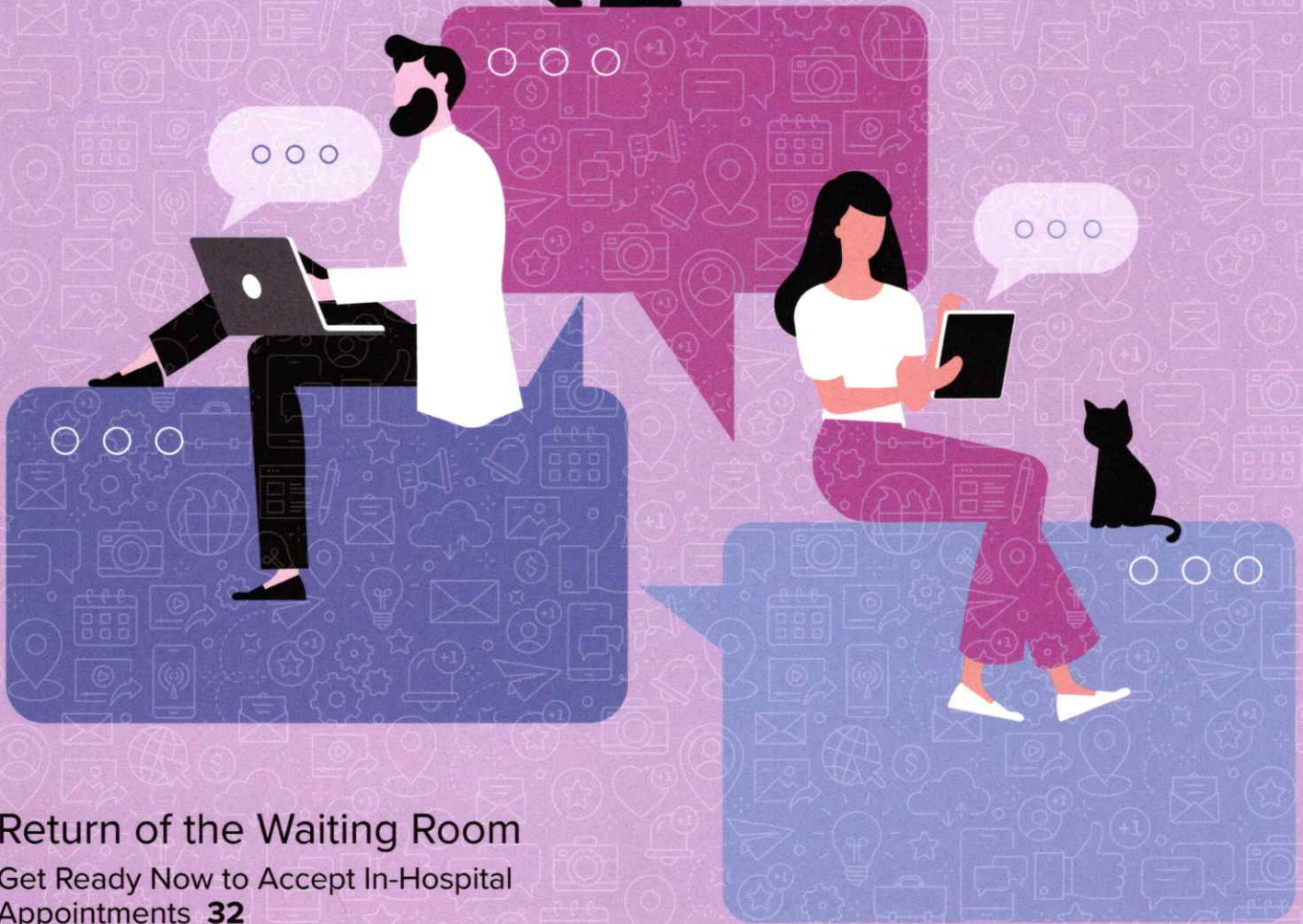


# Trends

magazine

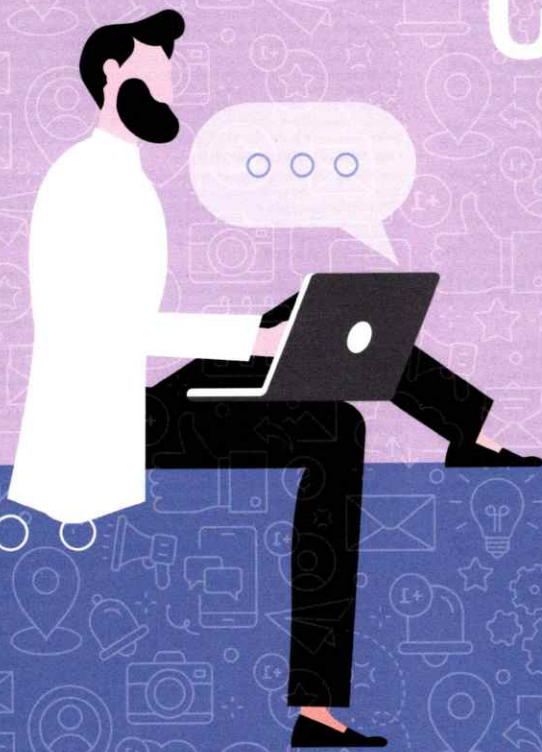
## Distance Socializing

The Importance of Social Media Connections in the Pandemic 24



Return of the Waiting Room  
Get Ready Now to Accept In-Hospital  
Appointments 32

# Distanced Connections



## During the Pandemic, Social Media Is More Important than Ever

by Jen Reeder

WHEN THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC STARTED THUNDERING across North America in March of 2020, animal hospitals like AAHA-accredited Truro Veterinary Hospital in Nova Scotia, Canada, quickly pivoted to protect staff and clients. The practice could only treat urgent-care cases and decreased the number of employees in the building from 12–15 to just 4–6 at any given time. People needed to drop off pets for curbside visits rather than entering the facility.

Clients flooded the front desk with calls and questions about the new protocols. So Truro Veterinary Hospital made a video of an employee demonstrating—with her charming mastiff—how the handoffs worked and posted it to their Facebook page.

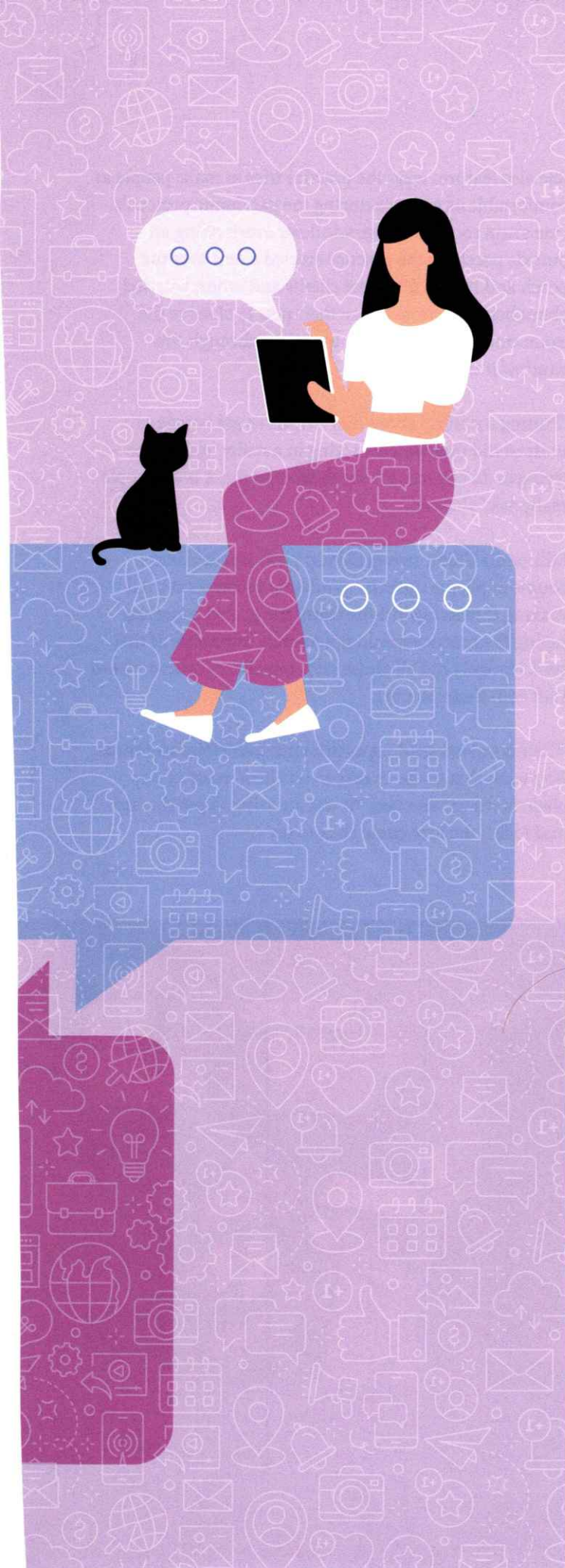
Melissa Aucoin, DVM, a veterinarian at the practice and president of the Nova Scotia Veterinary Medical Association, said the initial video proved so successful that the team has made similar videos—with the same handler and dog—to highlight the latest protocols as they've shifted throughout the pandemic.

“We have a lot of people who spend a lot of time on Facebook, and we felt that would be a good way for them to get a feel for how things would look when they came in,” she said. “It was easier for people to know what to expect and for staff to maybe not have to explain everything over and over again. They could say, ‘Just check the video if you’re worried when you come in.’”

Truro Veterinary Hospital also frequently posts photos of dogs in graduation caps when they finish obedience school at the practice, and showcases the team volunteering at spay/neuter clinics to help a local rescue organization.

### Getting Creative

As the world has grappled with the coronavirus for more than a year now, animal hospitals have been forced to find creative ways to safely stay open while also staying



connected to clients. With curbside protocols and masks making face-to-face interactions minimal at best, social media has become increasingly important as a tool not just for informing clients but for bolstering the practice-client bond.

Robin Elliott works in reception, marketing, and digital management at AAHA-accredited Veterinary and Rehabilitation Center of Cape Elizabeth in Cape Elizabeth, Maine. She credits posting social media pics of pets being cared for inside the hospital while their owners wait outside in cars with helping maintain trust with clients.

“We’re really trying to show them that we love their pets, what we do to care for them, that we do everything we can to keep them safe and comfortable when they’re inside,” she said. “I think it’s scary for people to let their pet go by itself into a building. We’re trying to bridge that to help people feel better.”

Elliott, who manages the practice’s social media pages, keeps followers engaged in fun ways. For instance, when many clients started working remotely due to the pandemic, she put out a Facebook call for photos of pets “working” at home and got a huge response.

She also features ways the practice tries to make people as comfortable as possible during the pandemic protocols. One exam room has large windows overlooking an outside porch, so the practice erected a tent over the porch and invites first-time clients and others worried about being separated from their pets to observe the exam from outside and ask questions through the window if they’d like.

“Putting a post up about that helped us get people to understand that we were trying in a really tough time—trying to do our best for them, which I think is all people really ask,” she said.

Still, while Elliott strives to keep posts upbeat, after a couple of people upset by pandemic protocols started making threats against the team, she posted a message saying the practice would not tolerate any abuse of the staff. Not only did all abuse stop, but clients overwhelmed staff with their support.

“Clients started sending us presents and letters and cards. Boy, what that made us realize was how many of our clients love us,” she said. “It was amazing to put that up and to feel the love come back to us.”



Sue Ettinger, DVM, DACVIM, of VCA Veterinary Referral and Emergency Center in Norwalk, Connecticut Photo courtesy of Sue Ettinger



Veterinary and Rehabilitation Center of Cape Elizabeth in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, uses social media to show its COVID protocols Photo courtesy of Veterinary and Rehabilitation Center of Cape Elizabeth



Clients loved a social media post featuring Jared Cohen, DVM, working at VCA Blum Animal Hospital Photo courtesy of VCA Blum Animal Hospital

“We’re really trying to show them that we love their pets, what we do to care for them, that we do everything we can to keep them safe and comfortable when they’re inside.”

—ROBIN ELLIOTT

### Getting the Right Message Out

Though every social media post includes the requisite photo of a cute dog or cat, Elliott calibrates the content depending on whether she’s posting on Facebook or Instagram. Facebook followers tend to be older and favor posts with an emotional tie, while younger Instagram followers respond better to humor. (Be sure to use hashtags on Instagram. Elliott likes #YourOtherFamilyDoctor.)

Maggie Marton, a pet writer who blogs at OhMyDogBlog.com and is coauthor of *Pet Blogging for Love and Money*, said Facebook and Instagram are the two most important social media sites for animal hospitals. She noted that Instagram is a terrific place to reach young people who adopted their first pet during the pandemic.

While she recognizes veterinary teams are particularly strapped for time during the pandemic, she believes

practices still need to maintain a strong social media presence—and that it might not take as much time as you think.

“You don’t need to post three to five times a day,” she said. “You just need to post three to five times per week and just make sure it’s quality content that people will engage with or react to in some way.”

The best place to start is jotting down a few goals, Marton advised. Are you trying to attract new clients? Introduce a new service, team member, or piece of equipment? Share client testimonials?

“Plan one post per week to tick off each of those goals,” she said. “The simpler you are, the louder you can amplify your message versus just trying to throw out a whole bunch of stuff and hope something sticks.”



Sue Ettinger, DVM, DACVIM, with Goldie Sun, a dog with lymphoma whose family traveled from Florida after finding her on social media. Photo courtesy of Sue Ettinger



Truro Veterinary Hospital frequently posts photos showing the team volunteering at spay/neuter clinics to help a local rescue organization. Photo courtesy of Truro Veterinary Hospital



Sue Ettinger, DVM, DACVIM, uses social media to spread information about pet cancer. Photo courtesy of Sue Ettinger

## What to Do About Negative Comments

When a client posts a negative comment about the practice or a team member on social media, it might be tempting to ignore the post altogether. But that's a mistake, according to Maggie Marton, coauthor of *Pet Blogging for Love and Money*.

"The only real option is to acknowledge the person's complaint and get the discussion off the page," she advised. "Validate: 'I can see you're upset. We're sorry this happened. We strive to provide excellent service. Please get in touch with us via DM (direct message) so we can resolve,' and move it out of public as quickly as possible."

To streamline the process, a practice can schedule a week's worth of social media posts that will automatically post with tools like CoSchedule, HootSuite, Buffer, and Planoly, though Marton emphasized someone will still need to monitor public comments and respond in a timely fashion.

Her *Pet Blogging for Love and Money* coauthor Carol Bryant, who blogs at [FidoseOfReality.com](http://FidoseOfReality.com), agrees. She said current and potential clients will discuss your practice on social media regardless of whether you're engaging with them online.

"You can either sit on the sidelines and listen to what people are saying, or you can join the conversation and have a blog and a social media presence and respond to your clients," Bryant said. "That's just the day and age we live in."

While people wait in cars as their pets are treated inside, many visit their practice's social media sites and post on their own pages about their pet's exam.

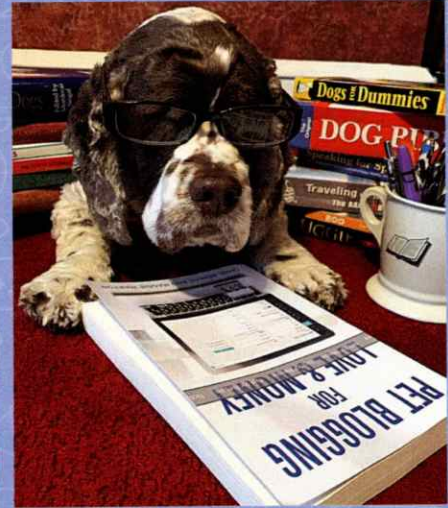
"Pets are more a member of the family than they ever have been," she emphasized.



Many clients love seeing their pet's updates on social media. Photo courtesy of Veterinary and Rehabilitation Center of Cape Elizabeth



Sue Ettinger, DVM, DACVIM, creates many social media posts featuring her patients. Photo courtesy of Sue Ettinger



Veterinary and Rehabilitation Center of Cape Elizabeth put out a call for photos of pets "working from home." Photo courtesy of Carol Bryant

“It’s one thing for someone to follow us, but we want them to feel part of the community too—especially when we can’t see them in person and create that extra level of bonding.”

—NATALIE MARKS, DVM, CVJ

### Showing You Care

As a dog mom, Bryant loves watching Instagram Stories—short videos that can then have a call to action, such as scheduling an appointment—that show how veterinarians care for patients. In addition to following her cocker spaniel Dexter’s AAHA-accredited practice, she follows many prominent veterinarians, including Sue Ettinger, DVM, DACVIM (Oncology), who is known online as “Dr. Sue Cancer Vet.”

Since the release of her 2011 book *The Dog Cancer Survival Guide*, Ettinger, a veterinary oncologist at AAHA-accredited VCA Veterinary Referral and Emergency Center in Norwalk, Connecticut, has garnered over 35,000 Facebook fans and over 14,600 Instagram followers.

One of her first Facebook posts to resonate with fans pictured a golden retriever with an amputated forelimb

seated in front of a birthday cake and the caption, “Bella is a hemangiosarcoma survivor of two+ years and here she is celebrating her birthday.”

“People wanted to celebrate milestones of pets with cancer, and people wanted to learn about pets with cancer,” Ettinger recalled.

She’s found people also respond positively to photos of pets who have died after battling cancer—sharing empathy for the pet’s family and for Ettinger. People seem to be even more engaged on her social media sites during the pandemic because they’re spending more time at home with their pets; not only is the human-animal bond increasing, but people are noticing potential health issues like lumps sooner.

A professional videographer helps Ettinger create YouTube vlogs (video blogs) about common tumor types



Concerned clients can observe their pets during procedures at VRCCE. Photo courtesy of Veterinary and Rehabilitation Center of Cape Elizabeth



Cute puppy pictures are always popular on social media. Photo courtesy of Veterinary and Rehabilitation Center of Cape Elizabeth



Sue Ettinger, DVM, DACVIM, poses with a happy patient upon chemo graduation. Photo courtesy of Sue Ettinger

and early detection—her catchphrase is “Don’t wait. Aspirate.” Though Ettinger doesn’t make any money on the videos (or her social media accounts, for that matter), she’s passionate about spreading awareness and credible information by building an online library for pet owners as well as veterinarians.

In fact, she encourages veterinarians to refer clients to her videos as a sort of “digital prescription” (a term she credits to her friend, Susan Little, DVM, DABVP [Feline]).

Though working on her vlog, blog, and social media sites cuts into a great deal of Ettinger’s spare time, she finds it worthwhile when people from around the world tell her they decided to have a pet’s lump aspirated or don’t feel scared asking about chemotherapy thanks to her posts.

“I feel like it’s just my duty—my passion—to put reliable information out on the internet,” she said.

Sharing reliable updates about COVID-19 and pets quickly became a top priority for Natalie Marks, DVM, CVJ, and veterinarian at AAHA-accredited VCA Blum Animal Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. As a certified veterinary journalist, Marks interviewed experts from the AVMA and veterinarians from Worms & Germs Blog about the fast-changing topic and shared their insights on her practice’s social media sites.

“We were pretty proactive trying to keep clients informed,” she said. “Especially at the beginning, there was so much confusion. Can dogs get this? Can cats get this? Can dogs and cats transfer it back to humans?”

## Links for More Information:

- Truro Veterinary Hospital: [trurovet.com](http://trurovet.com)
- Veterinary and Rehabilitation Center of Cape Elizabeth: [vrce.com](http://vrce.com)
- Oh My Dog Blog: [ohmydogblog.com](http://ohmydogblog.com)
- Fidose of Reality: [fidoseofreality.com](http://fidoseofreality.com)
- Dr. Sue Cancer Vet: [drsuecancervet.com](http://drsuecancervet.com)
- VCA Blum Animal Hospital: [vcahospitals.com/blum](http://vcahospitals.com/blum)

Instead of just saying there’s uncertainty and nobody knows, we said, “This is what we know for sure, and this is what we’re working on to get for you.”

In addition to timely information, the social media team at Blum—which includes a mix of team members from management, the front desk, and assistants—also shares warm and fuzzy posts to humanize the team. For example, clients loved a Facebook photo of a veterinarian wearing a mask and typing on a computer—with a client’s poodle resting on his lap.

As demand for pets has skyrocketed during stay-at-home orders, VCA Blum Animal Hospital has increasingly shared posts from local animal shelters and rescue organizations about adoptable dogs and cats. Some of the pets got adopted by clients and now are patients of the practice.

“We make sure that we are providing posts that encourage engagement,” Marks said. “It’s one thing for someone to follow us, but we want them to feel part of the community too—especially when we can’t see them in person and create that extra level of bonding.”

Marks feels the most important social media goal for practices should be finding ways to personalize the team to new clients. While she’s hugged and cried with some clients for over 20 years, newer clients who don’t share a history of face-to-face interactions might be inclined to try a different practice after just one bad phone call.

“The more you can connect to them, the harder it is for them to do a quick judgment,” she said. “I would just encourage that as the key focus whenever you’re thinking of a post: How do you humanize what you’re doing? We have feelings too, and we have bad days, and we’re just doing the best that we can in the midst of being essential workers.” ✨



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder deeply appreciates the heroic efforts veterinary teams are taking during the pandemic to keep pets and people as healthy as possible.