

New Year, New View

Article by Kelly Baltzell, MA & Melanie Burger

Veterinarian vs. Pet Owner Thinking

After speaking to more than a thousand veterinarians and their staffs this past year, I have recognized several general concepts regarding how veterinarians view the world versus how their pet-owner clients view it. Talk about a cultural divide! Following is a list of ways in which vets think and what pet owners actually expect.

1. Vets are check-the-box type of people. “I have a website. (Check!) Does it work? I have no idea, but I have one! The Yellow Pages rep came around, and I handed him a check. Are my clients finding me in the Yellow Pages? Who knows? But I am done with my marketing, right?”

When speaking to vets and their staffs, I ask them how many still use the local Yellow Pages to find information. Maybe 5–10% of the people raise their hands. Then I ask how many businesses in the rooms still advertise in the Yellow Pages. About 95% of the people raise their hands. Even among veterinarians, there is a disconnect on ad placement versus use.

On the other hand, pet owners want ongoing interaction and engagement with the veterinarian, who is their credible source of information about animal health. The majority of people shopping online today consult from 2 to 10 sources before making a purchasing decision (Google, ZMOT). This search tends to follow the path of starting on Google, going to online reviews, and then going to a website. Or, people start their search on Facebook, go to websites, and then to online reviews. Other sources include blogs, YouTube, e-newsletters, next-door neighbors, a business sign, and a few look at court reports for criminal records on a prospective vendor.

2. Vets have said to me: “My medicine stands for itself so why should I ask?” Veterinarians have been trained not to ask for reviews or accolades. They believe that they either practice good medicine or they don’t.

Now 70% of people, per Google, research online reviews before making a purchasing decision. In fact, people can post online reviews about a business without the business’s giving permission or even being aware the review has been posted. See the Quick Check in this article for more information. Pet owners are checking reviews to see if they should use your business. Putting your head in the sand will not stop the reviews from being posted.

3. Animal hospitals are foreign to marketing. Until 2 years ago, most animal hospitals did not need to market. The door kept swinging and business was great. Then the economy changed, as well as people’s buying habits. For a while, veterinarians kept the “hope card” on the table, “hoping” everything would go back to the way it was. Most vets I talked to in 2011 have now realized this simply will not happen.

Even if the economy recovered fully today, pet owners’ buying habits will stay the same. People are not going to put down their smart phones and heft around the Yellow Pages. Instead, we as consumers

are going to rely on 2 to 10 touch points to make a purchasing decision as stated above.

4. Veterinarians have told me that their clients are not online.

Veterinarians have told me that people over age 40 are not on the Internet and still use the Yellow Pages instead.

When these vets are asked if they use the Internet, they say, “Why YES!” Many of these vets are over the age of 50.

The Internet is used heavily by people of all ages. Pew Internet Report (www.pewinternet.org) stated in a May 2011 survey the following information, which shows that in fact, older people do use the Internet heavily.

Demographics of internet users

Below is the percentage of each group who use the internet, according to our May 2011 survey. As an example, 78% of adult women use the internet.

	% who use the internet
Total adults	78
Men	78
Women	78
Race/ethnicity	
White, Non-Hispanic	79
Black, Non-Hispanic	67
Hispanic (English- and Spanish-speaking)	78
Age	
18-29	95
30-49	87
50-64	74
65+	42
Household income	
Less than \$30,000/yr	63
\$30,000-\$49,999	85
\$50,000-\$74,999	89
\$75,000+	96
Educational attainment	
Less than High School	42
High School	69
Some College	89
College +	94
Community type	
Urban	79
Suburban	80
Rural	72

Source: The Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project’s Spring Tracking Survey conducted April 26-May 22, 2011. N=2,277 adults age 18 and older. 1,522 interviews were conducted by landline phone, and 755 interviews were conducted by cell phone. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

pewinternet.org

5. Vets use social media sparingly. Many vets loathe the entire concept of Facebook. I hear a lot of skepticism in my seminars, such as “Are you kidding? Facebook?” “It’s FLUFF!” “Honestly?” If a veterinarian has a personal Facebook page, it tends to be for monitoring his or her children on that platform. Many business Facebook pages are not updated regularly, if at all. There is a refusal to believe that adults use social media, since veterinarians themselves do not.

However, just because the vet avoids social media does not mean pet owners stay away too. Pew Internet Report (www.pewinternet.org) just released a report about online social media usage. It found that:

“Two-thirds of online adults (66%) use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, or LinkedIn. These Internet users say that connections with family members and friends (both new and old) are a primary consideration in their adoption of social media tools.”

Most vets are face-to-face people. Interacting and engaging with pet owners through this unfamiliar medium seems daunting and overwhelming. The concept that a pet owner is interested in “fluff” information versus factual health information is baffling.

To recap, people are shopping online today using Google, online reviews, Facebook, blogs, and other tools. Yes, they still use offline sources, but most research is done on a digital platform. If your clinic cannot be found where people are searching, then it might as well not exist. When pet owners conduct a search for you and they cannot click from the search to reviews to your website to Facebook, then there is a good chance that they will find another clinic that does supply this information. Oh, and pet owners are searching 24/7 on multiple devices in various locations—from home, the car, or even the airplane. What does your Internet presence tell your clients? Time to find out and take action in 2012.

Quick Check

To manage your brand reputation online, it is important to be aware of what people are saying about your business. A quick way to search for reviews is to type the name of your business, your town, and the word “review” into Google. For example, “ABC Hospital, AnyTown Reviews.” Search results will then show where your hospital and/or doctors working at your hospital have garnered reviews. Each one of these review areas needs to be “claimed” and monitored on a weekly basis. Once a review is posted, you should respond to that review, ideally within 24 hours but after no longer than 7 to 10 days. If a negative review is posted, use it as an opportunity to educate reviewers about your services, as well as to improve your business.

Webinar: Veterinarian vs. Pet Owner Thinking

January 25, 2012, 12 to 1 CST

Veterinarians need to think like pet owners when it comes to marketing. How a veterinarian perceives his or her business versus how a pet owner views it can be worlds apart. A veterinarian will say, “I practice general medicine or internal medicine” and understands exactly what that means. The pet owner thinks, “Of course you practice medicine and mess around with the inside of my cat/dog. Now what are you going to do for me? Why should I pay you? Your reviews are dicey but the vet down the street has 20 five-star reviews. Maybe I should go use that vet instead.”

Attend this webinar to learn more about how veterinarians and pet owners think. Learn how people are shopping on the Internet today and find out tips to see if your online branding stands up against that of your competitors.



Kelly Baltzell, MA is President and CEO of the Beyond Indigo family of companies, which she founded in 1997. Under her leadership, Beyond Indigo companies have developed all types of veterinary websites (small animal, exotic, specialty, equine, mixed animal) that now reach millions of people a year. Kelly's depth of experience, passion and visionary approach to the industry have made her an unparalleled leader in Internet marketing.

A true relationship builder who works to promote her clients and broadcast their stories to the world, Kelly speaks frequently about marketing trends and website design at national conventions and private functions. Before creating Beyond Indigo, she served as Site Manager for Online Psych, the mental health community of America Online, and designed customized mental health programming for the AOL Health Channel. Online Psych had up to 4 million page views per day and attained placement on AOL's Welcome Screen. After Online Psych merged with iVillage.com, Kelly became Director of Interactive Health and was later promoted to Executive Director of Health. She helped generate more than 18 million page views a month for iVillage.com.

Kelly was graduated from George Washington University with a degree in International Affairs & Economics and received her Master's degree in Counseling & Psychology from St. Mary's. Kelly is a proud parent, currently living with her family in Minnesota.