

Don't be left on the shelf, retailing is a key part of a veterinary practice

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An article about retailing... but before you stop reading, or pass it on to a junior member of your team, spare a moment to think. Retail is a vehicle to help you promote services and products for healthy pets, which satisfy your clients or customers and improves your business. What you sell and how you retail it reflects on your practice, so it's important to be professional in all that you do, including the products you retail.

While you were studying at vet school, questions of which types of pet food to stock and how best you should display and recommend them, probably wasn't at the forefront of your mind, but now in practice it has a role to play along with what other products you stock, and needs to be considered at a strategic level and integrated into the business. If

you and the team buy in to retail metaphorically then your customers will buy in to it physically!

If you don't embrace retail, your customers have ever increasing options to buy elsewhere, at pet superstores where they can talk to an SQP (Specially Qualified Person!), pet shops, supermarkets, online shops and pharmacies and of course from other practices. Interestingly, I recently saw Frontline products being sold in Boots the Chemist and the wholesaler Costco. Why would you let others look after your clients when you could be providing them with the right products for their pet, which would also reinforce your relationships and demonstrate your unique expertise? I don't want to scare you too much but I would question whether, in these challenging times, you can afford not to be a professional retailer?

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Professional retailing

So with your retail mindset now in place, let's explore what being a professional in retail means.

Retail is simply a combination of what you sell and then how you sell it. The 'what you sell' needs to be linked to your practice philosophy and customer mix, remember that less is often more: customers don't need lots of choice as they are trusting you as the expert to select the right items for their pets. If you don't know what sells, then find out as best you can from orders and sales figures in your practice or from suppliers and by simply asking those who handle the goods - there's no excuse!

Recommendation

If you only do ONE thing after reading this article it would be to make sure that you sell products that you and the



practice team believe in and actively recommend. As a pet owner myself I want your expert advice and recommendation plus any relevant support and follow-up. The f word 'follow-up' is one of the least used and yet highly effective tools at your disposal. For example, I'm a customer and I've just bought some recommended food for the first time, how good would it be if the practice phoned me after a few days to see how things were going? Is my pet eating the new food, do I have any questions or problems that I need answering and what help would I need in re-ordering the food? This is the sort of approach that will separate you out from the crowd: it's your point of difference. You need to be proactive in this increasingly competitive market. Customers are looking for value for money, which isn't all about price but a combination of product quality, service and price.

Product availability

So after deciding what to sell,

you then you need to look at how you sell it. I've already talked about recommendation being absolutely key but this is closely followed by the fundamental need for stock availability, as you'll sell more if the product is actually there when the customer is in the practice, it's not rocket science! I know that many of you can order products the next day for clients but think how you can be more proactive. For example, some practices make contact with clients in advance to pre-order and some of you deliver direct to homes. It's all about thinking of ways to make it easier for the client.

Display

Look at your displays and ask yourself: are your products neatly displayed? In logical groupings? Using appropriate fixtures? With clear signage? Is it easy for the customer to buy from and the practice to manage? The Drove Veterinary Hospital in Swindon did just that and in the photos

you can see one example of the changes that they made, namely grouping cat products together to make a 'cats corner'.

Retail trends

I couldn't write an article without referring to online retailing, which continues to grow in all sectors. You may well have an online shop already or be considering one. The same rules apply as it still must reflect your practice strategy and be linked to your recommendations. Another retail trend, which practices are also embracing, is pet health clubs and loyalty schemes, which help customers with easy payments and rewards for their loyalty. Technology, such as social media and the use of smart phones, will continue to play an increasingly important role. The challenge will be to blend all these channels together to give the customer an improved experience. Keep up to date with what's out there and be open to how it could help you and your customers.

Retail Check List

Do you have senior management buy in to the importance of retail?

- ✓ Do your products fit the practice strategy and customer profile?
- ✓ Do you believe in the products you sell and actively recommend them?
- ✓ Do you give after-sales support when appropriate?
- ✓ Do you make it as easy as possible for customers to buy from you by having products in stock, well displayed and easy to order?
- ✓ Do you embrace the latest trends and new technology?

The answers to the retail check list will highlight some areas for improvement and therefore be a prompt for some next step actions. It's not what someone else says but what you do, that counts. Remember, retail is a vehicle to help you promote healthy pets, satisfy your customers and improve your practice business. In the words of Jane Carter, Drove Veterinary Hospital "Don't just read this article, take some action, work with what you've got, think like a customer and ask what would attract you?"