WHAT VETERINARY PRACTICES CAN LEARN FROM THE DENTAL PROFESSION-
PART ONE
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The dental profession has transformed itself over the years. If you look back to a woebegone era, dentists were feared as the one who created long lasting unforgettable mouth pain because they were extracting teeth using pliers like devices. Then the pain and fear came from the ‘needle’ and the drill. The reptilian mind has engraved in it the sound of the dental drill and the sharp sting of the Novocain needle. Even in practice, I had a hard time with the high-speed dental unit sound because of past experiences.

Then fluoride came along and the dental profession went from a therapeutic focus to a preventative focus. Fluoride almost single handedly took the drill out of the dentist’s hands. Periodontal disease still existed and required skilled clinicians. Orthodontics continued to progress. Endodontics addressed the cavities that were filled many years earlier with amalgams or other agents that were cracking and tiring.

And now, dentistry has entered a cosmetic era. Teeth whitening…adult braces…laser cleanings…etc. Etc. How has the dental profession not only survived but also thrived and what can the veterinary profession learn from our more highly paid brethren.

There are some very specific lessons to be learned:
1. Leveraging of your team
2. Accepting of insurance
3. Marketing of your profession
4. Not accepting the status quo.

USING A TEAM FOR SUCCESS

It has been my observation, that in virtually every dentist’s office, there is a distinct separation of duties and responsibilities. The customer service staff do the customer service stuff. The Registered Dental Hygienists do the technical, in the mouth, work. The doctor does the doctor work. It is rare that I have seen a hygienist answer a phone or receptionist help with a prophy. Is there a benefit to this separation of responsibilities? Yes and No.

By keeping responsibilities isolated, individuals will focus on their core competencies and interests and pursue opportunities to continue to expand and enhance their skills. An individual asked to perform outside of their comfort zone (and especially if they don’t have any interest in that zone) will tend to under-perform, make mistakes, and stray from protocols that others have established. Let’s be honest---technicians want to be technicians and receptionists want to be receptionists. Dentists have created an opportunity for their staff to develop an ‘expertise’ in their zone and not have to worry too much about other zones.

On the other hand, isolation of staff responsibilities can leave great voids in skills and knowledge when a team member is out; leaving the practice short staffed and under-skilled. Cross training allows for voids to be filled by other team members who have been trained to help out in other areas. However, it will frequently force people, who really don’t want to or don’t have the skills to, to step outside of their comfort zone.
I think the greatest lesson that dentists can teach veterinarians is in the appropriate delegation and utilization of skilled staff members. By empowering dental hygienists to perform routine procedures, they have freed up time for the DDS to focus on the more challenging clinical cases. As a consumer of dental services, it would surprise me to have a dentist actually scale and polish my teeth. In fact on those truly rare occasions that I have had my teeth cleaned by a DDS, it was not as thorough as when I had an RDH clean them. Whether it is a single dentist practice or a multi-doctor conglomerate, the dental hygienist has become, in the client’s eyes, the one who will clean your teeth.

Let’s look at a typical dental visit:
Arrive and greeted by receptionist, update paperwork and insurance information
Greeted by hygienist, escorted to the torture chair.
   Update medical history
   Series of questions on oral hygiene, issues, discomfort, etc.
Oral evaluation by hygienist
Possible dental radiographs performed by hygienist
Cleaning, scaling, polishing, etc. by hygienist
Assessment of issues noted by hygienist, e.g. you need to floss more
Doctor arrives, says hello, puts on gloves, checks the work of the hygienist, does an oral examination, notes any other pathology, reviews radiographs, gives a dentist’s overview, extends appreciation for coming in, says see you in 6 months.
Receptionist sets your appointment for 6 months and hands you a reminder card. Collects payment or bills insurance company.

Total time: 40 minutes
   Receptionist time: 5 minutes
   Hygienist time: 30 minutes
   Doctor time: 5 minutes
Bill: DDS-$75 for periodic oral exam; RDH-$125 for prophylaxis = $195 (Southern California)

Let’s look at a sample veterinary visit (assuming no waiting time):
Arrive and greeted by receptionist
   Reason for visit re-affirmed
   Wellcare needs reviewed
   Asked to have a seat
Exam Room Nurse greets and escorts to exam room
   Weighs pet
   Temps pet
   Reviews history of current presenting complaint
   Reviews wellcare needs
   Advises that doctor will be right in
Doctor enters and greets
   Reviews history
   Performs physical examination
   Sets up treatment plan
   Creates healthcare plan (estimate)
   Gets client approval of treatment plan
   Sends client to front desk to pay or leave deposit or
   Escorts pet to treatment area and performs treatments (or delegates)
   Escorts pet back to client in reception area
Receptionist creates invoice, collects money, prepares prescriptions, etc.
Total Time: 40 minutes  
  Reception time: 10 minutes  
  Technician time: 10 minutes  
  Doctor time: 20 minutes  
Total Bill: $55 (average office visit in Orange County, CA)

The linear fashion of the veterinary visit limits a veterinarian to seeing one patient in a 30 minutes window. The leveraged fashion of a dental visit allows a dentist to perform a crown while any number of hygienists performs routine cleanings.

The biggest difference is the expectation that the dental profession has set up by setting the hygienist out front as the one that will perform routine care. Veterinarians have their own version of an RDH in the RVT (CVT, AHT, etc.). Practice acts are all that limits what an RVT can do for your practice… if you allow them.

  Average RDH salary: $66,570  
  Median RVT salary: $28,900  
Another thing to note is the significant difference in salaries for similar jobs.  
  Dental Front Desk: $16.50  
  Veterinary Front Desk: $11.75  
(results from 2007 DDS survey and 2008 VHMA survey)

LEARNING POINT—leveraging your team and creating ‘experts’ in your practice allows the doctor to focus on being a doctor and the three things doctors must do: Diagnose, Prescribe, Do Surgery. Oh, and pay your team a livable wage.
PAYMENT OPTIONS
In dentistry, insurance has been both a bane and boon. The paperwork and variations in coverage make for a clerical nightmare for many practices. On the other hand, getting into a network of providers that accepts an insurance program can flood the waiting room.

Dentists have looked at insurance as a necessary evil. The cost of providing quality care has escalated. The cost of operating a dental office has escalated. The cost of employing professional and personable team members has escalated. Dental insurance encourages people to visit the dentist for necessary care because it will be covered. Just as in veterinary medicine, the cost of even routine dental care is an out of pocket, unbudgeted expense. Without insurance, the teeth-owner (dentist equivalent to the pet owner) may delay routine care to the point of serious infection and pain (pet owners do the same). Insurance is a motivator for care.

In as much as dentists have accepted insurance as a necessity, veterinarians have shunned insurance as the next pariah that will force them into managed care.

Percentage of teeth owners with dental insurance: 55-60%
Percentage of pets with pet health insurance: 1-2%

Additionally, dentists are more likely to offer and accept without question, third party payers such as Care Credit. I have seen Care Credit brochures in regular dental offices, oral surgeons, and endodontist offices. While veterinarians will hold checks and extend credit, dentists are finding ways not to be a bank for their clients. Whether it is the expectation of the dental patient vs. the veterinary client or the attitude of the dentist business owner vs. the veterinary business owner, dentists offer client’s options to ensure that they can provide the needed care and be paid for it.

LEARNING POINT: do not turn pet owners away from pet insurance. Educate yourself and your team on the companies, the policies, and the benefits. Choose a few companies to have brochures or flyers about. Encourage pet owners to do their own due diligence. Pet insurance will encourage more visits and the paperwork is significantly less than you think. Offer payment options to encourage and assist pet owners in the payment of their bills.

MARKETING
1-800-Dentist…..If you haven’t heard of it, you don’t listen to the radio, watch TV, or scan magazines. For over 20 years, 1-800-Dentists has marketed the importance of dental care to the consumers of dental care. They provide a network of dentists that they refer people to who call their number. Yes, it is a paid service.

By the way, optometrists have entered into this 1-800 model in a similar fashion-- see www.thinkaboutyoureyes.com

Are their ads professional? Absolutely
Do they portray the profession appropriately? Absolutely
Do they help the profession as a whole, even those non-subscribers? Definitely

Dentists have accepted marketing, like insurance, as a necessary evil to compete in this environment. Some of the marketing is tasteful. Some is quite distasteful. Do they offer discounts? Yes. Do they advertise that they accept all insurance? Yes.

Have they learned that marketing is everything? Yes. What does that mean? Uniforms, nametags, cleanliness, odor free, tidy, systematized, organized, smiles, scripts, etc. Marketing is everything means that you think about the impact of everything that you do on your clients and potential clients. Every action creates a reaction. Control the actions to control the reaction.

A smile exacts a smile.
A handshake exacts a handshake
An attitude exacts an attitude.

Thinking about marketing in this fashion may explain why from a client service standpoint; my dental experiences have frequently been Nordstrom’s like. This isn’t to say that there are others out there who don’t have the same approach. It is the successful practices in both dentistry and veterinary medicine that have gotten it right.

Oh, and by the way, have you ever left a dental office without a future appointment having been made?

LEARNING POINT: think about marketing is everything and determine what message everything that you do is sending from the way you answer the phone to the manner in which you present an invoice to the smell of the waiting area and the cleanliness of the parking lot.

**TRANSFORMATION**
As noted in the beginning, dentistry has just undergone a change it has undergone a complete transformation. From cavities, extractions, and gum disease to whitening, invisalign, and veneers. Over a few decade period, dentists have gone from pain to pretty; from mercury amalgam and gold teeth to whiter smiles and fresher breath. And they have done it with a higher level of service and perceived value.
The veterinary profession on the other hand continues to deliver veterinary medicine in 2018 as James Herriot did in 1930. The technology has changed, prices have gone up, however has the service and value improved? Is there a new model for the veterinary profession in the future? Likely…

Dentists lost cavities. Veterinarians are losing vaccinations
Dentists lost extractions. Veterinarians are losing prescriptions
Dentists have gained cosmetics. Veterinarians have gained…

LEARNING POINT: Change is good. Be a leader and find a new delivery model that allows you to thrive in the face of the changes to the way we have to practice.

SUMMARY
I am not suggesting that the dental model is the epitome of success. All I am noting is that this profession has found a way to continue to be successful even while their business world has dramatically changed. Why else should veterinarians model dentists? Simple…