

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP MARKETING PLAN FOR DENTISTRY

By Tony Woodward, DVM, AVSC

You can maximize the potential of dentistry in your veterinary practice by educating your staff and recognizing and treating problems that are often missed. As 50% of your patients may be in need of some level of dental care, there are many opportunities to deliver the best care and build client loyalty to your practice. Remember – healthy patients make happy owners!

You can begin to increase your veterinary dental practice by preparing for **National Pet Dental Health Month in February**. The timing is ideal because there will be national advertising by several companies and you still have time to prepare and deliver your educational message. If you prefer to begin your clinic's campaign outside of National Pet Dental Health Month, you will still enjoy tremendous success. Preparing your total marketing campaign in advance of your targeted time frame is crucial in order to maximize patient visit opportunities. Training your staff to educate your clients, to detect and explain problems in the exam room, and to deliver thorough and complete dental care are your major steps in being prepared.

Please note that the steps outlined below all include spots for you to delegate who is responsible for each step, and by what date they need to complete their assignment. Spread the work around to multiple staff members so everyone feels like they contribute to the outcome. It is very important that you keep everyone accountable for their efforts. I recommend you use this list to go over progress on each of these points in your weekly staff meeting, letting each individual know ahead of time that they will need to update the entire staff on their progress. Remember that proper preparation makes the outcome inevitable. If you go through these steps, you will take your dental department to a new level of success.

Step 1 (Now): Order Your Marketing Materials

Call companies like Butler, Pfizer, Virbac, and other dental product manufacturers to request educational materials, models, brochures, etc., which they provide for veterinary hospitals. Much of this material is free for the asking. Posters, ads and other promotional materials promoting National Pet Dental Health Month are available from Hill's Veterinary Consultation Line at (800) 548-8387, while supplies last. Be sure to post these materials throughout your clinic, including materials that clients can read while they're waiting for their pets.

Who is responsible: _____

By When: _____

Report to: _____

Step 2 (Now): Train Your Staff How to Identify Dental Disease and Explain it to Clients

A variety of training materials are available from distributors and suppliers. Dental models, pamphlets with pictures, and other literature will help explain dental disease to your staff, so they can explain dental disease to clients. Staff training must also include how to recognize potential dental problems, so that these can be pointed out and explained to clients. For example, everyone should be trained to "flip a lip" and see if there is a red stripe along the gum line of the back premolars and molars. If there is a red stripe, the client should get a good explanation of gingivitis, periodontal disease, how this affects the pet, and what your cleaning includes.

Have your staff practice delivering their message to each other, preferably in a staff meeting in front of other people. Role playing is very useful for smoothing out the delivery of any educational message. Receptionists can role play with a pretend phone shopper, while technical staff can role play with a pretend client. If people can deliver a coherent message in front of the other staff members, they will have no problems with real clients. If your staff's role playing shows a lack of understanding, more education is required. In most cases, after 2-3 times explaining dental disease to a pretend client, your staff will be very comfortable delivering your chosen message to your clients. I recommend you set up some different scenarios for the staff to work with, write them on slips of paper, and have the staff each pull one out of the hat with no preparation time. Give the person with the best role playing explanation a small reward like a candy bar or gift certificate to a restaurant.

Regardless of how you prepare your staff, the entire staff must be educated for your message to be delivered. Everyone on the staff, from receptionists to kennel help to technical staff to doctors must be prepared to talk to clients about dental problems. If doctors try to delegate the task to others and avoid involvement, your level of success will decrease.

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Step 3 (Now): Plan Special Dental Care Promotions or Packages

Develop special packages such as a cleaning, x-rays and check-up for a special promotion price, or add-on dental services to a regular physical or check-up for a special price. You might consider free or half-priced dental X-rays with every cleaning, which would quickly improve your staff's dental radiology skills, give you a lot of experience reading films, and allow you to provide a lot of additional care. Additional offers could include:

- ⇒ Free dental home care lessons
- ⇒ Free "home care kit" (toothbrush and sample of toothpaste) with each cleaning
- ⇒ Discounted cleaning with annual physical
- ⇒ Or... do all three. Your costs are minimal, and these give you additional opportunities to educate clients.

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Step 4 (two months ahead): Prepare Direct Marketing Materials to Your Client Database

Direct mail marketing can be a very effective way to reach a target segment of your client base. If you are computerized, you can search your database for patients over the age of four who have not had a dental cleaning within the last year. You might also consider purchasing a mailing list through a list broker, and sending your cards to this list. One such list might be for pet-owning households in your service area with incomes over \$100,000 per household and no children. Direct mail is most effective when used more than once, preferably at intervals around one month apart. The success rate of direct mail is also improved when it is used as one part of the total marketing effort.

You are welcome to use the postcards I developed, designed by Laurel Prud'homme at Sandia Advertising. These award winning post cards have been consistently successful, and samples can be E-mailed to you by Laurel. For more polished look you can contact Laurel at (719) 473-8900 or Laurel@thinksandia.com, for help in customizing these cards or designing your own mailers. She can also provide you with competitive printing estimates, quality, cost-effective printing and mailing recommendations if needed. I work with Laurel totally by E-mail, including the review of proofs, and sending her my client database for inclusion in the custom printing of the mail pieces. It costs no more to have your client's names and addresses printed on each card. She is very reliable.

Be sure to customize your postcards with a special Dental Care Promotion as well as with your phone number, clinic hours and address information. You will want to start this process in early in order to be ready to mail the postcards in a month ahead of your target date. Consider two mailings, three to four weeks apart for maximum response. The second mailing can be a small colored postcard, which will be less expensive.

Estimated costs per 1000 full-color cards would include \$500 for one-sided color and one side black-and-white printing, \$220 for bulk mail postage, and \$100 for processing by a bulk mail handler. You will need to provide printed labels, or might prefer to have the client's address imprinted at the time of printing. Your total costs per 1000 cards will be around \$820, which can be recouped with two to three good dental cases. The cost per client decreases with larger client numbers. You might consider using the cards in black and white to decrease costs, however the impact will be reduced.

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Step 5 (ASAP): Cross-promotion

Everything you can do that compliments the message of your mailers and other activities will serve to amplify the response dramatically. The more you do, the greater your return will be. Certainly, not all of these ideas will fit with your practice philosophy. You need to pick and choose those ideas you are comfortable with.

- ⇒ Prepare promotional flyers with your offer that you can hand to all your clients starting in December. These single sheets can detail your thorough cleaning procedure, as well as any special offers you are offering.
- ⇒ Print additional direct mail postcards that you could hand out in your clinic.
- ⇒ Post your promotions and the Pet Dental Health Month materials throughout your clinic and in your exam rooms.
- ⇒ Record a pertinent message to your "message on-hold" if applicable.
- ⇒ Send every client home with some of the free literature you got from the various vendors.
- ⇒ Make sure every patient that comes into your office has an oral exam, and that the owner's are made aware of treatment options.
- ⇒ Include a dental related article in your newsletter, sent out in December, 2-3 weeks prior to your mailing.
- ⇒ Present a free client seminar in January or February about dental problems in pets.

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Step 6 (one month ahead): Call Clients to Remind Them of Pet Dental Health Month Special Promotions

Make friendly reminder calls to your clients to see if they received your postcard and encourage them to schedule an appointment for their pets' dental cleaning and checkup and/or for your promotional offers. Remind them that your promotional offer is available for a limited time. Your receptionist can make these calls as time allows, which gives them a chance to use their time efficiently, as well as providing a personal touch. This is not a "hard sell", but rather a gentle reminder about needed care. You can call your entire client base, or if you prefer, call only those clients that you targeted with your direct mail.

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Step 7 (One month ahead): Mail Direct Marketing Postcards to Clients

You should schedule your Dental Health Month mailings for the one month ahead and possibly three weeks after that, so your customers will get double reminders and have plenty of time to schedule their appointments. Of course, you should not discourage earlier appointments if people want to get their pets in immediately.

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Step 8 (ASAP): Deliver Quality Services

Hopefully, you will have prepared the professional and technical staff to deliver high quality care for the influx of patients you will experience. It is vital that the staff is motivated to find the problems that will invariably be there. It is not good enough to scale the teeth above the gum line and pull the loose ones!! The key is a good 12-step cleaning, thorough oral exam, recognition of oral pathology, and taking dental radiographs of these areas. Then be prepared to deliver the other basic services we outlined earlier, including surgical extractions, basic periodontal treatment, and bonded sealants for exposed dentin.

You will need some time to educate yourself and your technical staff on improved dental care, so start as soon as possible. A variety of dental CE opportunities can be found at: [HTTP://WWW.TOOTHVET.INFO/DC/](http://www.toothvet.info/dc/)

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Step 9 (ASAP): Reinforce Good Client Decisions

Be sure to take the time to explain what care was provided and the value of that care to every owner. You need to positively reinforce the behavior of good owners who provided quality care for their pets. Pictures always help communicate the “before” and “after” effects of the procedures. A digital camera, \$99 inkjet printer and photo quality inkjet paper can provide each owner a personalized record of their pet’s treatment for pennies per page. Clients love it!

Keep a box of your favorite home care items near the exam room and train a staff member to demonstrate proper home care to every dental client, on the client’s own pet!! You will see sales of home care items increase, providing yet another opportunity for the staff to say “hello”, when clients stop by to purchase refills of these home care items.

Consider free re-check exams of dental cases that required any treatment beyond cleaning. This gives you a chance to show the owners (and your staff) the improvement in oral health. It also give the oral tissues time to heal, which will make the patient more accepting of home care. These re-check exams can be performed by the technical staff, which gives them a chance to see the improvement in oral health. At this time the client should again receive positive reinforcement for the care they gave their pet, and the client should be informed when the next oral/dental exam should take place.

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Step 10 (Ongoing): Long-term Follow-up

Develop an “Annual Cleaning & Check-up” Package and send out reminders every 12 months to *all* clients, perhaps when they are due for their annual physical exam. You should also be sending out educational material periodically to reinforce the need for pet dental hygiene. Newsletter articles can serve this function very well. As time goes on, many patients will need care outside of your Pet Dental Health Month, and the workload will be spread out. You might also consider a marketing effort in August or September to help even out the workload.

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Step 11 (Ongoing): Track Your Response and Learn From Your Successes & Mistakes!

You can develop a simple tracking sheet on a piece of paper or develop an Excel spreadsheet to **track response daily** to your marketing efforts. Track every call you get as a result of every ad placed, postcards mailed or phone call made! Ensure the staff makes it a habit to ask every client how they heard about your offer or why they scheduled a dental health exam. *Find out what works in your particular situation.*

In addition, you should track **appointments scheduled** and **revenue acquired** from each marketing piece in order to track the success of each campaign and promotional offer. Reinforce

with your office staff how important this information is to ensure that you spend your marketing dollars and time appropriately. Tracking sheets can provide an unbiased statistical scorecard that can be used as a basis for staff bonuses, if desired. This information can be tedious to acquire, but without it you are guessing what efforts make you money and which do not.

In addition, you should ask clients if they like your promotional offers and make note of their comments. Track your mistakes or ineffective offers so you don't repeat bad campaigns. Invariably, some ideas will work better than others, and each clinic's clientele will react differently to different promotions. **Put very simply: Try a lot of different marketing ideas. Discard those things that don't work, and do more of those things that do work.**

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Good marketing is simply finding and expanding on those ideas that work best for your clientele, and eliminating or modifying those actions that do not work. Good Luck!!