

## **Keep Clients Coming Back via Retention Marketing**

Peter Weinstein, DVM, MBA  
PeterWeinsteinDVMMBA@gmail.com

Reports indicate that it is about 10 times more expensive to acquire a client than to retain those that you already have. Thus, acquisition marketing has a much higher price tag than just communicating, educating, and relationship building with the pet parents that you already have.

SO, doesn't it make sense to do everything that you possibly can to keep, preserve, and retain that which is rightfully, dutifully and already YOURS. So, shouldn't the bulk of your advertising or marketing budget be directed towards retaining your already satisfied clients. Thus the term RETENTION MARKETING is used to describe any and all communications, promotions, marketing, etc. that is developed to maintain, keep or retain clients that are already part of your hospital family.

### **FACTS:**

In a Research Project conducted a few years ago, the following reasons for leaving a business were identified:

1%	Death
3%	Moved away
5%	Buy from a friend
9%	Are sold by a competitor
14%	Product or service price
68%	Perceived indifference

Over two thirds of clients will leave a practice because of the way they are treated!! Doesn't it make sense to focus on the manner in which our clients are treated at all points during the relationship. You lose clients because they don't have a sense of relationship with you. The goal of Retention Marketing is to strengthen that relationship.

Retention Marketing may be less expensive than acquisition marketing but that doesn't make it any easier. In fact, sometimes the expectations that your clients have developed for your practice are so great that you actually have to perform at a higher level for your existing clients. So, although the financial outlay may not be as great, the emotional and time contributed may be greater.

### **What is included in Retention Marketing?**

Retention marketing includes controlling all of the contact points with a client. These may be when the client contacts your practice or when you contact a client.

INREACH—the client contacts you

Anytime a client calls or stops in to visit, they develop an image. If the image is cold, careless and isolated, the relationship that exists with your practice is weakened. If the image is warm, caring, comforting, concerned, etc., the relationship is strengthened.

**IMAGE:** It is imperative to work on your image everyday. To do this you have to have a vision of how you want to relate to your clients. How do you want to answer the phones? How do you want to welcome a client when they come in? Where are the smiles? What are you doing to make your existing clients feel welcome and part of the family?

**APPEARANCE:** Even the exterior and interior appearance of your practice are part of retention marketing. How warm is the feel? What colors have you used to create a welcoming feel? What is your staff dress code or appearance? Does your staff have name tags or not? What about the nature of the seats in the reception area—are they comfortable or stiff? Pictures on the walls also emit a message. You have to think about all the details as your clients would. What a healthcare professional perceives as warm and comforting may not be what makes a consumer warm and comfortable. Seek professional assistance in building your image and appearance. If your clients are comfortable, you will know it because they are in no rush to leave and will hang around chitchatting. That is a good sign...

**OUTREACH—YOU** communicate with the client

The mainstay of RETENTION Marketing is your communication with the client. In the 'good old' days, written communication with the client was primarily reminder cards. These were sterile notes designed just to get a client to take an action. There was very little in the way of relationship built with reminder cards. And virtually NO education was included on the cards.

Subsequently, the use of newsletters was developed. Newsletters allowed for more personalized communication about what was going on in the practice as well as education about medical conditions that a pet might develop or education about new products or services that were available in your practice. Newsletters definitely allowed for more relationship building as well as education.

As the cost of care has escalated so has the need for more intensive marketing programs that focus on communication, education, and calls to action. The goal of 21<sup>st</sup> century Retention Marketing is educate, communicate caring and needs, and encourage action.

Although pet owners are much more highly knowledgeable now than they ever have been as a result of the internet and other resources, your practice is the EXPERT when it comes to pet health and should act and feel that way.

It is our role to frequently and succinctly bring our clients up to date on the newest, best, most accurate information that they can use for their pets.

MAJOR POINT: In marketing, it can take anywhere from 5 to 12 'touches' of a product or service to a client BEFORE they may take action.

This major point helps explain why one reminder is frequently insufficient. It explains why talking about the need for dental care has to be done year after year before a teeth cleaning takes place. It clarifies why it has taken so long to improve compliance in so many areas of veterinary medicine.

Retention Marketing to be most effective must educate, communicate, cajole, and coax through about a dozen contacts to finally stimulate action.

### **The 3Rs of Retention Marketing**

Before any client leaves your practice, one or more of the 3 Rs of Retention Marketing must be documented. What are the 3Rs?

RECHECK

RECALL

REMIND

RECHECKS are the process of physically bringing the pet and pet parent back into your practice for a medical progress exam and evaluation of the status of a medical condition or post operatively or ...It includes a hands-on assessment of the pet to determine its health.

Rechecks are very common after skin cases or ear cases. For what other clinical conditions should a standardized Recheck protocol exist? Corneal ulcers, bladder infections, post-operative soft tissue surgery, post-operative orthopedic surgery, after the start of chronic medication such as thyroid supplement, etc. Does your practice have a standardized recommendation for rechecks on the most common medical or surgical conditions that you do? If not, put this on your "to do list". The doctors create the time frame for rechecks and all of the staff are responsible for implementing the program.

Rechecks should be give the message "we care so much about your pet" that we want to make sure that the medical or surgical condition from which they suffer is improving, better, or cured before we can give a 'clean bill of health'. The other message is that only a member of your professional healthcare team can truly assess the status of a medical condition. In other words, what looks good at home may still have a festering condition when examined more deeply.

Many clients perceive rechecks as simply a manner for practices to make more money UNLESS you provide value and service associated with them. Thus, treat rechecks with the same importance you treat full physical examinations and let the client understand that value by explaining WHY they are so important. Remember it is the WHY that bonds clients not just the WHAT.

If a RECHECK isn't really needed, then at least one of the other Rs is.

RECALLs are the use of the telephone to reach out to the clients and check on the status of the pet. A recall may be done for everything from a major medical or surgical condition to vaccination visits to boarding, grooming or bathing.

The premise behind a recall is to let the client know how much you care about them and their pet by talking to them and specifically let them know you care. A recall is best done by a 'people person' on your staff. If you use an exam room nurse they are a great person to follow up on a case that they worked on in the exam room. Scripts or pre-prepared guidelines allow for accurately addressing the client about their pet's most recent visit. It is imperative to review the record before the call. Don't lift the phone without knowing WHY are you calling.

Recalls also allow for the opportunity to remind clients about any recheck visits that they may have scheduled or should have scheduled.

If you remember the old adage, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care, the recall is the chance to show how much you care. The ultimate goal of a recall is NOT to directly generate more sales or services. The goal of a recall is to strengthen the relationship that is so important with Retention Marketing. I can't tell you how often I had a client say, " My doctor doesn't even call me."

ACTION ITEM: before a client leaves, ask them: At what number and at what time would it be best for us to call and check on Fluffy?

The final R taps into the use of all media to stay in touch with a client.

REMINDERS are just that—a reminder. They are communicating to the client by mail, e-mail, fax, phone call, post card, etc. that their pet is in need of some product or service. The old reminder system was used for vaccinations. New reminder systems may include reminders for annual exams, refills on prescriptions, monthly grooming, seasonal boarding, 6 month spay or neuters, or anything where a 'tickler' system helps re-initiate a synapse that had been disconnected and with its reconnection lead to an action.

The use of various media allow for you to create a system that best meets your clients needs as different clients may prefer different means of outreach. How do you know what a client wants? You ask them!! How would you like for us to stay in touch with you about Fluffy's necessary healthcare services? Mail? E-mail? Etc.

Reminders are a great education tool, also. Not only should you be letting a client know that their pet is in need of care but also WHY they need the care and WHAT will happen if the care is missed. Utilize reminders as one of the 5-12 touches for things such as dental care, senior care, obesity, etc.

Beyond the 3Rs, Retention Marketing is based upon the use of DIRECT RESPONSE MARKETING to segments of your client base. As noted above, the 5-12 touches can be used for any service, product or concern that might exist in pet healthcare. Direct Response Marketing selects a targeted group of your clients, builds an education campaign around the parameters used to select the pets, and then creates educational pieces that will lead to an action.

STEP ONE: CAMPAIGN- Choose a campaign area that you want to educate your clients about.

EXAMPLE: Senior care (ages 7 and up)

STEP TWO: SEGMENT- Using your computer, select those clients whose pets fall within defined parameters.

EXAMPLE: all pets that are 7 years or older that have not been in for an exam or labwork in greater than 6 months.

STEP THREE: EDUCATE—create educational pieces on the topic that focus on what you will be doing for the pet and MORE importantly WHY it needs to be done. These educational pieces should include: letters, postcards, e-mails, phone calls, website updates, flyers, posters, etc. AND even more importantly they should include a call to action and possibly an 'ethical bribe'.

EXAMPLE: why pets change more quickly as they age; what changes may occur; how you can identify those changes; etc.

STEP FOUR: DO IT—set up a timeline and system whereby you will mail, e-mail, call, etc up to 5-12 times in the next month or so on the topic chosen.

EXAMPLE: Week one: letter; Week two: postcard and e-mail; Week three: e-mail; Week four; postcard and call.

Direct Response Marketing is RETENTION Marketing at its finest. It is letting clients know how much you care by educating them about things that they may not be thinking about and how you can help them out. It is staying in the front of the minds eye of clients that could readily lose touch with you until it was time for a vaccine visit.

Retention Marketing's success is based upon being consistently in touch with clients to let them know you are there; to let them know that there is no better place for the care of their pets; to let them know you care about them and their pet.

If you don't stay in touch, it is very easy for a client to be persuaded by someone else that they are a better choice. By being in touch consistently you are definitely NOT showing indifference as much as being different and wanting to make a difference in their pet's lives. Retention marketing focuses on individual attention, acknowledgement and a feeling that a client is genuinely appreciated.

Simple acts of education and kindness go a long way to building and keeping relationships that last a lifetime.

Replacing lost clients is expensive and time consuming. Keeping them is inexpensive and highly rewarding not only in terms of your bottom line but in the quality of the relationships you create.