

VetSCOPE NEWS

Move It

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Moving with the Times

VetSCOPE talks to Eamonn Moore, Blackrock Veterinary Clinic, Dublin about moving premises

Whether to move premises or not raises questions for many veterinary practitioners. Is it better to sit tight and work with your existing facilities, or move and risk disturbing your client base? Will the financial investment necessary to renovate or build new premises be met by a healthy increase in practice turnover? Although moving can seem a major undertaking – both in terms of time and money – it means the expansion of your business is less likely to be compromised by a lack of space or facilities. So, is this the right time to make that move?

Eamonn Moore, Blackrock Veterinary Clinic, has moved premises in the last 12 months and he says that business has gone from strength to strength since. Now, at the start of 2009, he says: "Genuinely, we've never been busier."

RENOVATION PROJECT

Eamonn, a 1991 UCD graduate, first came to Blackrock, Co. Dublin in 1997, having decided to follow a companion animal career. A practice on Carysfort Avenue owned by vet Val Demery came up for sale and although the building itself was, according to Eamonn, "very small



and rundown", it allowed him to build a healthy client base. A decade later and Eamonn was primed to move. In April 2008, following a 12-month renovation project, Blackrock Veterinary Clinic reopened in an old schoolmaster's cottage in Stillorgan Park. The building was

"The transfer of clinical notes, records and accounting information from one practice to the next was seamless. Being computerised meant that moving all the information was not an issue"

a "complete wreck" and had to be completely refurbished inside but this was a positive for Eamonn: "In hindsight it was a godsend that the building we moved to was almost derelict on the inside as, although we weren't allowed to touch the outside, it meant we could rebuild the whole interior." The new building is, according to Eamonn, "absolutely wonderful" and now with a

part-time veterinary assistant and two full-time veterinary nurses Eamonn is rushed off his feet. He says: "It has gotten busier and busier since we moved. We've been able to do more, we have better equipment and more space, and there's also the increased visibility of the clinic. In the old surgery we weren't turning away work, but we weren't taking on as much as we could. We didn't have the space or the manpower."

But, what of that all-important transition between premises? "The move itself was fine," says Eamonn, "as we'd planned it to a 'T'." The old practice was closed on a Saturday and the new one opened on a Monday. "One of the biggest concerns on opening morning was whether the computers were going to work. This was the only thing we couldn't test fully and there was a little anxiety." Fortunately, help was on hand from Lawler

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Welcome

An astute businessman once said

"Never waste the opportunity of a good recession."

This is the perfect time to streamline your business practices and prepare for growth. From reinforcing the quality of your client-practice relationships to tightening up accounts and payment systems, now is the time to search for any weak areas.

In this edition, we look at how VetSCOPE can help you in several areas, including customer relationship management (CRM), using SMS messaging to increase customer service and minimising bad debt. We also talk to Eamonn Moore, Blackrock Veterinary Clinic, who has been "busier than ever" this January and extend our warm thanks for his time and input.

Stephen Lawler

**Stephen Lawler
Lawler Developments Ltd**



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Developments – Eamonn has been a VetSCOPE client for around five years – who were able to give technical support during the changeover. Eamonn says: “We got advice from Stephen [Lawler] on what we needed to do with the new cabling and, on the Monday, everything worked like he said it would.” Because of this, the transfer of clinical notes, records and accounting information from one practice to the next was seamless. “Being computerised meant that moving all the information was not an issue,” says Eamonn.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICE EQUIPMENT

Eamonn is a keen advocate of practice management software. He says that computers are an essential piece of veterinary equipment. Eamonn likes to be able to access clinical information easily. He says: “One of the absolute best things about computerised records is information availability – being able to pull up notes and see that x-rays have been

taken and where are they stored. When they have been scanned onto the system, I can view them directly.” The software also allows him to streamline the business side of his practice and keep abreast of current – and rapidly changing – veterinary legislation.

Eamonn comments: “It’s almost impossible to be compliant, say for animal remedies regulations and other new legislation, without a good computerised system.”

Eamonn also says that it’s important to use one’s software package to its fullest potential. With VetSCOPE, this has been easy to do. “Currently I think we use our software fairly well, but [in 2009] we’ll start to use it more for stock control. We haven’t been using this facility, but in the new premises the software



Eamonn Moore working the keys

will make it easier for us to identify extra or unwanted stock on the shelves.” Commenting on his VetSCOPE system, Eamonn says, “The more and more we use it, the more and more it would be very hard to do without it.” It seems that making the move to new premises can provide a boost to practice income and success will come in the details: good planning, accessing support and using existing practice management tools to their fullest potential.

Practical Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

“If you build it they will come” they say but when it comes to veterinary practice, attracting, wooing and retaining clients often demands a significant amount of effort. The technical term for these activities is ‘customer relationship management’ or CRM. Employing CRM in a practice environment means keeping track of, and using, contact between practice and client to strengthen the relationship between the two.

At its most basic, CRM involves being able to communicate in a friendly and effective manner with your clients whether face-to-face, over the phone or by other means. It is also important that a record can be kept of what is said, when and by whom. This can be difficult in the busy clinic, especially when there are several staff members and a multitude of clients to take into consideration.



This is where CRM software, a time and energy saver for practice staff, comes into play. By allowing information about clients and client interactions to be entered, stored and accessed by all veterinary staff, CRM ensures that the practice has a unified, team approach to each client.

INBUILT CRM

VetSCOPE has an excellent inbuilt CRM facility which allows veterinary staff to build a comprehensive history of client-practice interactions over time.

The software has a full suite of letter writing, email, fax and SMS features which makes it easy to make contact with clients. All of these methods of communication can be recorded by date and time which gives structure and coherence to the stored information. In addition, VetSCOPE has designated areas where details of client responses, e.g., email or phone, can be recorded. VetSCOPE’s SMS facility is a new and particularly useful way of sending out quick, cost-effective and client-focused messages (see also ‘Keep and grow client service with SMS’ in this newsletter).

Although computer records cannot replace good verbal communication between staff members, word of mouth alone can be ineffective.

In a busy practice environment, forgetting the smallest pieces of information (‘He ate this morning’/‘Can you ring me before noon?’) can cause the

biggest headaches. Also, new or locum staff will not have all the ‘inside information’ on clients and this can be a major point of communication breakdown. VetSCOPE allows storage of current and historic client information and thus, from the client’s point of view, there is continuity of service. CRM also makes it easy to stay on top of ordering: if a client has ordered a product, the software can be used to remind practice staff to contact him or her once it has come in. A further advantage of computerised CRM systems is that they remove the need for post-it notes, scraps of paper and scribbled messages, which can look unprofessional.

TWO-WAY ADVANTAGES

The advantages of customer relationship management are two-way. As well as improving service to the client, CRM is also a valuable mine of information for the veterinary practice. Through CRM software, veterinary staff can

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Stephen Lawler, Ros Devereux (VetSCOPE user) and Clare Lawler at the 2008 Veterinary Ireland Equine Conference

VetSCOPE: "Please visit our stand"

A busy veterinary exhibition was held to the backdrop of the 2008 Veterinary Ireland Equine Group Conference, which took place at the Lyrath Estate, Kilkenny from November 6-9. Clare Lawler, Lawler Developments,

commented that such exhibitions were an important point of contact to meet busy veterinary professionals. She said: "Veterinary exhibitions provide a forum for us to meet our valued customers. They also enable potential customers the opportunity to discover the

benefits of VetSCOPE and what we can do for them. Our customer base is representative of every element and sector of the veterinary profession and we aim to support the respective veterinary exhibitions."

Clare and her business partner Stephen would love to talk to

you. Clare said: "Please contact us or visit our stand at the next veterinary exhibition. We work with over 150 veterinary practices across Ireland to reduce costs, drive efficiencies and deliver better business. Talk to us, we can do the same for you."

Keep and grow client service with SMS

From the handset which goes off during a consult, to the dreaded ring tone of the duty mobile, phones can sometimes seem more of a hindrance than a help in veterinary practice. But what many practitioners don't realise is that mobile phone technology can be a valuable – and often underutilised – business tool.

SMS (short message service) is a way of keeping in touch with your clients that's cheaper and faster than the post. It can free staff from some of the more laborious reception tasks and, if you harness it to generate consult reminders, it might just revolutionise your appointment diary.

SMS AS A SERVICE

The key to using SMS messaging successfully is to employ it as a means of communicating with your client rather than as a blanket marketing tool. Stephen Stynes, Chairman of the Irish Direct Marketing Association and Managing Director of DirectBrand, a direct and digital marketing agency, explains: "The

secret of any successful business is how well relationships are managed with customers. In services business, keeping good communication with customers is the best way to keep and grow those customers. SMS is one of the simplest, most cost-effective ways to do that, provided it is done in a well thought through manner."

Messages, Stynes advises, should specifically address clients' needs. "Your mobile phone is a very private tool. No one wants to be receiving messages that only serve to sell and drive someone's business. Texts, like phone calls, should be very specific to the recipient. If you are in any doubt simply ask yourself: if you were the customer, would receiving this text add any value to you or would it simply be a distraction?"

In veterinary practice the prime role for SMS messaging is in sending reminders about appointments, say repeat consults or booster vaccinations. VetSCOPE has an excellent SMS text facility which allows text messages to be sent directly from the computer to a mobile phone. This allows the practice to inform a client on the progress of their pet after

surgery, or to remind them of a forthcoming consultation or vaccination appointment, or even bank holiday opening hours.

PRIVACY

Attention to client privacy is also an important consideration. It is essential that you have express permission from the client in order to communicate with them via SMS. Just because you have their mobile phone number does not mean that you can use this legally to send texts. Stynes says: "In order to ensure that you are compliant, include a section in your registration forms that offers to contact customers with check up reminders and any other services that may be relevant. They must tick the box giving you permission to message via SMS." Consider advertising the scheme in your waiting room and adding a text 'opt in' to forms and records.

For more information on the VetSCOPE SMS messaging service, go to www.vetscope.ie. Remember, SMS messaging is a cheap and efficient 'added value' service which tells clients that their time, and business, is important.

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Debt control: Cash is King

One of the constant challenges in maintaining a healthy practice cash flow is client debt. Here, we look at ways of minimising this practice cost.

A good starting point is to look at the accounting system that you use. Traditionally, many veterinary clients, particularly farm animal and equine, have outstanding accounts with their veterinary practice. Vets often see that they have little choice here: "It's what we've always done" or "If I don't offer this facility someone else will". The reality is that if a large bill is allowed to accumulate on a client's account there is the very real chance that it will go unpaid. Research carried out by credit control agencies shows that the longer the balance on an account is due, the less likely – statistically speaking – that it will be paid. Also, when you consider that every euro on a client's account is a euro missing from your bank balance, the drawbacks of this system are obvious.

The current economic climate provides an excellent justification to negotiate a more mutually beneficial payment system with your clients. Recent research revealed by Dublin City Enterprise Board shows that many small businesses (78% of those sampled) are considering adopting cash up-front payment systems. If this seems too big a leap then encouraging clients to subscribe to a monthly direct debit system or pay a deposit and regular smaller payments are halfway-house measures. The key here is to get your client into a regular payment habit and away from the mindset of 'the vet can afford to wait'. Other measures described by the Dublin City

Enterprise Board report, that you may want to consider, are early payment discounts and credit checks on new clients.

SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS

To minimise client debt, it is also important to use your practice management system to its fullest potential. VetSCOPE provides at-a-glance accounting which can print up-to-date statements and invoices to provide clear,



unambiguous information to eliminate client queries or excuses for non-payment of a bill. In addition, VetSCOPE software allows you to send out bills regularly and on time.

Practice software is also the easiest way to keep track of late payments and outstanding accounts. For example, VetSCOPE's integrated accounts module allows you to record billing information for both clients and suppliers, whilst generating a series of financial reports. Account balances, aged balances, statements and top accounts all give valuable information on the status of client/supplier accounts and, consequently, the practice's cash flow position. Taking aged balance reports for example, these can highlight accounts where money has been outstanding or overdue for a period of 30, 60 or 90 days. They also show when the customer last paid and the amount they paid. With

An easy way to get started with targeted campaigns is to use the 'Category' function in VetSCOPE. Through this feature, it is possible to create defined categories such as 'Puppy Parties', 'Diet Clinics', or even 'Christmas Card List'. These lists are good ways of targeting specific practice services or facilities towards selected audiences of clients.

CRM, such as the facility offered by VetSCOPE, is a valuable tool which can be used to strengthen the client-practice relationship. Used effectively, it can retain clients, build customer loyalty and provide the customer with a better, more focused service.

VetSCOPE, aged balance information is also available on the handheld device, so accounting information can be accessed on-farm.

Use VetSCOPE's built in direct debit facility to electronically receive payments from your client's accounts into your account. Look at charging interest on overdue accounts. It is generally accepted that charging interest works in most cases but not every case and is a worthwhile exercise.

In addition, a credit limit feature is a recent introduction on the VetSCOPE system. When a new invoice is created, a pop-up window appears on an overdue account: this shows the amount that the client has exceeded his or her defined credit limit. This allows the veterinary professional to make an informed decision on whether or not to put a stop on this client's account.

MAKING THE CALL

Finally, when it comes to debt control, a defining moment is asking a client – whether in person or over the phone – to settle an account. There are four steps that can help you to 'make that call'. These are: 1) prepare – use your VetSCOPE records to get background information and practise dealing with excuses; 2) use a positive and friendly approach – this is more likely to help you achieve the result you want; 3) explain firmly that, although you value the client's business, it is important that he or she can meet you in settling the account (if there are genuine financial difficulties, ask the client how much they can afford to pay and when); and 4) keep a record of what was said during the conversation and what agreement you came to, and add this to your computerised notes.

The main concept to keep in mind is that cash is king and, particularly in a recession, it is vital to keep it in your pocket rather than someone else's.

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be proactive in marketing their services to clients. A prime example is the powerful search facility provided by VetSCOPE that enables the practice to identify animals or clients via different parameters. If, say, you wanted to target a population of animals for a new diet club, or invite owners of geriatric pets to a 'Looking after your 7+ pet' night, this is an extremely useful tool. The search will generate a list of clients that may be interested in the service and this list can be used to generate letters or emails to owners.

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