

### 1.00 Fitting into the internet

Far too many practice web sites have been created with little thought being given to how they are supposed to serve either the needs of the practice or the needs of the visitors they hope to attract.

In this section we will look at the potential benefits of having a practice web site and consider how your practice web site fits into the billions of pages on the Internet. We will investigate how potential clients find your details and consider the ways that your practice might benefit from their visits. We will look at the kind of content you need to put online to realise those benefits.

### 1.01 Just a simple web site . .

Once upon a time we volunteered to design a bit of a web site for our local veterinary practice. This has one and a half surgeries and three and a half vets. How much work could that be we thought!

We started by analysing existing vet web sites. We wanted to see how they worked, how they were put together and the way they looked. To be honest, we were looking for an example of excellence among them so that we could clone it and save ourselves hours of work!

We went looking for Veterinary Web sites. This was 1999. There weren't very many and some were surprisingly difficult to find. There aren't that many more in 2004. We persevered until we had built up a reasonable collection. The first thing we wanted to assess was the probable return on investment that each site was bringing to its practice.

Some sites had clearly had a lot of expensive professional time spent on their creation. Others looked like the hobby of an interested vet. One or two looked like they'd been put together by chance as the practice cat walked across the keyboard. Investment ranged from tuppence to thousands of pounds.

What were these practices expecting from their web site? Did they want to improve animal care in their area? Sell more products? Attract new clients? Encourage existing clients to take extra services? In most cases it was very difficult to see any potential returns for the practice.

Estimating positive returns was easy. Almost universally zero. When sites had been online for a while there was a general feel of those piles of expensively produced practice brochures that gather dust in an office cupboard. Out of date information, pictures of staff long gone. Many sites proudly displayed a label "Site last updated" with a date two years or more before. The content was generally thin. You could read every page and come away with nothing more than the phone number and the post code (though some sites even failed to show one or other of these).

The clearest returns were negative. Some sites were so badly implemented that the lack of professionalism in their design could only suggest a similar lack of professionalism to be possible in the surgery. Today, with many

more visitors having experience online, the effect of a poorly designed site has become more pronounced. People "know" what a professionally designed site look like and they are much less forgiving of an amateurishly produced site attempting to promote a professional service.

We found a handful of exceptions. Practices where someone, generally a principal, had discovered both an interest and an aptitude for promoting their surgery online. The most effective of these combined an enthusiasm for the internet with a clear parallel enthusiasm for the practice of veterinary arts.

We clearly weren't going to find an easy solution to designing this one little practice web site. We would have to do some work - rolling up our sleeves we started by considering who the site was going to serve.

### 1.02 Who is a practice web site for ?

Lets start by considering the visitors who are likely to come to a practice web site. Sort them into groups, try to define their needs and consider how best to serve them.

We could go on for page after page breaking possible visitors into smaller and smaller sub groupings - A Ford-full of drug company reps in this column. All the relations of the youngest trainee over there. We filled several notebooks with the exercise before concluding that there are three broad groups.

#### The rest

A large group as most of the online population of the world comes into this category. They may be perfectly presentable - or they may not - but they certainly aren't particularly profitable. The best way to impress them is to do a good job of serving the needs of the other two groups. "The Rest" may be safely ignored.

#### Potential clients

We are using "clients" here in a very broad sense. We include everyone who is likely to have a commercial or professional relationship with your surgery. This will include veterinary colleagues and companies looking to supply you with goods and services as well as the puppy owner looking for a vaccination.

Your potential clients will probably be looking for your practice on the basis of the geographical area you serve or possibly a specific service you might offer. They need to find your practice details when they look for a veterinary service and a placename - they won't know your name until they find you.

### Existing clients

Again, we use “clients” in the broadest sense. Like your potential clients, existing clients will need your site to be easy to find online. They will still, from time to time, need to look up some of your basic details. Your fax number or your Saturday opening times. Even if they know you have a web site they are likely to look for you by entering your practice name in a search engine rather than by typing your web address into their browser.

You need to decide what you are going to provide for your existing clients once they have found your web site. How do you expect your practice to benefit. If you can attract them to visit your site regularly you gain an opportunity to promote improved animal care in your area and to let them know about new products and services.

We'll return to the needs of your existing clients in a few pages time. First, let's take a closer look at the needs of your potential clients.

### 1.03 Potential clients

Let's consider the design of your practice web site from the point of view of your potential clients. Who is visiting and how do they find your site.

Are they looking online? Yes! According to late 2003 figures from the Bureau of National Statistics 48 per cent of households in the UK can access the Internet from home. Two thirds of UK businesses are online. Sixty percent of the UK population has used the internet. At least half of potential clients are likely to be looking for details of your practice online.

All Internet users quickly become familiar with one or other of the main search engines, Yahoo, Google, MSN, AOL. Various flavours of search engine are built into the portal pages provided by the big Internet Service Providers and into web browsing software like Internet Explorer. "To Google" is in the process of entering various languages as a verb.

The majority of visitors arriving at your web site will either have found it as a result of a search or as a link from another web site - probably also found with a search engine. Very few people type in web addresses. Those that do type in web addresses tend to type them into a search engine. The web address for Hotmail, [www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com), is a very commonly used search term and provides a graphic example of the way that peoples first choice is to go to their preferred search engine.

For your practice to be easily found by new clients it is important that your practice web site is easy to find in the major search engines. Potential clients won't be looking for your practice by name. They will be looking for the services you offer and for the areas you serve. Ensuring that they find your site requires an understanding of how the search engines work.

So, let's take a look at searching

### 1.04 Introduction to search engines

The major search engines, there are about ten that are important, all work on words. To search, you send a string of words to your chosen search engine. The search engine simply returns a list of web pages, each of which contains all the words in your query.

How do the search engines know which pages to return? They maintain huge indexes of all the words from billions of web pages. As I write the Google index holds over four billion web pages. Each search engine continually sends out robot indexing programs to visit and check for changes on all the pages they know about – and to follow links to new sites and additional pages.

The search engines may take note that a page has images or whizzy graphics, pretty coloured text or an interesting background - but only as something hanging around with what they are really interested in – words.

The search engines don't see the visible information contained in an image – they just collect the text visible around it. They will take an interest in the sizes and colours you use for the information on your pages – but only to be sure that visitors can see the same words they do. At one time it was possible to hide text and so cheat the search engines by defining white text on a white background or black on black.

Most of the search engines have a form where you can submit the address of your web site. They prefer, however, to think that they have found your site themselves. The best way to get yourself added to their indexes is to have an incoming link from another site that is already listed.

To ensure that your pages appear in the list of results when someone searches for “vet in yourtown” then the words “vet” and “yourtown” have to appear together – as words not pictures – on at least one of your pages. If they appear in an important part of your page – like the title. If they appear more than once on a page. If they appear together on more than one page on your site – then your pages are more likely to appear high up in the list of web pages returned when someone searches for “vet in yourtown”.

This the essential essence of the way search engines work. Let's apply this to the content you put online for your potential clients.

### 1.05 Content for potential clients

Your potential clients are looking for your practice using details of the areas you serve and the services you provide. How can you design your pages so that they find you easily?

To help potential clients you need to state obvious facts about your practice and about each surgery. The species you treat, your contact address, your phone number, a location map, and your opening hours. It's amazing how many practice web sites put this sort of information in out of the way places. Even more amazing

is that some practices fail to include some of this information entirely!

It is sensible to display your practice name and your contact details on every page. This helps to make your site easier for existing clients to find. Make sure that the search engines can read it though – if your practice name and address appear in as a graphic make sure that they are repeated in plain text as well.

Potential clients from your surrounding areas are going to be looking for a practice where they are, not where you are. You need to include the names of the places your clients come from. These don't all want to be in one place as a list. They are more effective if you can use placenames in the middle of natural language. Search engines are suspicious of lists.

You can't just assume that potential clients will all search for your practice using the same simple term. "Vet in yourtown" for instance. As you write the copy for your site you should try and introduce as many variations as possible without making your text read like a cross between a gazetteer and a thesaurus. Don't try and get all the variations on every page. Use as many alternatives as possible but don't compromise the readability of your site

Don't be reticent about presenting details of the services you offer. Every additional word you write makes it easier for a potential client to find you. Take a leaf from the journalists handbooks. Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them what you have to tell them. Then tell them what you have just told them. The natural desire is to do this without too many repeated words so you get a nice spread of keywords and phrases and your page will therefore be much easier to find.

So. Your web site is well populated with all the search terms that your potential clients are likely to use. Lots of people looking for a vet in your area find your web site. Will this mean that every visitor becomes a long term satisfied client? No. Your visitors need a bit more information – and it is not something that you can provide satisfactorily within your web site. - They need to be satisfied that they are making a fully informed choice.

### 1.06 Informed choice

We are going to start by looking at the ways new clients find you without the internet.

How do new clients find your practice at the moment? Recommendations from existing clients. Spotting your surgery as they drive to the shops. Printed directories like Yellow Pages. Advertisements you place in local papers. Of these, a display ad in Yellow Pages probably represents a major portion of your marketing budget.

What makes printed directories like Yellow Pages so effective? There are four main factors.

#### Printed Directories

- 1 **Universal** **YES**  
Free copy around practically every telephone
- 2 **Organised** **YES**  
Practices are grouped into geographical areas
- 3 **Complete** **YES**  
All the practices within the area covered
- 4 **Accurate** **YES**  
Misprints happen - but it's rare

When someone looks for a practice offline they commonly pick up Yellow Pages. In YP they know that they are looking at a complete and accurate list and that the surgery they select is very likely to be the one that suits them best. They feel that YP lets them make an informed choice.

Now lets look at the same factors when someone uses a search engine to look for a practice.

#### Search engine

- 1 **Universal** **YES**  
The search engine is universal online
- 2 **Organised** **NO**  
Certainly not organised
- 3 **Complete** **NO**  
Only practices with a web site appear in results
- 4 **Accurate** **NO**  
Information is often inaccurate or out of date

When someone looks for a practice online they generally start with their preferred search engine. They don't get results that give them the same confidence as using YP though. The search engines don't organise their results into convenient geographical areas. Because the search engines only index web sites the list is far from complete. Practice web sites that aren't designed to be easily found are so far down the results that they may as well not exist. Practice web sites that haven't been updated since the initial flush of enthusiasm that saw them created may display out of date information.

Clearly, people can't have the same confidence in search engine results as in the vet listings in YP. They may find your web site, they may be impressed by the services you offer, but they can't be certain that you are their best choice because they don't have information about the other surgeries in their area.

How can you build up search engine users confidence to the point where they feel able to make an informed choice? Ideally, every surgery in your area needs an up to date web site as easily found as yours. If the results provided by the search engines were as organised, complete and accurate as those from the print directories then potential clients would have the confidence to act on the information they provide.

We started this series of articles by looking at the design considerations for a simple practice web site. Once work on its design reached this point it became clear that, before our one web site could be fully effective at attracting new clients, every practice in its area would ideally need a quality, easily found, web site so that visitors could make an informed choice.

This, initially, sounds counterintuitive. Why wish that all your competitors have a web site? The reason largely comes from the unique way that vets, companion animal practices in particular, are seen by their clients. The prime consideration for the majority of clients is distance. They may be influenced by the ease of parking or the provision of specific services but initially they want to know which practice is nearest. Something of the order of 85% of urban small animal clients live within two miles of their chosen surgery.

If you are the only practice in your area with a web site then the majority of potential new clients visiting your site will not be able to decide whether your surgery is their best choice. They may be impressed by the services you offer but will remain hopeful that a nearer surgery will match your provision. They will look elsewhere for the information they need, probably reverting to Yellow Pages, and your investment in your web site will bring you no benefit.

If, on the other hand, they can find listings for all the surgeries in their area then they will feel able to make an informed selection. They will be able to decide which surgeries are nearest. They will be able to compare services. Your web site can then have an effect similar to a larger ad in Yellow Pages. You can extol your virtues, promote the superiority of your services and show a picture of your car park so they know that your parking is easy.

We decided to take a look at what might happen to our simple web site project as other practices in the area gained web sites.

### 1.07 Complete and Accurate

As the number of practices with a web site increases then potential clients looking online are theoretically going to get access to a progressively more complete and accurate set of surgery data through the major search engines - or are they?

Web design is a far from exact science. Some sites are much more likely to appear in particular search results than others. If each practice organises its own web site individually then there is nothing to say when the list is complete and no-one to take responsibility for its accuracy.

Still trying to do our best for our one small practice we returned to the drawing board. We considered what would happen if some outside agency created basic web sites for all the nearest surgeries to our base surgery - the one we are supposed to be creating a web site for.

Creating web sites for the nearest surgeries to our one clinic meant that the practices at the edge of the area covered wouldn't have a full set of other vets for users to compare. If the area covered was large enough then visitors may be in a position to make an informed selection between the surgeries at the centre of the area but the whole concept would lose credibility once people realise that they couldn't make valid choices for practices around the edges.

There was only one solution. Add web sites for every surgery in every direction until we reach the sea. Every UK veterinary surgery needs a basic web site.

We ended up creating a free basic web site for every UK veterinary surgery and the Any UK Vet web site was born. Our motivation wasn't purely altruistic of course. We had moved forward from the needs of our single web site. We are a web design company and we want an active marketplace in veterinary web sites where practices can see real benefits from investing in a web site. It was clear that potential clients would only use the internet to look for practices when they could have the same confidence in the results returned from search engines as they have in the listings in various print directories. Your practice web site would then be able to show a worthwhile return on investment in the form of paw prints in your waiting room.

We are going to take a look at how the Any UK Vet web site works. This isn't for the sake of promoting of one of our services. If the Any UK Vet site had been created by someone else then we would be explaining how it worked in equal detail. The Any UK Vet web site turns the major search engines into an online equivalent of print directories. It has an important part to play in making every practice web site easier to find online.

### Any UK Vet and the major search engines

Let's look once again at the four factors from section 1.06 once the major search engines have access to comparable web sites for every UK veterinary surgery through the Any UK Vet site.

#### Search engines with Any UK Vet

- |   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>1 Universal</b>                      | <b>YES</b> |
| The search engine is universal online   |            |
| <b>2 Organised</b>                      | <b>YES</b> |
| Organisation is provided by Any UK Vet  |            |
| <b>3 Complete</b>                       | <b>YES</b> |
| Any UK Vet entries for every UK surgery |            |
| <b>4 Accurate</b>                       | <b>YES</b> |
| Any UK vet is continuously maintained   |            |

The combination of the major search engines and the Any UK Vet web site provides potential clients with the universal, organised, complete and accurate list of surgeries they need to make an informed choice, matching the services provided by Yellow Pages and the other print directories offline. Half the population of the UK are potentially looking for information online so your free

Any UK vet listing is as important as your YP ad to your practices marketing program.

So lets see what your free web site on Any UK Vet looks like.

### 1.08 Your free Any UK Vet site

The internet has grown on a reputation for generosity in the provision of information. Your free web site on Any UK Vet is no exception. You can add more information for free than you could get into a full page Yellow Pages ad costing thousands.

The Any UK Vet site contains individual listings for every surgery, right down to the smallest branch. One entry is for a clinic held in a village hall for just an hour a week. The first thing people want to know is their nearest surgery - if they didn't there would be far fewer practices maintaining branch surgeries in every outpost of pet owning population - listing surgeries individually makes this easier.

Every surgery listing has its own control panel. Through this you can edit your basic contact information and also add a wide range of other information about your surgery. You can add details of your surgery hours, the species you treat, the standards you have achieved and the services you provide.

If you have more than one surgery you can create links between them. You can add an e-mail link for clients to contact you if they choose. You can add a link to your practice web site if you have one.

You can add a welcoming message for visitors. This is a block of text, the search engines favourite, and it has the effect of making your listing more likely to appear in search engine results. Your hours appear on their own page - so do referral services if you offer them. There is plenty of available space for yet more text.

Your free site can end up with several pages. Each of these is indexed by the major search engines. Pages on the site are designed to rank well, particularly for searches like "vet in placename". Because it is a large site with thousands of unique pages on a consistent theme, entries from the Any UK Vet site generally appear high in search engine results.

If a potential client of your practice looks online for a vet they will quickly find an Any UK Vet practice listing, possibly yours, possibly a surgery near you. Every page of every practice listing has a search box. Users can enter their postcode or a placename and get a list of their nearest vets.

It may seem counterproductive to have a search box to take visitors away from your free site once they have found you - but just think of all those other surgeries in your area with search boxes that are bringing clients to your listing.

Once users have found the list of their nearest surgeries they can limit the results to just show the surgeries that treat the specific species they own or offer the partic-

ular service they need. Surgeries that haven't added the information for their surgeries don't appear in these results.

It is time to consider the needs of your existing clients.

### 1.09 Why attract existing clients?

The first question to ask is not how to attract your existing clients - but why. Why do you want them to visit, what benefits do you expect for your practice and what do you expect your clients to take away from a visit to your site?

First, look at what you already provide for your existing clients which will translate into content on your web site. If you already produce a practice newsletter or regularly send information to clients then your web site will enable you to enhance their effectiveness - and possibly reduce your production costs. If you don't provide these, or similar services like regular newspaper articles, then you should consider carefully whether or not you need to develop your web site to attract existing clients. It isn't essential to do so.

You need to define the benefits you expect to come from clients visiting your web site. These may be purely commercial - increasing sales of products and uptake of services. At the other end of the spectrum altruistic - promoting responsible animal ownership within the community you serve. In practice you will probably find a balance.

What do your clients take away from a visit? Information in some form. The challenge is to define which information. The Internet is an enormous information resource, your practice web site a mere drop in its ocean. What information can you provide your clients which will uniquely answer their needs.

Attracting your clients to visit your web site once isn't going to keep them up to date with the latest products, introduce them to your new services or find a home for that unwanted mongrel. You need them to visit regularly, the more often the better. The information you provide must both answer their needs and attract them to visit your site again - and again - and again.

It isn't too difficult to convince people to visit your web site once. If you include your web address everywhere you can - on letterheads, invoices, business cards, advertisements and posters in the waiting room - and add a call to "Visit our web site today" - then your clients are quite likely to visit out of curiosity - once.

Put yourself in a position similar to one of your clients. Let's suppose that you spot a web address that interests you. You visit the site. You find interesting articles and a promise to remain current, to add new content, to stay up to date. You bookmark the site.

Later, you return to the site, if you find that the content has been updated as promised then you are likely to visit again. You may become a regular visitor. You are more likely to purchase items from their catalogue.

On the other hand, if the content is unchanged, the promises unfulfilled, then the likelihood of your third visit diminishes. A third visit to an unchanged site will, almost certainly, be your last.

How often do you need to update the information on your site? It's a balancing act. You want to spend the minimum amount of time creating new material. Your clients want to see new articles relevant to their interests every time they visit. You want them to remember your site and visit it regularly. They will stop visiting if you update your site too slowly.

Another little exercise. If you find and bookmark a web site that covers a subject that you are interested in and which promises regularly updated content - how long would you wait before visiting for a second time and how many visits would you make before assuming that the promise was false and that the site wasn't going to be updated.

Assuming that the site was updated regularly, how often would this have to happen for you to continue to remember to visit?

If you decide that there are good reasons to attract regular repeat visits from your existing clients then you need to make a full commitment. A regular flow of new information is essential to keep them coming back. There is no point in doing it halfheartedly. Better to create a very good site designed to only serve the needs of your potential clients than to promise a site with regular updates to interest your existing client base and then fail to deliver on your promise.

Lets consider what kind of content you need to create.

### **1.10 Content to attract existing clients**

Alright! You have decided that you want to attract your existing clients to visit your web site regularly. You, and your staff, are committed to creating regular new content for your site. What kind of content do you need? What will attract your existing clients and keep them coming back?

The content you provide has to be specifically targeted at your clients. They need to get something from your web site that they can't get elsewhere. Among the billions of pages on the Internet, why should your site be the one they come back to again and again?

What is special about your clients? What do they have in common that you can use to define unique content? There are two things. They certainly have animals and they most probably live relatively close to your surgery. Local animal owners.

There is only one class of material that can attract regular repeat visits from your existing clients. The magic word is local. Local content about local animals, their local owners and their local veterinary surgery. It's local content that keeps small newspapers alive up and down the country.

...and what happens to last weeks local paper? The cat pees on it. Last weeks news is replaced by this weeks. This weeks news is often much the same as last weeks, only the names change. The same basic articles, rewritten with a changing cast of local characters, have kept local newspapers alive and reasonably profitable for a hundred years or more. The same approach can work for your web site.

A robust policy of removing content would do most web sites a world of good. What good is fireworks advice in February? How can you make the advice fresh come October when it's been on the web site all year? Put it online at the appropriate time, take it down as it goes out of season.

There is no substitute for regularly refreshed local content. You and your staff are the only people in a position to create it. Nothing created in some distant web designers studio, however whizzy or technically advanced, can match a fuzzy snapshot of your head veterinary nurse visiting the gerbils at the local primary school.

Once you let them know that their school is going to be on your web site then this kind of article will attract visits from all the children, their parents, their friends, their aunty and granny and the lady who lives next door - the list goes on and on and nearly everyone will live in your surgery catchment area.

You will still have clients without internet access. You don't want them to feel left out. The content you create for your web site should also be made available for clients visiting your waiting room. Print a newsletter, put copies of articles on your noticeboard, create a paper version of your site in a folder. You might even consider making your web site available in the waiting room - an old computer is inexpensive and your web site can be displayed without requiring an internet connection.

Lets put a couple of long standing myths about content to rest

### **1.11 Content that doesn't work**

Try asking a few people, both vets and clients, what content your web site should provide. Two things are very commonly suggested. Veterinary advice and an online pet shop. Lets see how effective, or not, they are.

Lots of practice web sites promise veterinary advice. None provide a comprehensive resource and none provide advice at the level clients might expect. This isn't the practices fault, it is an inevitable consequence of a combination of factors.

Lets consider the level of advice that your clients are hoping for. They would like to find free professional advice, comparable to that they would receive in the surgery and preferably at a level which will save them taking their credit cards for a walk. Many of your clients will see the verbal advice you provide during a consultation as mere conversation - not part of your stock in trade

– and won't understand why you can't provide the same service for free online.

It is obviously impossible to provide online advice which comes even close to the levels of advice you can offer specific cases. It is also clearly unacceptable to do so. In professional terms advice needs to be tailored to a specific case, and in business terms the advice you provide is your main product and should be paid for.

When practices attempt to provide veterinary advice online they tend to end up with pages peppered with "take it to the vet". Even the best intentioned end up looking as if they are blatantly touting for custom.

It is frustrating for visiting clients when, promised pet advice, they fail to find anything covering their specific species, breed and problem. If you are going to provide pet advice then you should do it properly. Let's see what this means. We'll look at a small animal example but the same would apply to equine, large animal or mixed practices.

Go into any bookstore or pet shop. Find the petcare books. Never mind the number of titles, just measure the length of dedicated shelving. Even the smallest pet shop will manage a metre of books. Allowing a conservative 200 sides of paper per cm that's 20,000 pages. Web pages hold less information than the printed page so double that to get a total of 40,000 web pages to match a moderate library of pet care. Even with robust allowances for duplicate information, material outside the scope of a veterinary web site and the thickness of the covers you still end up with thousands of web pages - and each page needs writing, each page needs illustrating and the whole lot needs glueing together with the links that make the web work.

If you created the thousands of pages of advice, would it attract visits from your existing clients? Maybe. Would it attract regular repeat visits from them? Unlikely. You could extend, but not refresh the content of your web site. People would appreciate the reference material your site would provide - but few would be your existing clients.

Straightforward pages of veterinary advice don't look like a viable option for content, let's look at an online store.

Let's measure some more shelves, this time pet products in your local supermarket. Even modestly sized stores display four hundred shelf feet of assorted pet products. Throw in product ranges that were once only seen in specialist shops and vets, own brand products at loss leader pricing points, online ordering and a delivery service with evening deliveries. Would you really want to compete?

Several large online pet stores, selling directly or through vets, were set up in the nineties with the aim of cashing in on the valuable pet food and accessory market. Their business model was generally based on central warehousing and national distribution. They have almost all gone under, some quite spectacularly. There are only a couple of survivors left in the UK.

In any case, an online store set up just to serve your clients is likely to be all work and little profit by the time you deal with deliveries and returns. This is not to say that you can't promote products available in your waiting room online, just that an online shop as *raison d'être* for a practice web site is not a viable approach.

So, let's look at content that does work.

### 1.12 Local content in more detail

Locally based articles can be created in formats borrowed from a wide range of media. Copy can be pitched at audiences of various ages and with various levels of education and can carry serious messages as easily as light hearted pieces.

There are obvious parallels with local newspapers. Straightforward reportage is very flexible for newsy stories – a report about a client visiting your surgery or a piece about the results when you judged the pet show at the local fete – spelling peoples name right is much more important than correct grammar.

Take a leaf out of specialist magazines to create interest pieces about the equipment you use or the procedures you undertake. Reading a piece that has been written with enthusiasm for a subject gets through to people, even when they have no direct understanding of the bit of kit involved. They may gain some small understanding of the item you are writing about but will also get a vivid impression of how much you enjoy your subject and your work.

A diary format is effective – so long as entries are maintained – and has the added advantage that it encourages repeat visits. An ongoing account of any member of staffs' day or week will attract followers. It might even help keep your nurse trainees up to date with their portfolios!

Many of the articles you produce can be recycled. Today's article about a kitten being microchipped can be repeated in a few weeks time with a dog instead. Later in the year a rabbit, later still a llama. The subject of the article in each case is the animal rather than the micro-chipping so this won't be seen as repetition but each instance allows you to promote the service anew.

Even the most routine of consultations can be turned into an article that will attract clients, can include an opportunity to promote animal care and offer a chance for product placement. Take a simple kitten vaccination. Kittens have built in "ahhh" factor to start with. A simple introduction of kitten and owner can be accompanied with a short paragraph about the advantages of vaccination or the perils of kitten ownership. Talk about the cost of vaccination or add a bit about kitten food.

It is easy to find opportunities to promote new products and your more innovative services. It is just as easy to do the same for existing products and the services you have always offered. Write a brief piece showing a client taking advantage of the product – get a testimonial possi-

bly – and link to a page with full information about the product or service.

Promoting improved animal care among your clients is much more effective when demonstrated through real examples than by way of page after page of advice. Suppose you are presented with a local rabbit with overgrown incisors. An article about the rabbit can include how this happens, why it happens, what you do and what other owners can do to recognise and minimise the problem. Later, with a new article about a different rabbit, you can repeat and reinforce the advice in a way that is impossible with straightforward advice pages.

### **1.13 Local content at work**

Local content doesn't only work for pets. News about horse cases will attract the equine community over their larger catchment area. Farmers aren't immune to the pleasures of reading about their neighbours.

Putting local content online won't only draw your clients. It will also attract visits from the broader community you serve. This will help give your practice a good name more generally.

Once your visitor numbers grow your clients are quite likely to request to be included on your web site. You can turn this into an advantage – get them to do some of the work. If you are producing a report about a case then ask them for a picture of the subject, for a testimonial or for their own account. If you are judging the pet show at the local fete ask the organiser to find a volunteer to photograph the winners and collect their names.

Images are essential for a web site. When you are providing local content then images are, in many ways, easier to create than when you are trying to illustrate more general content. Quality is less important than content – a fuzzy image is forgiven so long as the subject remains recognisable. With modern digital cameras images are both easy and inexpensive to gather. When you take the pictures issues of copyright don't arise

Last weeks news may end up in the litter tray in the homes of its readership – in the papers' offices last weeks news is carefully stored in the archives. You can take the same approach on your web site. You should create a “current edition” where all the latest information is easily found and presented all together. There should also be an archive that pages move to as they go out of date.

As material is moved to the archive section of your site the search engines will see a growing resource with a consistent theme. They like this. Your site ranking will gradually improve.

By adding a search facility to your archive it will become a useful resource for clients looking for snippets of advice they remember from weeks or months earlier.