

Ask the Right Questions for the Right Answers

By Valerie Wham

The future of veterinary medicine will be dramatically affected by many of the same forces that have affected all business in the past: societal issues, economic viability, political decisions, and technological advances will all have an impact on how we do business in the future. These issues, along with others specific to veterinary medicine, will create both threats and opportunities that need to be addressed in order for the veterinary profession and your individual practice to remain productive and economically successful.

Why change? We all experience the present, but few of us really plan for the future. You can be satisfied or dissatisfied with the present, but no matter how good or bad the present is, guess what, it's going to change. The future is coming whether you're ready or not. Strategy is about seeing options and making choices. Planning for and acting on your future plans will require change, and change is always difficult. But given the forces affecting the future, not changing is not an option. These outside forces are something that all businesses face, and one to which all businesses have to respond in order to continue to be successful. If you can't adapt you won't survive, and the rate of change is increasing at a higher rate all the time.

As a veterinarian you were most likely never formally trained in business, and you have probably never thought about the importance of strategically planning for your business future. When you were in school your focus was on medicine. This is the reason it is even more important for a practice owner to create a specific plan for the future and to proactively take steps to capitalize on any opportunities that exist and to avoid the threats that may lie ahead. Put simply, your future success depends on a plan, not just hope.

Where do we start? To fully understand how to affect your veterinary business you must understand your product from the point of view of the client. In the service business, where the product is intangible, the clients' perceptions are the key drivers in the decision process. This means your clients' perceptions are their reality and are the only perceptions that matter, because they make their decisions based on these perceptions. So what is your product? Quality medicine? Ask any veterinarian and they'll tell you they provide high quality medicine. Is that what you really sell in the eyes of the client? What you really sell is peace of mind and the relationship between your practice, the pet and the client.

How is this product judged by your clients? Since your clients can't accurately judge the quality of your medicine they will infer quality by any tangible means possible - how nice you and your staff members are, how clean and professional the hospital and employees look, the delivery of health care education and recommendations for the care of their pets, and many other things that don't have anything to do with the quality of the medicine you provide, but have everything to do with whether or not these clients are satisfied and happy with your business. You can't forget that your product is not only the services you provide, but also how you deliver those services. New demands from the public for service delivery will require new ideas and creative alternatives. This is where a strategic plan becomes an essential tool for your future success.