase. However, neither the veterinarian nor his staff members were feeding the premium food products to their own pets. A decision was made to have everyone in the practice feed the premium pet food to their pets. Everyone saw the benefit in their own pets, and nutritional sales increased by 19% the first quarter after the change had been made [4].

Even though every staff member does not have an intact, breeding animal as a pet, the concept of internal marketing can still be implemented to increase theriogenology revenue. We must sell ourselves and our staff members on a product or service before we set about selling our clients. I will again refer to our full-time theriogenology technician who is also a well-respected breeder with more than 20 years of experience. She is enthusiastic about our theriogenology services. She understands the why of the outcome, not just the dollars generated from the sale. She also walks in the shoes of our breeder clients, has immediate credibility with them, and whole-heartedly supports any recommendations for products or services that I make to the client.

5. Ongoing marketing

Marketing by definition is an activity that never ends [5]. It is not something to be done at the launch of your theriogenology practice and then simply forgotten. Constant attention to providing the best service, keeping clients well satisfied with those services and rewarding referrals from loyal clients all contribute to the dynamic

process of marketing. I charge you to approach the task with enthusiasm and enjoy the journey.

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