

# Social Media: Are You Onboard?

Get the most out of your online presence

by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD

**WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?** When we think of media, we think first of radio, television, and newspapers. These media share ideas, inform, persuade, and even entertain, but only when the reader or viewer can interact can they be considered social media. With the advent of the digital age, there are myriad ways to exchange ideas and thought—thus, real social media.

## **Media that are social**

The ubiquitous telephone has been transformed into the smartphone, giving you the option to text message, email, and share photos. And that's just the beginning. To get into social media, you will create a website, write blogs, and then move on to create Facebook and Twitter accounts. From there, you can explore using sites like Digg, Flickr, Google, Instagram, LinkedIn, Mailchimp or Constant Content, Petportal, Pinterest, Yahoo Groups, and YouTube. And you can adopt media tools like Hootsuite, Buffer, Feedly, BuzzSumo, IFTTT, Circloscope, and vCita—and many more.

## **Why do social media?**

It might all seem overwhelming, and you might like to avoid it and just stick to what you know best—caring for



animals. But, as Karyn Gavzer, MBA, CVPM, a specialist in veterinary marketing, puts it: “If you’re not tweeting, blogging, and visiting Facebook, you’re missing out on many opportunities to communicate with clients and educate the public.”

Andy Roark, DVM, a practicing small animal veterinarian in Greenville, S.C., is passionate about communication between doctors and clients. He says, “There is no doubt that people today are looking online for their veterinarians and other service and care providers.... If you want them to see you, you need to have a presence on these social networks... just as you had to have a presence in the Yellow Pages in the old days.”

Donna Rae Recupido, CVPM, a veterinary hospital administrator in Mt. Pleasant, S.C., reasons, “I don’t do business with places that don’t have websites or Facebook pages. I want the chance to see their space, their people, get a feel for who they are before I decide if I want to do business with them (just like online dating before we decide to meet or date).”

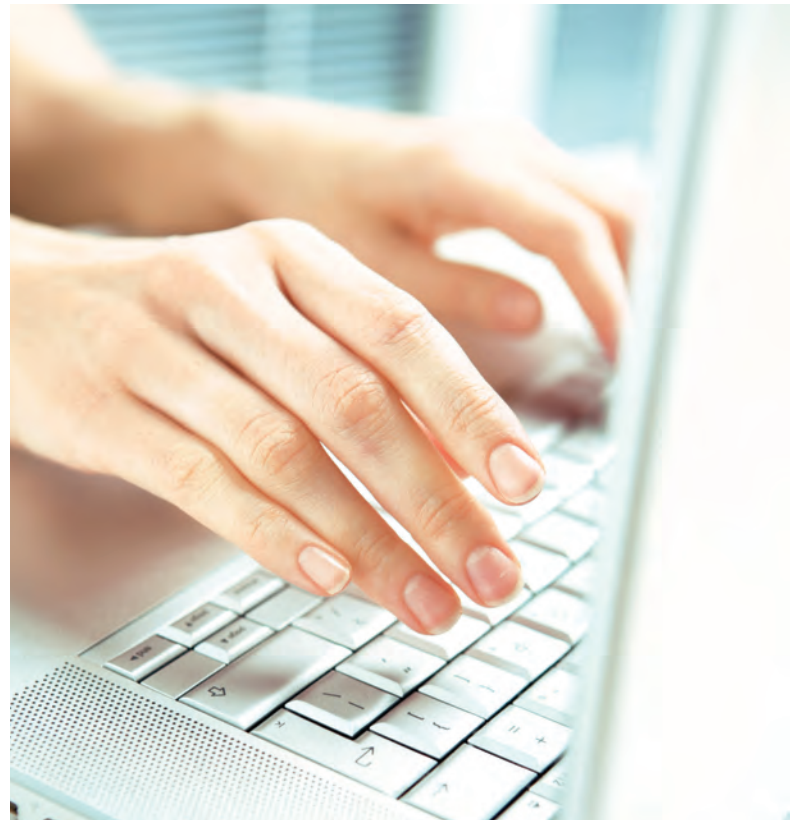
Access and efficiency are the watchwords. Clients have access to you—and vice versa—and you can stay in touch more efficiently than if you were only relying on mail and telephone.

### Your goals

Everyone wants access and efficiency, but because there are so many forms of social media, you must take the time to consider just what you hope and expect to accomplish. Then you can choose the appropriate channel.

#### Consider these questions:

- 1. Do you want new clients?** This is an appropriate goal if you want to grow, but it’s also important to offset attrition. Since today’s consumers have become skeptical of paid advertising or ignore the commercials, social media can provide what appear to be “word-of-mouth” recommendations. Your clients’ accolades are worth far more than paid advertising, and they don’t cost anything. (That is, except all your hard work!)
- 2. Do you want to brand your practice as “friendly,” “efficient,” or “high-tech?”** The media you choose to use and the text and images you post will convey a message about your practice, and, as Recupido says, people will “get a feel for you.”



Blogs are an efficient and cost-effective way to get your ideas out.

- 3. Do you want to develop a better bond with existing clients?** Successful veterinary practices understand the difference between relationship-based and transaction-based selling and the importance of building relationships with clients and patients to provide better lifelong care. You may be spending a lot of time phoning clients, sending reminder postcards, or mailing a periodic newsletter. Now there’s a more efficient way. The digital world enables you to connect one-on-one with clients and allows them to relate with one another. They can share stories, photos, and, hopefully, reviews of the good care they have received from your clinic, all of which enhance clients’ confidence in your services.
- 4. Do you want to sell new services and products to your clients?** At times, you can use your media as if they were bulletin boards, but with the added advantage of an efficient channel to receive questions and comments as readers learn your news.
- 5. Do you want to connect with other veterinary professionals?** Once you have entered the world of social media, you will find it an efficient way for you to keep up and to connect with like-minded professionals.
- 6. Is continuing education a goal for you and your veterinary team?** Without costly and

time-consuming travel, webinars and chat rooms are at your fingertips.

Once you have settled on the goals that are important to you, you can begin to explore appropriate media.

## Our 7 media recommendations

### Here's our advice on where to start:

- 1. Develop a website.** It's the sign hanging outside your door. Your clients will expect this to include basic information like your location (with directions), your vision and mission statements, and staff profiles with their expertise. We suggest that you add a complimentary feature, such as a downloadable fact sheet. This will enable you to capture prospects' email addresses—useful for sending a monthly newsletter or special promotion.
- 2. Add blogs to your website.** Here you can post various content, in small (400–600-word) doses each week. The blogs can provide new information, educational material, newsletter-type articles, or conversations with your readers. Blogs are an efficient and cost-effective (that is, free) way to get your ideas out, and, by using search engine optimization (SEO) strategies, blogs can enable your website to be seen at the top of online search results. SEO is an advanced-level strategy worth learning after you have mastered posting blogs.
- 3. Send an electronic newsletter periodically to give your clients more extended updates and reports.** Using a template, you will find that it's like sending a glorified email. It's efficient, doesn't use up our trees, and can be done at no cost for small numbers with easy-to-use platforms like Constant Content or Mailchimp.
- 4. Create a Facebook page for the practice.** Note, a business page is not the same as your personal Facebook page. On your business page, you will be able to keep professional posts separate from those about your family and your travels. Post what your clients want to know and what will keep them engaged. You can even purchase Facebook ads to boost your initial traffic.
- 5. Create a Twitter account and profile for your practice or for each of your veterinarians.** This is becoming the place where news breaks. Because you are limited to 140 characters, you'll learn to interact ever so briefly on this site—bonding with existing and potential clients. You can share

insights with other professionals and monitor or share news stories of interest to your clients. In all, you will be driving readers to your blog posts. Get yourself a handle that starts with the “@” symbol (i.e., @cshadle), and learn to use the hashtag (“#”) to search for data (i.e., #veterinary).

- 6. Establish your own YouTube channel.** Here you can collect videos (such as a tour of your practice or video instructions for administering subcutaneous fluids or medicating reticent pets). You can send them to your clients or include them in your posts when appropriate. Speaking of video, it's worth mentioning that images carry the day. Add an image to any and all of your posts, including your blogs and your posts on Facebook and Twitter.
- 7. Communicate via text message with your clients.** As more of your clients adopt smartphones, you will find texting to be the most efficient way to make efficient, brief, direct contact for an appointment reminder or assurance that Fluffy has come through surgery with flying colors. Beware, however, not to abuse this feature; otherwise, you risk your messages being considered spam by your clients.

We'll stop at seven. Once you get into social media, you'll learn about other recommendations, some of which we mentioned above. Don't let yourself get overloaded before you can manage more, though.

### Types of content to post

With all these media sites clamoring for attention, you need to think about where you will get appropriate content.

### Consider these:

- 1. Success stories of cured patients and happy clients.** These stories enable clients and potential clients to connect with your services. Inevitably, they will identify with the issues that other pet owners are experiencing. Adam Little, DVM, is a veterinarian and entrepreneur with a passion for using technology. He likes to remind veterinarians that the majority of your viewers don't spend 40 hours a week around animals. The things that seem to be a daily occurrence for you will be intriguing and exciting for them. Remember, however, that you must get permission from your staff members and your clients, even for pictures of the pets, before you can post them on a public site.



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Pet owners like to see their questions in writing and will be motivated to read your blogs and other postings.

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- 2. Cute animal pictures.** Be careful, however, not to overuse this kind of post, because it may distract from your content. Also, stay away from images that might make your audience uncomfortable. Select photos that will acquaint clients with your daily operation and showcase elements that make your practice unique. Even with anonymous names or generic references, these posts can help customers identify your practice as their practice of choice.
- 3. Free information sheets.** Create attractive replicas of all the handouts and “take-home” sheets that you’ve been handing out to your customers all these years. Some of these might include how to treat seasonal problems like tick infestation or flea problems.
- 4. Up-to-the-minute news and information.** Read AAHA’s *NEWStat* newsletter and subscribe to Veterinary News Network to have access to reliable, well-researched news and information. Your clients will appreciate you making them aware of current issues and advances in veterinary medicine. Another great way to acquire veterinary news that you can pass on to your clients is through Twitter. Try following @AAHAHealthyPet, @AVMAvets, @AVMARECALLWATCH, and @FDAAnimalHealth.
- 5. Products for sale and gift opportunities.** It’s worth mentioning products you have for sale when you are offering a coupon or discount prices. You can, at the same time, stress the convenience of purchasing products in the same clinic where your client’s pet is being examined.
- 6. Contests or games and quizzes.** James DeLano posted a “Back to School Pet Trivia Game.” This involved a pet-related trivia question posted each week in September on his practice’s Facebook page. Viewers with correct answers were entered into a drawing. In October, you might invite clients to post photos of their pets wearing their Halloween costumes and invite them to vote for their favorites.
- 7. Your clients’ questions.** What is being talked about at conferences? What questions and comments do you see on blogs or Facebook? Scanning these will

help you appreciate the issues that are of concern to your clients. Add a feature called, “Ask Your Vet.” Pet owners like to see their questions in writing and will be motivated to read your blogs and other postings.

The content you choose, whether it be serious, playful, or what clients share, will depend on your goals and management strategy.

### Seven management steps

#### 1. Gather the team.

Whether the initiative begins with the practice owner or an employee who is “au courant” with social media, ultimately you want to get everyone on board.

Michelle Drake, DVM, CVA, owner of the Drake Center for Veterinary Care in Encinitas, Calif., pointed out that much of the impetus for her social media efforts began 6 years ago with Christine Spencer, their hospital manager. Now, it is directed by a team that includes herself, Spencer, and a third person, Jennifer Reed, who was hired two years ago to serve as the practice’s media relations specialist. Nevertheless, when all 35 staff members meet every 3 weeks, they are updated and invited to generate ideas for photos or posts. A recent suggestion, for example, was to photograph a patient with an enthusiastic owner who had committed to regular teeth brushing.

#### 2. Set objectives.

This can be done through conversations with the entire team and/or by department and/or a designated planning group. At the Drake Center, the team of three have set the objectives and continue to meet once a month to review policies and priorities. They also plan a schedule for the month, most of which Reed implements.

#### 3. Develop policies.

To secure client permission, consider your process, perhaps through a release form signed at the first visit or with an upfront conversation about what you would like to post and where.

Agree on who will be responsible to respond to client queries, especially those related to medical questions that come through social media.

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It will also help to establish a policy about how staff members use their personal websites. It's worth reminding everyone to use discretion and remember that everything they post on their Facebook page could reflect on the practice.

If you are always planning for both the best and the worst, consider the advice of Brenda Tassava, CVPM, CVJ. She recommends establishing steps to follow in the event of negative remarks within your social media networks. She also advises you to consider possible repercussions should any team member breach confidentiality or fail to follow policy.

### 4. Have a point person.

As the veterinary profession transitions to larger hospitals in metropolitan areas, engagement on social media will become commonplace, and resources can be well spent on a designated social media point person. Smaller practices may not feel they can justify hiring a staff person dedicated exclusively to social media, but, on the other hand, you may find, as the Drake Center did, that things change. As more and more time is devoted to updating the website and social media sites like Facebook, you'll find an increasing number of clients come to your practice from online sources. At that point, it may be worth having one person who can focus on your social media activities. The Drake Center moved from no clients coming to them from online sources to currently 25 percent.

Remember that people who participate in social media expect to interact with the principals at your practice. If you do go outside your practice for someone to manage your social media operation, Tassava stresses that this person should be someone who is deeply entrenched in the core values and philosophies of your practice.

James DeLano, DVM, who believes that practices should be in as many social media spaces as possible, thinks it is worthwhile even for smaller practices to engage an outside company to manage their social media. You may want to start internally, however, until you know what you need or want.

When you decide you are serious about this endeavor, you want to be sure to give your internal point person time and authority.

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## Additional Useful Resources:

- *DemandForce.com*, resource for automated marketing and client communication offering targeted marketing campaigns and consistent online business information.
- *Drupal.com*, platform for website and blogs.
- *dvm360.com*, home of *dvm360 magazine*, *Veterinary Medicine*, *Veterinary Economics*, and *Firstline*.
- Karyn Gavzer, MBA, CVPM, a practice management consultant specializing in marketing, training, and customized solutions for veterinary practices, as KG Marketing & Training, Inc. Find her at *KarynGavzer.com*.
- Therese Kopiwoda, specializing in social media training for pet business and web design. Find her at *socialmediahound.com*.
- Adam Little, DVM, director of innovation and strategic partnerships with LifeLearn (*lifelearn.com*), author of "A Practical Veterinary Social Media Strategy" at *vmdtechnology.com/social-media-strategy/*.
- *Mailchimp.com*, a platform for online newsletters.
- Andrew Roark, DVM, speaker and writer who often focuses on social media. Find him at *drandyroark.com*.
- Neal Schaffer, founder of Maximize Social Business, available at *MaximizeSocialBusiness.com*.
- The Vet App, source of apps for the veterinary profession. Find at *petvetapp.com*.
- *VetStreet.com*, source of veterinary communication and marketing information.
- *Webbortunity*, *Webbortunity.com*, source of web-building tools and creator of websites for veterinarians.
- AAHA-accredited practices go to *aaha.org/publicity*.





### 5. Have a schedule.

One of the cardinal rules to ensure success with social media is to be consistent. If you decide to post an interesting case every week, be sure that it happens. There are a number of ways to keep on schedule. Andrea Vahl, a social media coach, strategist, and speaker at Hubspot, advised in a VetNetwork blog that practices should use a content calendar. It “gives you an overview of what you’re posting so you can ensure that you cover all the topics and products you want covered.... It forces you to think about what’s important and what’s not, so you don’t fall into the trap of posting content just to fill a void.”

To keep on schedule, don’t hesitate to use ready-made posts and tweets from [dvm360.com/postnow](http://dvm360.com/postnow).

Another useful resource is the *Veterinary Team Brief’s* monthly calendar. It not only gives you content but also suggests a plan. For example, if you post daily on Facebook and Twitter, you might devote one day to highlighting a service, another to feline facts, a third to orthopedic issues, a fourth to a product you provide, a fifth to a pet story, one day for a contest or survey, and so on. If you post a blog each week, have a plan for the month.

The Drake Center has decided to focus on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with content or responses posted every day. They also post on Pinterest, LinkedIn, and YouTube once a week. Blogs are posted four times per month. (Their house cat has his own blog!) Drake said that planning was particularly useful for the months of November through March when business typically drops 10 percent.

Whether it’s a point person or autonomous decentralized engagement, Danielle Lambert, creator of The Snout School, suggests you establish systems that will enable you to avoid what she sees as the three major mistakes that veterinarians often make when starting out with social media: (1) failing to respond (and build relationships); (2) not creating engaging posts, such as stories about clients or welcoming a new patient, and, instead,

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- Caleb Frankel, DVM, founder and head techy of VMD Technology. Sign up for their free newsletter, TechyVetNewsletter.
- Instagram: an online photo- and video-sharing social-networking service that enables users to share pictures and videos on social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr. [instagram.com](http://instagram.com).
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- *VetNetwork.com*, blogs for pet owners.
- *Wordpress.com*, platform for website and blogs.



posting only serious material or using stock photos; and (3) missing an opportunity to educate and inform.

### 6. Monitor.

If you can't monitor your platforms several times a week, you should not use them. Not only could you miss an opportunity to interact but you might also overlook a comment by a disgruntled or grieving client to which you could have responded.

### 7. Assess.

Once you set up a social media account, you will find that weekly statistics are available to you. Pay attention to them. They will help you know what kind of post is garnering the most activity.

Given the fact that the social media catchment area is worldwide, measuring your return on investment (ROI) is nearly impossible. Many practices believe that the best payback from social media is interacting with existing clients. Practices can relate the number of new clients to the source (by asking), but the return on their investment as it relates to existing clients is a less certain measure. Drake says, "In spite of being in a highly competitive environment, we came through the recession without losing business and know that we have a stellar reputation. That is all we need to know."

Recupido says that she usually measures everything, but has given up trying to measure her ROI.

"My goal is bonding with pet owners who may never need our services, but if they do, they will think of our practice first because of the online relationship we have developed," Recupido says. "It is like a relationship, in my opinion. Look at online dating: people meet and fall in love over chats, posts, looking at photos and emails. That is Facebook without the date. I can connect with people with my posts and stories and sharing about my practice and our patients. My clients can post and share their stories, too. All these things allow other pet owners, who are not clients, to get to know Veterinary Specialty Care and our staff and develop that online relationship. My ROI is growing that relationship. My ROI is more likes, higher ratings in Internet searches. People reaching out to our staff or me as 'experts.'"

### Where will you go next?

Mobile devices have increased users' access to the

Internet. Make sure that you have sites that are mobile-friendly and have apps that make mobile use efficient.

When you're ready for advanced social media management, you may want to work with a consultant or find your way to special tools such as Hootsuite, Buffer, Feedly, BuzzSumo, IFTTT, Circloscope, and vCita.

Always, however, remember that social media is social. Engage with your clients. ✱



Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, earned her PhD degree in interpersonal and organizational communication from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She now provides writing and training through Interpersonal Communication Services (ICS) Inc. ([icsworkplacecommunication.com](http://icsworkplacecommunication.com)).



John L. Meyer, PhD, earned his PhD degree in communication studies from the University of Minnesota. Through ICS Inc., he writes and provides training in interpersonal communication as well as in speech arts.

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