

Developing good communication skills brings business rewards

WHO likes junk mail or cold callers trying to sell us something we don't want? Junk mail, text and email messages go straight into the bin. Yet all these things are an attempt by someone to communicate with us. They have something they feel is of vital importance to our lives. Maybe they do and we are missing out, but in that case, these people are not communicating with us in the correct manner.

This tells us we need to

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emphasises the importance of communicating and engaging with the individual rather than assuming you know what your client wants from you

think carefully about how we communicate and engage with our clients. The vet/farmer relationship is changing significantly and we need to be able to respond to this. Vets need to be effective

communicators and able to promote and sell their services – easy to say but this can be quite difficult to achieve.

I have been working with farmers for the past 35 years, so clearly I understand them

and know exactly what they want. Right? No. This is incorrect and a very dangerous assumption. Here is the classic example. Many years ago I visited a farmer and had been going through his data and farm records; it was clear the key issues affecting his farm were A, B and C.

I asked him what his top three concerns were and was surprised his answer was X, Y and Z. He had no interest in A, B or C at that time; they were not on his list of priorities.

So I could have spoken to him at length about A or B and he would not have engaged at all in this topic.

We must find out what the farmer's concerns are and see how we can help him or her address these issues. Often we believe we start to think like farmers and make totally incorrect assumptions, like "he will never want to use that, it's far too expensive" and we are proven wrong time and time again.

The key point is never assume you know what a client's concerns or needs are until he or she has told you.

Several years ago we decided to change our practice accountant and invited a couple of firms to come to talk to us. Accountant A turned up with two people. They had put together a PowerPoint presentation and lots of blurb telling us what they could do and what we should be doing. I switched off almost immediately as I didn't want someone telling us what we had to do. This was an intrusive approach.

Accountant B came on his own and sat down with a blank sheet of paper. He asked us about our business, our plans for the future, our current and future concerns and what we wanted from an accountant. Throughout the meeting he was taking notes and repeating back various things we had told him to make sure he had interpreted them correctly. He had really engaged with us and, of course, he got the business.

His firm offered what we wanted and, as time and the relationship progressed, we did even more with our accountants. That is exactly what we have to do with our clients, and they are all different.

The best way to find out what our clients really want from us has to be sitting down with them face to face without distractions and talking. This will be difficult at the end of a routine visit when the farmer is keen to get on with his next job. You need

to agree a time that allows you to have a good discussion without time pressures or distraction. A few members of his staff might also be there.

Ask the questions our accountant used as a starting point, with lots of "open" questions that encourage more discussion. Listen actively, repeating back things they have said, and take notes if necessary. This is how we can engage with our clients. You could use a questionnaire, but this is limiting, can be misleading and will not give the full story.

Changing world of vets and farmers

Twenty years ago, we would have treated three cows with milk fever before breakfast at the peak of the calving season. We treated most of the lame and sick cows and debudded and castrated calves.

How much of this work do we still do? Little – just look at the drop in out-of-hours work. Times are changing.

Advisors and others are now encroaching on what were previously considered "vet only" services – fertility and lay scanners, foot trimmers, advisors offering the DairyCo mastitis plan, people who debud and castrate, along with new diagnostics. We need to be able to respond to these changes and modify our services so we meet farmers' needs. With increasing herd sizes, this also offers lots of opportunities.

Selling skills

Say you want to promote a service or a vaccine. The first step is to have the practice team understand and buy into the concept. The practice team means the farm vets and the support staff. Let's say we are promoting a new product – a talking ear tag for cattle that can only be supplied by vets. You look at the tag and it reads out the number for you.

Agree the key messages you want to convey; what this will do and why you are doing it, how it will benefit the animals

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WHO WE ARE AT A GLANCE
 At Shepton Veterinary Group we recognise that important your pet is and strive to treat them in the same way as we do our own.
 Founded in 1921 we are a well established practice and our team of experienced, caring and safe serve the community in a professional and friendly manner.
 Small Animal Dept

D.L.V.A.I TRAINING COURSE
 Posted on January 12, 2010 by @sheptonvets

D.L.V.A.I Training - 10th - 12th February All areas of AI techniques will be covered and assessed to ensure that everyone who completes training is confident and competent, in line with us to date DVFA approved courses. Our courses... Continue reading --
 Posted in News, (Unapproved) Comments (2)

PRACTICAL LAMBING WORKSHOP
 Posted on January 12, 2010 by @sheptonvets

Practical Lambing Workshop - Thursday 29th January at 9am, Our Practical Lambing

Shepton Vets' website features training course information.

Shepton Vets Farm created an event.
 12 January at 06:06 · UK

Practical Lambing Workshop

Practical Lambing Workshop
 29 January at 19:00 in UTC

A lambing course being advertised on Facebook.

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uct or a service, but others will like what is best for their animals, convenience, peace of mind and so on. In fact, the majority of decisions are made more from emotions rather than on price. All you are doing is offering people choice: some will want to buy in, some will hesitate and wait before joining up and then there is always the group that will say no.

Summary

Effective communication is essential for vets and it's an ongoing learning process. Some people are really good, while others with less confidence and skills will need training. The whole world of vet practice is changing and so effective communication and selling skills have never been more important.

and the owner, what he or she has to do and the cost benefit. Make sure the practice team is fully trained, especially in "objection handling".

We are often very poor at dealing with negative comments. We talk to a farmer about a new product or service and he or she puts up one objection and we opt to change the subject. You need to think about all the objections likely to be raised about the new ear tag and whether these are real or just perceptions, and train the practice staff to deal and manage these.

Keep it simple and avoid mixed messages. The more complicated your messages, the more there is to go wrong and the greater the degree of confusion within the team and clients.

Now you can roll this out to clients and you might use a number of ways to communicate and market this, such as:

- Practice newsletter – article about the new ear tag (post or email to clients, put copies in with medicine orders, leave copies at the large animal reception area). Not everyone reads the newsletter but many do.
- Practice website (just replicate the newsletter story for those who might miss

it) but how many clients visit this? Probably very few, but it will reach others who will want to know.

- Practice meeting – these can be useful and you can reach lots of people quickly, but there is limited interaction. An added attraction comes from food and drink and a good social night out for farmers. Texting reminders about the meeting the day before is a really good idea because farmers forget; they are busy people.

- Smaller meetings can be more effective as there can be far more discussion and interaction. These could be held at lunchtime or evenings. Again, refreshments maintain people's energy levels, which helps with concentration.

- Facebook, Twitter and other social media – put something on them.

- Individual one-to-one discussions with a client. This can be at routine or sick cow calls where you talk to the farmer about your new tag, its benefits and so on.
- Fliers could be left with the farmers after you have talked to him or her so he or she can refer back to the information at a later date.

Launching the ear tags is just the start of the process. You should have identified

which clients in the practice are going to start using the product immediately. This will be a small number. Get them on board and using the tags. You then use their feedback and sound bites to keep the promotional messages going. Success stories should be shared with the practice team,

put in newsletters and on the website and they make great snippets for Facebook.

Your converts would be great people to persuade others to start using these tags. They could help at practice meetings, especially with smaller meetings. Here a person from the practice

can introduce the meeting to the others and then act more as a facilitator and allow the converted farmer to do the selling for you.

Price is important, but certainly not the most overriding objection we face. Some will always use price as a reason not to use the prod-

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