

Marketing and Client Education Through Storytelling

Article by Roxanne Hawn



How to tell a good story to promote your practice and top-notch pet care

Storytelling gives veterinary teams the chance to share important practice and pet care messages in an engaging way. Stories describe who you are without literally having to say, “This is who we are.” Stories give you the chance to share sweet or heartwarming cases, or they can be used as cautionary tales. Stories also give you an opportunity to show how you work as a team, jump into action in an emergency, or work through complicated cases.

In human medicine, some recognize the power of patients telling their stories and of practitioners and other healthcare providers using stories to connect with clients. It’s referred to as “narrative medicine,” and some of the medical schools now teach it. There are also graduate degrees in narrative medicine. As far as I can tell, veterinary schools are not formally teaching storytelling and the stand-alone graduate programs aren’t seeing students with veterinary backgrounds or interests.

However, Marcia Childress, Ph.D., associate professor of medical education (medical humanities) at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, says, “Certainly, all veterinarians have stories—and good ones—from their practice, and it could be a rich experience working with veterinary students, as well as veteran practitioners, to help them use storying to reflect on their work, from the many ethical dimensions of veterinary care to the heartwarming as well as the heartbreaking tales of particular animals and their people.”

If you want to try using stories for marketing and client education purposes, leverage all the places you could publish stories:

- Lobby digital slideshow or case story notebooks for people to browse
- Practice website case profiles
- Email newsletter (with an introduction in the newsletter that clicks out to your website or social media)

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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- Social media posts
- Printed newsletter
- Common case topic educational materials
- YouTube videos, even if it's mostly still photos and text or voiceover

What good stories have in common

Meredith Gordon Resnick, LCSW, works with writers and others when they need help breaking through whatever is blocking them from finishing a project. Writing and other creative efforts can help people work through old and new traumas which, considering how stressful veterinary medicine can be, makes storytelling perhaps helpful in more ways than one.

I was surprised to hear that Resnick rarely reads what people are writing. "Sometimes the block in the writing has nothing to do with the writing," she explains.

Resnick, a writer herself, offered some insights on things to consider when telling or sharing a story with a specific client or your client base. She suggests asking yourself a question similar to what fiction writers ask themselves about characters. "What would this character want or need in every single scene," she says. "If they are going to write to the owner of a pet, figuring out what does that owner want ... What do they want that they are not getting and, in this case, how the veterinarian can help them get it?"

Different clients will need different things from a case story. Those early into a new and potentially scary diagnosis with a pet may want clinical details, like what happens next and why. As an example, when Resnick's greyhound developed osteosarcoma, she looked up things like:

- Life expectancy
- What to expect as the disease or treatment progressed
- How other people dealt with the challenges of amputation

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Choose your starting point

The best part of any story may not be the beginning. In some cases, chronology matters. In others, it's okay to start with the most interesting element first, and then fill in the rest later.

You almost always want to lead with the fact that the pet survived, if that's the case. Let's say your team did heroic work in a long surgery to save a pet. Once the case is mostly resolved, share it with your clients in a practice newsletter or social media feed. Start by saying the pet did well. Describe the work to save him. Then, perhaps circle back to how he got hurt in the first place.

If it's a heartwarming story, and the beginning part is the best part such as the pet was found in a crazy situation, then how the pet was originally found is probably your starting point. For example, maybe one of your clients found a momma cat and litter of kittens in a storm drain. That's where you begin, and then describe the veterinary care you provided, along with details on where the kittens can be adopted.

Find your storytelling style

Are you already feeling a case of writer's block coming on? Don't worry! Here are some ideas to get started.

Resnick suggests this test to see if you are an intuitive storyteller or an outliner:

1. Do 100 words of free writing, where you just write whatever comes to you.
2. Sketch an outline of all the points you want to include in your story, and then draft the meat of the story.

Which one works better for you? Resnick points out that it's a lot like getting more fluid in the exam room with clients. When you're new to the profession, you may have used paper or mental checklists to make sure you didn't forget anything. But, the more experienced you become, perhaps exams and conversations with clients happen more naturally and without a strict structure in mind.

It doesn't have to be one strategy or the other. You can do a bit of both—free writing and outlining.

On the other hand, if both writing strategies sound like pure torture, Resnick suggests having another team member interview you about the case. Record and transcribe the results for later editing.

"Some people are speech-givers, and some aren't. I'm not. I cannot talk off the cuff like that, but I can answer questions, if someone interviews me," Resnick says.

To challenge your sense of story, interview several people individually about the same pet's case and see how different their versions of the story turn out. This may give you insights into how different clients may also interpret a case story.

Sharable and visual storytelling for a new age

The internet makes many of us impatient. Long-form writing and storytelling still lives, but in hectic daily lives, people consume information in smaller chunks. Storytelling continues to adapt.

I first noticed the simplicity and strength of a good photo paired with an exceptional quote or a story vignette through the work of Brandon Stanton who created "Humans of New York" (humansofnewyork.com).

The genre keeps expanding to other kinds of photographic and conversational storytelling. Some animal shelters use similar tactics with profiles of adoptable animals. I've not yet seen this storytelling strategy used specifically in a veterinary medical setting. It's an opportunity for the right veterinary pioneer. (Hint. Hint.)

My former American Animal Hospital Association colleague Elizabeth McGuire is gaining attention for "The Sibling Revelry Project," where she photographs and interviews siblings of all ages (siblingrevelryproject.com).

McGuire offers this advice: "Find one compelling detail of the case and focus on that," she says. "It might help to think in terms of a cocktail party or elevator pitch. If you only have a few minutes to describe the most interesting piece of the story, what would you say first?"

The strength of presenting stories in this format comes in the hyper-focus on the image and text. The story doesn't try to be all things. It shows a glimpse, moment or message, and that's it.

"Great photos draw people into a story," McGuire explains. "Even if you don't have action photos from the specific case, you can capture some of the emotion with portraits in that space—in the lab, with a patient, etc. Readers also love captions, so use them as an opportunity to share the highlights of your story."

Educate, engage, entertain

In the end, storytelling is about educating clients with the tales of your daily work. If you can entertain them along the way, that's even better. Take a few minutes to brainstorm your most exciting or heartwarming cases from over the years and play with ways to tell and share those stories with clients that further your marketing and client education goals.



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*.

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