

External Excellence - Branding with the Best

By Tricia Burt

Veterinary Medicine has encountered many challenges. Rising costs. Technology. Corporate practice. Increased competition. More educated consumers. The list goes on. For the most part, we've weathered the storms pretty well. And hopefully, you have not wavered on the guiding principles that make your brand (fancy marketing word for entity/image).

Your guiding principles determine your client's experience. When communicated properly to clients by our actions and words, they shape client (and potential clients) expectations and generate new business. For a good model on imaging, let's consider one of the best in the retail clothing/catalog industry.

Lands' End has undergone numerous changes in its product line, yet for 35 years, the customer experience has been constant. According to a Lands' End business analyst, the company values "Eight Principles of Business." The principles call for superiority in product quality, return policies, shipping, customer service, fair pricing through cost-conscious vendor selections, efficient operations, low overhead, and inexpensive facilities.

To manifest these principles in consumer perception, Lands' End touts three main components in maintaining its brand image. These are Contact, Delivery/Packaging and Satisfaction. By maintaining excellence in these areas, the company has achieved a superior image in the retail clothing catalog market - a very competitive industry to say the least. Let's discuss how you compare in various aspects of the client experience.

Training: Lands' End - New representatives (i.e. "receptionists") at Lands' End receive 70 to 80 hours of initial customer service training before serving customers and 24 hours of customer service training yearly from that point forward. Your Practice - What kind of training do your new "representatives" (receptionists) receive when they begin employment? Do you put a receptionist on the phone on day one? When was the last time your customer service employees (front desk personnel) spent a full-day training, or a half-day for that matter? How often do you have your receptionist sit in with the doctor in the exam room and actually listen to interaction about patient care with clients? Or do we just give them a bogus script and tell them to memorize it? Can your receptionist talk from actually knowing and experiencing what you do?

Customer Service/Education: Lands' End - Lands' End goes to great lengths to enhance a customer's experience when calling in an order. By continuously endeavoring to understand the desires of its customers, Lands' End has specific goals for "receiving" clients, as well as guidelines for attitude, demeanor, efficiency, accessibility ("on hold" policies, toll-free lines, 24-hour accessibility 364 days a year, etc.) and other important issues. Your Practice - What are your goals for the process of receiving clients? What about your goals for outcomes? Are you sure everyone is aware of these goals? Are they written down? When was the last time you discussed them? In your policy manual, do you have guidelines for attitude, demeanor, efficiency and accessibility? Or did we just get a phone script from a journal article and say, in effect, "Make this work". Are clients put on-hold for long periods? Do you respond quickly to e-mail messages from clients?

Image and Supporting Details: Lands' End - Lands' End has done an out-standing job of developing a "with the program" image, such as its campaign motto - "Life is in the details". Examples of details they tend to closely are unique product selection, packages shipped within 48 hours of ordering (72 hours with alterations), the order is right, and satisfaction guaranteed - a full refund if not completely satisfied, regardless of washed or worn. No exceptions. Believe it or not, customers do NOT exercise this option frequently. Your Practice - How well do your clients understand what sets you apart? For what are you known? What details do you tend to regarding accessibility or client follow-up? What is your policy for an unsatisfied client? How do you make clients and potential clients aware of your unique selling points? What would your ten-second commercial say about who you are and how you're unique?

In making these considerations, perhaps you've identified some areas of needed improvement.

Here are a few tips in going about making them:

- Decide what your brand image should be and stick to it! Define your desired client outcome. Discuss and actually write down what you want your clients to know and perceive about you and how you desire them to react. Yes, actually write this down.
- Create unique selling point programs from the "raw materials" of your services, products, people and facility. Develop comprehensive wellness programs, rather than just marketing services and products. Many providers have services and products similar to yours, but no one will have your programs.
- Execute and stay with an actual policy on team training. Our clients do so in what we call monthly team meetings, (not to be confused with weekly business meetings) in which we do just that. Among the regular topics in this systemized training process is specific client education in all management centers. Develop an actual staff training program, complete with your own objectives, policies and actual training on market differentiation (what makes your practice unique in terms of care, expertise, procedures, programs, warranties, technology, client relationships, etc.), written and audio rehearsal aids and other elements.
- Design and market a superior client satisfaction program. The less clients (and potential clients) have to lose, the more likely they are to react favorably.
- Survey clients at least twice a year. Consider a mail out survey as well as a point of service survey for each management area (front desk, clinic, product area). Schedule outbound phone calls to check on your client's level of satisfaction with recent services, purchases or problems.
- Designate a Quality Control Coordinator who spearheads quality improvement strategies and efforts. Learn from your mistakes and don't make them again. Make the delivery experience unique. Be different and tell people about your differences.

When it comes to branding, it's good to step outside your business now and then and look in. Understanding guiding principles of successful businesses in other industries (who market to the very same people that are your clients) can be very revealing of needed improvement. And remember, life is in the details. Get your clients and potential clients to understand and value your details.