



### 9.1.5. THE NEW CLIENT ENGAGEMENT: USING REMINDERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA MEANINGFULLY

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Have you ever played the telephone game? One person whispers a message to an adjacent person in a group. The communiqué is passed along until the last player reveals the message to everyone. Inevitably, and this has apparently been studied by academic types, the final version of the message varies significantly, sometimes almost unrecognizably, from the start. “Mary is wearing a green dress to the dance with Bill.” morphs into “Mary wore a green dress while dancing with Phil.” I fear veterinarians have literally been playing the telephone game with our clients. We’ve been relying on outdated and outmoded telephone conversations, faxes, and mail while the rest of the world whisks away at the speed of electrons. We pass information slowly by word-of-mouth, often creating confused conversations and mixed messages while politicians move millions with 140 characters and Millennials modify their life by memes. It’s time veterinarians get serious about winning social media for practice success. It’s time to hang up the phone and tap that app.

#### How Did We Get Here?

Over the past decade, it’s become increasingly apparent to me that many of my colleagues aren’t keeping up with communication technology. For most of our profession’s existence, we thrived simply by sending postcards. A pet owner received a notice in the mail it was time for her pet’s vaccinations, and, voila, she booked an appointment. No more. For starters, few check their mail and when they do, tend to toss anything suggestive of marketing. Secondly, young pet owners may not have a mailbox, at least not a physical one. Finally, who has the time to read a postcard, dial a number, talk to someone and haggle over a date and time that works with everyone’s schedule? And we wonder why visits and revenues are plunging and pet owners are increasingly skeptical and unimpressed with our services? Check your mailbox.

It’s not that veterinarians are incapable of changing or taking action; it’s more often our inability or stubbornness to take appropriate action. I gave my first “social media and text message” lecture at the 2007 North American Veterinary Conference (now VMX). I may have been the first veterinarian to advise clinics to join Facebook and monitor this new thing I thought would be important to the profession. I also touted text as the next “postcard” and urged owners to pressure software developers to implement these features in their reminder systems. I was roundly laughed at and ignored for several years. It’s okay; I’m over it.



When our profession finally began approaching social media, email and text, we were hampered by our postcard postscript. Emails weren't much more than mailers mated to a screen. Text messages became intrusions screaming "Discount day!" or "How's it going, client!" instead of brief, personal interactions. Social media became a mess for the few daring to dip into its murky waters. Without a meaningful vision, strategy, or comprehension, social media and digital communications became haranguing hinterlands to be avoided or minimally appeased. Thankfully, we're emerging from those dark days, and, although the electronic glare can be overwhelming at first, progressive clinics are seeing growth in revenue, patient care, and client satisfaction by embracing Client Communication 2.0.

### Where Are Clients Listening?

The first step toward transitioning to Client Communication 2.0 is understanding where your clients are talking. This is important because a recent McKinsey Report concluded that businesses who utilize social media and electronic communication experienced 20 percent more revenue and 60 percent higher profit growth. Over half of all U.K. adults use Facebook on a regular basis with an estimated 78 percent of over 18's checking their status routinely. 20 to 29-year-olds comprise the largest group of Facebook users followed by 30 to 39's and 40 to 49's. Over 14 million Britons Tweet, 36 million watch YouTube, and 40 percent of the nearly 20 million Instagram addicts log in daily. About 15 percent of the estimated 10 million U.K. Pinterest participants eyeball their boards every day.

For most veterinary clinics, this means focusing your social media efforts on Facebook and Instagram and dabble in YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, SnapChart, and TikTok. I suggest securing clinic profiles on all social media platforms (I'm talking to you, TikTok, Snapchat, WeChat and the like), but concentrate on connecting with your Facebook and Instagram family.

### How Are Clients Listening?

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, texting and email each attract a unique audience and establish specific expectations. You can think of it in terms of planning to attend a concert; the musical genre and venue will largely determine how you dress and behave. Iron Maiden fans will typically look a bit different than those attending an Adele performance. It's fair to say there are general expectations and tendencies worth noting to prevent you from showing up at the Spandau Ballet reunion clad in leather and safety pins. The lesson is you need to dress your online content appropriately for the show.

### Dressing Your Presence Based on Platform

A common 'dress code' mistake I see is applying the same branding, messaging, and strategy across all social media platforms. Because each platform operates in a distinctive manner, here are a few tips when creating content on the major social media outlets:



## Facebook

Facebook is the modern pub crawl. People check their Facebook feed to get the latest gossip, trending news, and entertainment. Facebook is where most funny cat videos are viewed. A simple rule of thumb I follow is that about 80 percent of content should build your brand, educate, and add value to the veterinary profession and 20 percent can promote a service, product, or promotion. Creating a weekly or monthly schedule can help balance your strategy. If you post daily, consider four or five posts per week consisting of: breaking pet news, reposts of feel-good animal stories, and advances in veterinary medicine. One or two posts each week can highlight your senior pet care program, a weight loss promotion, or seasonal emphasis on flea and tick products. You can further build your brand when sharing other posts by adding, “ABC Veterinary loves research demonstrating the powerful human-animal bond! Check this out!” Show your personality and passion in your posts.

An easy way to ignite engagement and educate on Facebook is by sharing pictures. After obtaining permission, nothing sparks a smile and a conversation more than a picture or video of a cuddly puppy or a pet combating a challenging condition. “We were all hugs today with these cuties in for an intestinal parasite check and immunizations!” or “Mabel is a 15-year old kitty beating the odds. Diagnosed with kidney failure six months ago, her owners are proof that love, compassion, and commitment can make a difference. That’s the face of a fighter! If your older cat is drinking or urinating more, losing weight or acting tired, let us check them out. Way to go, Mabel!” Entertain, inspire, and educate.

## Instagram

Pictures. Beautiful pictures. And videos. Shorter videos. I consider Instagram for clinics as an excellent platform to reveal ‘behind the scenes,’ ‘wow,’ and ‘gorgeous’ sides of practice. Messages that pop on other platforms can fall flat unless fabulously framed for Instagram. What’s in it for us? Showing your softer side and lots of heroic pictures.

## YouTube

YouTube is a search engine run by Google. That’s critical to remember when creating YouTube content for your clinic. Users subscribe to channels to learn from or they find entertaining and interesting. Most veterinarians should use YouTube to provide virtual hospital tours, how-to videos, and information their clients are searching for. Video production is rapidly improving on YouTube; shaky smartphone video with faint audio is a no-no. Be sure to link to your clinic’s website and other social media in each video’s description and optimize end screens and cards.

## Twitter

If Facebook is the neighborhood pub, Twitter is a cruise ship. Loads of anonymous people climb aboard hashtags and hurl clever quips and offensive oratory over cyberspace cocktails. For most clinics, Twitter isn’t incredibly helpful. Use it to share



hospital blog posts, a special event, or breaking news. I discourage tweeting discount codes, product sales, and other blatant promotions. Social media backlash can be brutal, particularly around perceived “advertising.” Tweet compassionately, cleverly, and carefully.

### TikTok and Snapchat

TikTok brought viral music videos to the masses while Snapchat Stories brought business potential, but current demographics skew awfully young for most veterinary clinics. In March of 2022, 57% of TikTok users were female and 43% male. Roughly 43% of TikTok's global audience is between 18 and 24 years old. 32% of TikTok users are aged between 25 and 34. Only 3.4% of the TikTok audience is older than 55.

For SnapChat, 21.1% of Snapchat's total ad audience was aged 13 to 17, 38.9% aged 18 to 24, 22.0% 25 to 34, 13.5% 35 to 49, and 3.6% aged 50 and above.

My advice is get onboard and monitor for now. Big changes are promised that should help small businesses connect with the next generation of pet owners.

### Live streaming

Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have evolved into excellent live streaming services. While these are the early days of live video, watch this space closely. Try hosting a 30-minute live Q-and-A, offer a five-minute highlight of a new product or service, or announce an event. The live events are automatically archived for later viewing. With a little planning and promotion, you could reach scores of clients and potential new clients with little effort.

### Pinterest

What happened to Pinterest? A widely-publicized Pinterest stat is that 80 percent of its users are female. That looks great on paper, but I've found using Pinterest as a standalone or primary social media marketing platform to significantly underperform. Besides, Pinterest growth has plateaued and appears to be on the decline. Share original blog posts and infographics along with how-to's and YouTube videos. Showing up seems to be half the battle for Pinterest.

Today's texting and email are like yesterday's phone call and postcards in many ways. Each represents a different communication opportunity than social media. Understanding how people use, and want to use, text and email is critical for Client Communication 2.0.



## Text messages

This is my preferred way to remind clients and check on patients. Five texting caveats: 1) If you're requesting to schedule an appointment, the mechanism to make that appointment needs to be embedded in the text. No dialing or texting back-and-forth. Click here or reply to book an appointment. No more. 2) If confirming an existing appointment, same rules. 3) If checking on a patient, make it personal and be prepared to discuss. Texting creates a sense of urgency and when a client responds; they expect you to be available to reply. If the client responds after hours, have an autoresponder with what to do in an emergency in place. 4) Text checkups are best for minor medical conditions and routine visits. Call after surgery, anesthesia, and major diagnoses. 5) Limit text messages to only when necessary. You don't want your number blocked because you sent a cat owner a generic sales pitch for a dog product.

## Emails

Emails continue to serve as both the primary mode of connection as well as a backstop to text messages. Our client admission forms ask in what order they prefer to be contacted: phone, email, or text. Use emails to remind about appointments (see text rules about incorporating 'single-click solutions'), new blog posts, announcements, seasonal educational messages, and surveys. I've found occasionally asking clients for their opinion on adding new products or services to be an effective way to gauge interest and build awareness. Monthly clinic update emails are ideal for most accompanied by personalized reminders. Embedding a quick video summary is a bonus.

## Who's in Charge of Your Practice's Social Media?

Nearly everyone on your team should be a part of creating social media content, snapping photos, writing blogs. Creating isn't the same as posting. Before you press publish, an administrator should verify, clarify, and proofread every message bearing your brand. This is another reason I encourage you to use a calendar to guide your outreach and solidify your strategy. Simply posting cute kitten pics, lost dog posters, and homeless pets isn't a plan and won't grow your business.

## What's the ROI on all this?

Does social media make business sense for your clinic? I'll repeat what I've been saying since 2007: Return on investment (ROI) on social media is hard to measure and perhaps the traditional ways to calculate it don't apply. Internet conversations about you are happening with or without you. It's far better to insert yourself in these discussions than pretending they aren't real. It's even better to influence the conversations and control your image and protect your reputation. Many veterinarians get interested in social media after discovering a poor review or negative post. That's great, but it's always better to be proactive with communications than reactive.

Social media and electronic communications are also important to elevate the bond you share with clients and patients. We often mistake a client's desire for increased access



with extending office hours. What many want is a richer, more frequent method to interact with us. Social media, texts, and apps provide a contemporary way to connect with clients that an increasing number of other professionals offer. My own physician has an app and online portal through which I can access my medical information, test results, and chat with a medical professional around the clock. Systems for veterinarians are just beginning to appear and I expect them to be universal within two to three years. Apps and websites won't replace social media and texts; they'll augment each other.

Finally, determining ROI is a challenge because social media allows you to expand your reach farther and more focused than traditional marketing. Sure, you need to boost a Facebook post to get it in front of your audience, but boosting allows you to precisely target pet lovers within your professional perimeter. Even better, it's possible to showcase your personality, passion, and expertise in ways we could only imagine a decade ago. Go ahead, turn up the volume on your social media and be prepared for the celebration of the century!

### Boosting Your Clinic Management Software

Veterinary practice management systems continue to serve as the mixing board and amplifier for our client communications. To get the most out of your clinic software, make sure you're dialing up the volume by following these simple tips:

**Optimize email reminders:** Link services and products to a specific email reminder that reminds pet owners not only that something is due, but why it's important to do it. For example, an immunization or preventive reminder should be coupled with a few sentences explaining why fleas are a problem in your geography, any prevalence data, and consequences of flea bites. Vaccinations should include a short statement detailing why their pet is at risk of a specific infectious disease (what I call "individualized immunizations" based on a "Lifestyle risk assessment"), why the immunization is given at a certain frequency, and disease dangers. For the past decade, we've been sending out at least two email reminders scheduled one to two weeks prior to the due date, a week following the deadline, and then a final email ten to fourteen days later before resorting to mail. Use pet name, age, gender, and any other pertinent information to make your outreach as personal as possible.

**Text Messages:** In addition to email reminders, ask clients if they prefer SMS reminders and updates. I've had success with monthly medication refills and preventives, weekly weight and progress updates, and daily critical care check-in's over text. Be respectful of your client's preferred communication platform and crank up your software's text features to be heard above the email crowds.

**Social Media:** Your management software can also help grow your social media by adding Facebook or Twitter links to all correspondence, generating survey contacts to conduct client satisfaction research, and connecting with your blogs and breaking news. I recommend your management system to send a monthly electronic newsletter highlighting hot social media posts or stories, embedded with direct signup and shareable links.