



# Staying in Touch with Clients

Veterinary practices offer smartphone apps

by Jen Reeder

It's the Digital Age, and cell phone use is a daily reality for most of America. Investigation for the Pew Research Center's Pew Internet & American Life Project found that, as of December 2012, 87% of American adults have a cell phone, and 45% of American adults use a smartphone. It also found a majority of young Americans use smartphones; 65% of 18- to 29-year-olds have one.

As a result, savvy veterinary practices are now using the smartphone for marketing. Specifically, they are offering smartphone apps as a free service to clients.

"It's just one more tool in the arsenal," said Brian Hurley, DVM and co-owner of AAHA-accredited Gardner Animal Care Center in Gardner, Mass. "We've been in business 25 years, but we're constantly trying to reinvent ourselves.... I'm always looking for the next great thing to offer the client."

The practice began offering a customized app in January 2013. Available to clients through Apple's iTunes (for iPhones or iPads) or Google Play (for Android devices), the in-touch MOBILE vet app features buttons to "tap to call" the practice or to request an appointment or prescription refill, emergency contacts and a news feed of content that Hurley generates (such as food recalls or discounted services).

"When we had a blizzard come through, I was keeping [clients] up to date not only on Facebook and Twitter, but I was also posting it within the app



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so you didn't have to have your computer open to see [if we were] open, what time are we closing, those types of things," Hurley said. "I think it gives the client that sense of 24/7 contact with us."

Hurley purchased the "premium" package for an initial fee of \$1,299 (plus a \$50 monthly hosting fee) from in-touch MOBILE, which began offering its vet app in December 2012. The package includes weekly online training and marketing seminars, along with "Pet Postcards," a pet-photo-sharing template that brands pet photos with the animal hospital's name so that when clients take a photo of their pet and share it on social media, they also share the practice's name with all of their friends.

Having an app in today's world sends the message that you're keeping up with technology, which conveys the message to your clients that you're current with developments in your practice.



Hurley said Gardner Animal Care strives to enhance the family-pet-veterinary bond, which can be difficult with clients who may only visit the practice once a year. He said the app and the social media sites to which it links help maintain a relationship year-round.

“For us, I don’t care where you are, we want to make sure we’re making it as easy for you as we can to communicate with us and facilitate whatever it is you need for your pet,” Hurley said. “We want to be communicating with [our clients]. It’s not like we can pick up the phone and say, ‘Hi! It’s Dr. Brian. Just wanted to see what’s new in your life.’”

Hurley said the app is a worthwhile investment that is more cost-effective in the long run than traditional marketing methods, like buying a Yellow Pages ad for thousands of dollars a month. This is because the app development fee is a one-time fee, and the benefits extend beyond an ad on a piece of paper.

“That’s what this is about—it’s about marketing. But it’s not just ‘get your name out there.’ This gives you the ability to increase that communication, to increase the touches, to endear clients to you, which a Yellow Pages ad just can’t do. It’s a piece of paper. Where with the app, the sky’s the limit,” Hurley said.

“It’s not going to surprise me to see the number of veterinary apps increase because in this day and age, it’s almost useless to have a Yellow Pages ad. You have to make that shift in your way of thinking,” Hurley added.

### New ways to connect

Another consideration is that the number of homes with only wireless—as opposed to landline—phones continues to grow. The results of the January–June 2012 National Health Interview Survey, published in December 2012 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics, showed 35.8% of American homes had only wireless telephones (up 1.8% since the second half of 2011), and nearly one in six homes with landlines still received the majority—or all—of their calls on their cell phones.

Mary Shields, CEO of in-touch MOBILE, which she founded in 2009, recalls that veterinary clinics used to have magnets printed with their contact information for clients to put on the refrigerator near their telephone. “You can’t put it near the telephone anymore because we’re mobile,” Shields pointed out. “Having a piece of real estate on the primary caregiver’s cell phone is invaluable.”

She said an app creates an ongoing communication channel with clients—they essentially have their animal hospital on speed dial, and the practice sends “push notifications” when it updates its news feed. With a push notification, clients receive an alert on their phone that they have to touch (and, in essence, read) to turn off the notice. In contrast, clients can easily delete an email without reading its contents.

“The open rate on the push notification is 97% versus [that for] an email, where the open rate’s only 25%,” Shields said.

Kimm Pontiff, hospital administrator at AAHA-accredited Coral Veterinary Clinic, which has two locations in Florida (Fort Myers and Sanibel), said she heard about the importance of being “mobile-friendly” at the North American Veterinary Conference. Her son, an information technology student, developed an app—and subsequently an app company, Pontiff Technology Solutions—for the practice. Coral Veterinary Clinic, which was

founded in 1967, began offering the app for Android devices in January 2012 and for iPhones in December 2012.

She said clients can request an appointment or prescription refill with the app, call either one of the offices by tapping a link and find directions via Google Maps to both clinics. The app also provides an easy way to contact recommended emergency clinics in the area and get directions to them.

“We felt that was important because people in an emergency are usually in a panic. They don’t have time to look through the phone book and try to find a phone number,” Pontiff said. “So all they have to do is go to the app and there’s three emergency clinics listed, so they can chose the closest one to them and call immediately with just a touch of the phone.”

Clients can also send an email through the app or visit the practice’s website or Facebook page. There are sections for promotions, like discounts during Dental Month, for events, such as Valentine’s Day photos with pets, and for biographies of the veterinarians. She said she promoted the app with an email blast and a Facebook post and by printing information about it on all invoices.

Pontiff noted that the \$1,200 she paid for the app development is an economical way to communicate with clients since it’s something the practice can use forever, unlike a one-time ad.

Stacey Santi, DVM and managing veterinarian at AAHA-accredited Riverview Animal Hospital in Durango, Colo., has been on both sides of the equation. She began offering an app for her practice in October 2012 and launched a veterinary app company, Vet2Pet, in January 2013.

“The reason I did it is because I could see a lot of other businesses had apps. When my hairdresser started having one, I thought, ‘Holy cow, I better have one, too,’” Santi said.

“I also know, being a veterinarian, that veterinarians—we’re so busy. Most of us are not trained in technology. I decided

Last October, Santi looked at the schedule and saw it would be a slow week, so she sent a push notification to app users offering \$50 off dentals by mentioning the app. . . . It resulted in a \$2,100 revenue increase.

I wanted to make a company that could simplify the whole process and provide a tool like this for veterinarians. We want something that works, that’s progressive and current, but that’s not a lot of hands-on managing,” Santi noted.

She said the initial setup fee of \$500 (there’s also a \$100 monthly hosting fee) includes customizing the app, including artwork and features like contact buttons, push notifications and pet portal access through Vetstreet.

An upgrade option for the app she’s found helpful is a customizable loyalty reward program. At Riverview, clients gain “punches” by making a \$100 purchase, downloading the app, referring a friend or giving an online review. After 12 punches (made by scanning a QR code with their phone), they receive a \$100 credit.

“It’s a way for us to strengthen the bond with people who already like us,” she said. “And the other thing it does is encourages them to purchase medications from us rather than online pharmacies.”

Vet2Pet provides extensive analytical reporting beyond the number of app downloads (Riverview had 1,246 downloads from an active base of 3,400 clients as of April 2013), such as tracking how much time is spent on the app, the sequence of button behavior, which buttons are hit most and even ways to analyze how much income is generated by the app. (Riverview generated over \$7,000 in income from app blasts between October 2012 and April 2013.)

For example, last October, Santi looked at the schedule and saw it would be a slow week, so she sent a push notification to app users offering \$50 off dentals if they mentioned the app.

“I went back and looked at how many people claimed that reward and how much money they spent with that reward visit. I also compared it to how much that same group of clients spent the year before, and the year before that, on dentals,” Santi said. “It ended up being a \$2,100 revenue increase for us with that group of clients.”

She said even though veterinarians might not always use or understand apps, “There’s a good possibility your clients do.”

“You have to keep up with technology, even if it’s out of your wheelhouse, or someone else is going to beat you to it,” she said. “Having an app in today’s world sends the message that you’re keeping up with technology. I think that translates to also represent that you’re current in your medicine and in your surgery, your treatment.”

### Stay ahead of the curve

Dave Seefeldt, DVM and owner of AAHA-accredited Airdrie Animal Health Centre in Airdrie, Alberta, Canada, started offering a Vet2Pet custom app in February 2013, which he said puts him “ahead of the curve” compared to many of his colleagues. He said 175 clients downloaded the app the first month it was offered.

His goal is to increase communication with clients as well as compliance by being able to send reminders for wellness exams and dentistry.

“We have had some very positive feedback. Most people have liked that they have all of our info right there when they press on the app button,” he said.

He’s also had positive feedback from his employees, who “loved the idea” of offering an app. “Most of the staff are young and have grown up with the quick changes in technology so they are pretty tech savvy,” Seefeldt said. “They see the practice as evolving with technology.”

Ed Fegan, practice manager at Big Creek Pet Hospital, which has two locations in greater Cleveland, Ohio, said

he began offering an app from in-touch MOBILE in November 2012 to increase client communication and promote a “cutting-edge” persona for the practice.

As a result, he’s cut down on the number of reminder postcards he sends, which saves money on postage and printing. He still sends emails, but said the phone app has distinct advantages.

“When we send out an email, we have a 10–15% bounce rate—the email address is bad because people are changing their email addresses on a pretty frequent basis,” he said. “Or they have multiple emails—I personally have four email accounts that I’m checking. You’re not looking at the emails quite as often as you should.”

Fegan said the practice maintains a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus and YouTube, and its website has a mobile version because he’s always seeking creative ways to communicate with clients. In contrast, he knows of competitors that still don’t even have websites.

“I know a clinic that has digital X-rays, does laser surgeries, but they don’t have a website. I just sort of scratch my head,” he said.

“The mobile app is a tool,” Fegan noted. “I’m glad we’re at the beginning of it because it’s something that’s coming. In the next few years, just like websites, the majority of clinics will have one—because we’ve got to communicate with our clients, and we’ve got to be able to do it in ways they want.” ■

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder writes frequently about pets from her home office in Durango, Colo., which she shares with her husband and their Lab mix, Rio.

For more information, see:

#### **Pontiff Technology Solutions**

*ptsolutionsfl.com*

#### **in-touch MOBILE**

*in-touchmobile.com*

#### **Vet2Pet**

*myvet2pet.com*