

It's the Relationship – Beating the “Commodity” of Veterinary Medicine

By Tom Bowen, President

As we have discussed in the past, value is simply defined as the extent to which people perceive what you do as good. Client objections to price are not really objections to price at all. They are actually objections to the value of the experience at that price.

There is an increasing emphasis on price and distribution in today's offering of veterinary medicine and products. Without question, this will have an impact on quality providers of veterinary medicine. There is a trend towards more price conscious consumption in today's society.

Take buying a car – a friend of mine recently bought a new vehicle. By the time he met with a salesman face-to-face, he already had the rock bottom price from four different dealers in four different states, as well as their best trade offer on his current vehicle! Could it be the same is possible on an orthopedic surgery? In fact, it's probable.

The commodity of veterinary medicine will start with large internet-based outfits marketing the same retail products you sell directly to your clients for less, and delivered to their front doors. Next will come prescription items. When it gets to this level (and arguably it already has), the next step is to come hard at your client for the actual patient care.

My prediction is that “virtual veterinary clinics” will form. These will be much like PPO's in human medicine. Once there is consumption established with a pet owner (starting with supplies), they will contact your client regarding the need for preventative care, physical exams, spay/neuter, heartworm checks, even grooming or boarding using clever total care programs designed as Veterinary Happy Meals. They will market them directly to your clients on-line. When a client responds, they'll all go right into the panel doctor's schedule on-line; set up their initial visit, and just like that they're gone.

Sound far fetched? So did having prescription drugs delivered to your door step ten years ago. This Commodity of Veterinary Medicine is entirely possible at this juncture, and I would even say probable during your tenure as a practice owner. But fear not, there is good news.

Although any service or product you provide is comparable, the *relationship* within which it comes is not. Say it with me: ***"Although any service or product you provide is comparable, the relationship within which it comes is not."*** Again...

Let's face it, any of your services or products are available elsewhere and a lot cheaper. You can't be the best AND the cheapest at the same time; so in the case of our clients, someone is always going to be cheaper. That's not to say it's exactly the same program, it's simply to say similar services/products are available elsewhere for less. But the *relationship within it comes*...now there's the opportunity for differentiation.

More than ever before, it is absolutely imperative we teach our clients how to value the relationship within which comes the commodity. That is the one thing in this whole distribution universe that is truly incomparable. The spay is comparable. The vaccination is comparable. The boarding is comparable. But the relationship within which all these things occur is not. Period.

Therein lays the marketing opportunity of our day. Your clients' loyalty will be put to the test. And to pass the test, you must teach them everything possible about how to value the relationship within their care and products. They know how to value the commodity, but they do not know how to value the relationship. You must put programs in place that teach them. And time is of the essence.

There is a concept in marketing known as Unique Selling Points. A USP is an offering that comes with a commodity that makes it truly unique. Think of companies that have provided examples of this. Lee Iocca had the first ever five-year, fifty-thousand mile bumper-to-bumper automobile warranty. He taught people to value the relationship within which comes driving a car, rather than the car itself. And look where that led the automobile industry and it's USP's.

What are you doing in your practice, right this minute, to teach clients how to value your practice at a higher level? And have you realized marketing the commodity is not the answer? The answer is marketing the relationship within which it comes. That is the battle ground on which you cannot lose. It is there we must apply our creative efforts in marketing.