

Do More With Less

Strategies for your slow times help nurture talent, unearth new efficiencies and bond your best clients to your practice.

■ By Roxanne Hawn

Michael Grant, a certified veterinary practice manager (CVPM), hospital administrator and veterinary practice consultant, remains unwilling to mire his practice team at Evergreen Veterinary Hospital in Centerville, Ohio, in the economic doom and gloom. "If you have all sunny days, you end up with a desert. If you have all rainy days, you end up with a swamp," mused Dr. Grant. "On one side you have lots of money and no time, and on the other side you have lots of time and no money. So, what you want to have is a balance between times when [you're] really busy and times when [you] can invest in the practice."

Even practices weathering the downturn likely have an excess of openings in the schedule these days. Now, say experts, is the perfect time to regroup, refocus and refresh activities practice-wide.

Training and CE

Dr. Grant uses slower times each year or within bigger economic cycles to up training and continuing education efforts, such as sending staff to nearby veterinary conferences, where a different person attends each day of the conference then reports back, and inviting suppliers and other experts in for lunch-and-

learn sessions on new products, client education and technical know-how.

Now is also a good time to run team members through any DVD, CD-ROM or online training for computer systems, equipment or protocols that you didn't have time to before.

"We're going to make money when we can make money," Dr. Grant explained. "When we can't, we're going to invest in the hospital. We're going to invest in our staff. We're going to do the things we have time to do."

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Ramp Up Client Contact/Service

Katherine Dodds, RVT, CVPM, PHR, and president and consultant with interFace Veterinary HR Systems in Appleton, Wisconsin, suggests using the extra time to focus on client service. Such efforts offer a good opportunity to bring in a bit more revenue by rounding up overdue procedures and also help build client bonds to the practice.

However, you can't pay extra attention to your clients now and then drop that ball when work picks up again. This is why Dodds recommends absorbing the work into your ex-

isting team today, then putting or hiring staff into these high-touch positions permanently when the economy improves.

Make stellar service your norm:

- Make follow-up phone calls after a new diagnosis, recent procedure, diet change, medication addition or "just because"
- Contact clients whose pets are overdue for services or procedures
- Spend more time during appointments on client education and bonding
- Dedicate yourself to making sure clients

get everything they need before, during and after appointments

The trick to doing this well in tough economic times is to monitor and control any judgments about what clients can and cannot afford to do. "I don't think you can have those kinds of negative thoughts and not have it affect the way you behave," said Dodds.

Instead, focus on education and empathy so that when clients can afford your recommendations they'll come to you. Dodds said clients

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Critical Numbers and Personalities

Gary Erickson, DVM, MS, of Wyndfall Financial, is loathe to offer one-size-fits-all recession survival advice. "If you put [people] on the wrong diet, it's more likely they're going to fail," he said. "Put them on a diet that's more conducive to their personality; that's more of my personal philosophy – to approach each practice individually."

When pressed, however, he divided veterinarians into two camps:

- Newer practitioners who are more technical
- More experienced ones who are more intuitive

Before you assume one is better than the other, know this: Both sides can end up with issues in their critical financial numbers.

Technically minded practitioners often get caught up in new equipment and new procedures without planning for a return on assets. In other words, they don't know how many procedures at what fee it takes to support the new equipment or procedure.

The best solution to a problem with the return-on-asset number is to run a few if-then scenarios – if you do X of these procedures per month, you need to charge Y.

More intuitive practitioners, on the other hand, may see their number of transactions or their average transaction charges fall because they're consciously (or not) letting staff help clients too much over the phone or dropping charges here and there themselves in an effort to give clients a break.

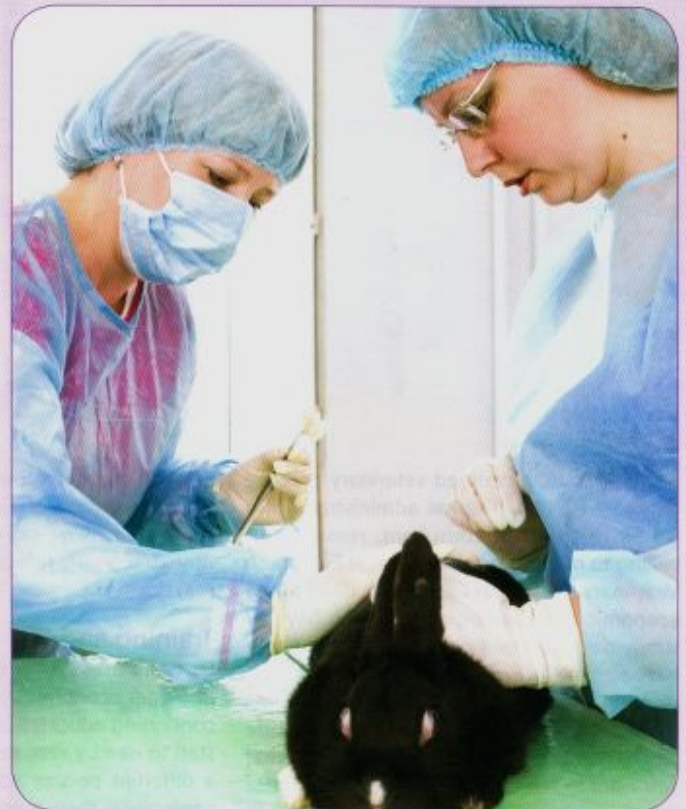
To explore and potentially solve this conundrum, Dr. Erickson suggested listening to responses to incoming calls to see if staff members are turning calls into appointments or not. He also said that occasional file audits can show when doctors note procedures in the chart but the fees for the procedures never make it to the client invoice.

For example, you may decide you want to start charging for cleaning ears or clipping toenails during an exam if you haven't been doing so. In these cases, Dr. Erickson said, "Charge something – \$3 or \$5. It's managing expectations."

If you'd rather avoid the impression of nickel and diming clients, Dr. Erickson recommended using a catch-all "professional services" line

item. "It's a composite fee that can be adjusted accordingly to bring the average transaction fee closer into alignment," he said.

Erickson pointed out that once you know your critical numbers and how your style may affect them, then, "A ratio or a number is all that is, a ratio or a number. Now "you have to find out what's feeding that number."



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may pop in at a low-cost vaccination clinic down the road, but you want them to always think of you as their "veterinary home" for bigger pet care issues.

Catch Up and Reach Out

Dodds also recommends tackling those facility and equipment maintenance tasks that never seem to get done when the whole team is running from one appointment or surgery to another. The practice to-do list likely includes scrubbing cage doors, cleaning out and organizing storage areas, and revising or updating client education materials.

Community outreach is another good use of down time, according to Dodds. Maybe you invite more Scout troops in for tours. Maybe your technicians give career day or show-and-tell presentations at school. Maybe the whole team staffs a booth or takes part in a local pet event.

Internal Marketing

Peter Weinstein, DVM, MBA, is the executive director of the Southern California Veterinary Medical Association. He pointed out that the last 10 years of "gravy time" meant most practices needed little, if any, marketing.

Often, however, marketing focuses on luring new clients to plug any leaks from current client exits. "I think the current environment from a quality organizational standpoint is to focus on your existing clients and hold onto them for dear life," said Dr. Weinstein. "I don't think we can afford to capture new clients when it's much less expensive to retain existing clients. When I talk about marketing, I'm talking more on the client retention side, not the client acquisition side."

Dr. Weinstein notes that marketing, even to people who already know you, is a multiple touch effort. A single effort or campaign isn't enough. Research shows it takes between seven and 12 contacts before most customers take action. "I think we need to look at all media," said Weinstein. "That's written media in terms of direct mail, and electronic media in terms of email and e-newsletters. I think we need to use the telephone more in outreach to clients. Let your clients know how much you care."

He cautioned, however, against using such calls for purely "sales" purposes. Instead, Dr.

Weinstein suggested delivering client education information to your most valuable clients – those 20% who bring in 98% of practice income.

Boldness, Not Ballast

Dr. Weinstein acknowledged that tighter budgets may mean layoffs in some practices, but he pointed out, "It's a great time to take your staff to a higher level...to get training done...to work on efficiencies... to see how effective and efficient you can be with fewer people."

This includes cross-training staff to help out where needed, raising expectations, training on teamwork and client service and developing practice efficiencies.

While Dr. Weinstein advised practices to focus on valuable clients and valuable staff, this doesn't mean you simply "duck and cover." You spend your time and energy (and money)

on the clients and staff members who make your practice what it is. "Get the best people in place. Get the best systems in place," he said. "Stop dealing and living in chaos, so when the world rights itself, you're in a better position than [those] who have been bemoaning and whining and complaining and cutting."

"More businesses fail from failing to take action than from taking the wrong action," said Dr. Weinstein. "More businesses fail from inertia than from moving forward and having to regroup."

Use these down times to try new things. Rather than an economic crisis, imagine a gauntlet of leadership at your feet. "Now is a great time to try different things," said Dr. Weinstein. "I think it's a great time to create more leaders within your practice and on your staff by giving them more freedom and flexibility to make clients happy." ■

