Veterinary Practice Apps

By Roxanne Hawn

Apps won’t replace your website and other marketing efforts. However, if you can customize an app that is useful to clients, the financial, time-saving and client loyalty and engagement results look promising.

It’s now vital to have a veterinary practice website that is mobile responsive, meaning it knows what electronic device a visitor is using and adjusts accordingly.

However, the latest data gathered by SmartInsights tells us that, anymore, that may not be enough:

- In 2014, the number of worldwide mobile devices users eclipsed desktop users
- In 2015, the time adult users spent engaging in media on a mobile device (2.8 hours per day) exceeded time spent doing the same thing on a desktop (2.4 hours per day)
- Of the time mobile users spend on their devices, 89 percent is spent using mobile apps, not mobile websites.

The SmartInsights report written by Dave Chaffey says, “This 90 percent figure is a key insight as companies decide whether to develop mobile apps or restrict themselves to mobile optimized sites. You do have to be careful about interpreting this since…Facebook, messaging, games and utility apps will naturally have the greatest time spent and browser use is still significant by volume if not by proportion.”

Apps won’t replace your website and other marketing efforts. However, if you can customize an app that is useful to clients, the financial, time-saving and client loyalty and engagement results look promising.
“Consumers need a reason to download an app these days,” says Jane Harrell, president of ‘cause DM. “With so many different types of apps cluttering their options, pet owners need to immediately understand the value your practice app can provide…What functionality is available in the native app that they don’t already get via your practice website or mobile-friendly pet portal?”

Apps to the Rescue?
Don’t worry about building your own app yourself from scratch. There are companies that can customize one for you for a lot less.

The reason a practice should have an app, relays Stacee Santi, DVM, CEO, and founder of Vet2Pet, is to let technology handle the administration of time-occupying tasks so that veterinarians and staff can spend more face-to-face time with clients. “Let it lighten the load where you can; then you can be more present,” she says.

As an example, practices using customized Vet2Pet apps see a 10 percent average drop in phone calls. Letting people ask for what they need without interrupting your team by calling is great for clients and great for your team.

“I feel that’s why we lose so much business to online stores,” Santi says, “because we can’t deliver on the efficiency side. Veterinarians are known for a lot of things, but efficiency is not one of them.”

Programmers have created veterinary apps like Santi’s Vet2Pet or the app called Happy Vet from InTouch Practice Communications to build engagement between veterinary clients and veterinary practices. It’s a new avenue for communication with pet owners, including ways to:

- Request appointments
- Order prescription or food refills (snap a photo of the bottle or bag to reorder)
- Push notifications, where you can send messages to a single client or groups of clients (vaccines due, appointment reminders, time to dose for heartworm prevention, etc.)

The Happy Vet app also features a photo booth where clients can add funny graphics to their pet’s photos before sharing them online. And when they do share, those photos are branded with the practice’s name.

Bill Schroeder, senior vice president with InTouch, also likes that Happy Vet offers a “map my pet feature.” Like other fitness trackers, it allows clients to accurately document how far and how often a pet walks, for example. It’s a great tool for helping clients with overweight or diabetic pets because they can also log food intake, insulin doses and other details.

“It allows people to be more precise about what’s happening, rather than just guessing,” Schroeder says. “It creates a much more engaged experience and a much more accurate view.”

In addition, Happy Vet includes iBeacon technology which knows when clients are near your practice. Restaurants and retailers use this technology to push coupons and other enticements to those nearby but, in a practice setting, the feature could do things such as automatically send a welcome message to clients on arrival. Better yet, it could also alert clients if you’ve had an emergency that’s put you behind schedule. Schroeder says, “That has perhaps greater value than a coupon.”
Both Happy Vet and Vet2Pet apps give you the option of providing clients with loyalty rewards. With Happy Vet, you can decide what kind of rewards make the most sense—rewards based on money spent, frequency of visits and so on. With Vet2Pet, the built-in loyalty feature gives clients a loyalty stamp for every $100 spent on a single invoice. For every 16 loyalty stamps clients earn, they get a $100 credit to their account.

Just like in dog training, Santi says, “There is something about positive rewards reinforcing behavior.”

Santi adds, “One of my clients said, ‘Hey, Dr. Stacee, I’m so excited, I just got eight stamps.’ She does not say to me, nor will she ever say to me, ‘Hey, Dr. Stacee, I’m so excited. I just dropped $800.’ I’m not trying to suggest that getting stamps make you forget the money part, but at least you’re getting something for it.”

Plus, she says, it gets practices away from discounting services.

**Real App, Not an App, Sketchy App?**

Know what you’re buying when you pick an app for your practice. Make sure it really is an app and not something else. Make sure it’s primary purpose is to help you and your clients.

Schroeder explains, “There are companies not looking to invest in developing the technology of a mobile app and are passing off mobile websites as being mobile apps. It’s really a bad thing because the functionality pales in comparison.”

Schroeder also warns against going with a really cheap or free “garbage” app. Often these apps have nefarious goals. They may give you some functions you want, but their real goal is to deliver advertising or another product to any consumer they can dupe into using the app.

If you go with a true, customizable app, you will pay set-up costs and monthly maintenance fees, but your app will be free to clients.

Schroeder and Santi offer these additional tips for knowing if an app is real and perhaps more reputable:

- It’s available through true app venues such as iTunes or GooglePlay
- It can send customizable push notifications
- It’s free of any external advertising
- It’s continually upgraded, both for features and for new versions of devices
- It provides you with real-time stats on downloads, feature usage, user engagement, etc.

**Is an App Right for You?**

Harrell of ‘cause DVM points out that Millennials either have already or will soon supplant Baby Boomers as the largest pet-owning population in the United States. This generation expects its phones to do a lot. Millennials are also reluctant to make or receive actual calls.

Schroeder, however, doesn’t buy the idea that apps are only for certain kinds of veterinary practices with younger clients. He says it’s a misconception that only younger people are app-savvy mobile device users.

Most of Santi’s Vet2Pet apps go to general practices known for being progressive. The population of the city or town or the age of the client base does not seem to be a factor. Practices using her app see revenues grow thanks to the loyalty rewards—clients who are close to the $100 spending threshold are more likely to add an additional purchase to earn the reward.

“We’re seeing an average four-doctor practice with a $115,000 gain on gross revenue,” she says. “The worst case scenario was one practice that only made $28,000 more. Of all the pet owners [114,000] who have downloaded the apps [220 practices], we’re seeing about 60 percent engage with the rewards program.”

Harrell encourages practices to look for ways to make the app useful to clients, including asking them upfront what functions matter most to them. She says, “The biggest mistake I often see is assuming where there’s value for the practice or practice staff there’s value for the pet owner.”

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Roxanne Hawn is a professional writer and award-winning blogger based in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. A former writer/editor for the American Animal Hospital Association and the American Humane Association, she has written about veterinary medicine and pet topics for nearly 20 years. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, Reader’s Digest, Natural Home, Bankrate.com, WebMD, The Bark, Modern Dog, and many high-profile outlets. Her first book is called *Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate.*