



THE LOYAL PRACTICE

A DVM/MBA'S GUIDE TO INTERNAL
MARKETING AND CLIENT RETENTION
THROUGH DENTAL HEALTH

BY NICOLE SCHERRER, DVM,
MBA CANDIDATE

WWW.NICOLESCHERRER.COM



SECTION 1: WHAT INTERNAL MARKETING REALLY MEANS

As veterinarians, "marketing" can often feel like a dirty word. It brings to mind a sales-driven pressure that clashes with our mission. We are here to heal, not to be salespeople.

I agree. Our goal is to guide clients toward decisions that protect their pets' long-term health, and I believe the right marketing plans can help us do exactly that.

This is where internal marketing comes in. In the veterinary medical context, I define it as:

The process of communicating the value of care to your existing clients in a clear, consistent, and repeatable way.

This concept goes far beyond promotional discounts; it centers on helping clients understand what their pet needs, why it matters, and how to plan for it.

This is critical when it comes to dental care. In the United States, dental disease is the most common clinical condition in dogs and cats, yet it is often the hardest to explain because the pet's pain is not always obvious to their owner.

The Medical Reality: It's More Than "Bad Breath"

Veterinarians know this, but most owners do not: dental disease is not just a mouth problem. It can cause a transient bacteremia that can place strain on vital organs, especially in patients with pre-existing health conditions.

Sharing this information with our clients isn't fearmongering. When clients understand that dental disease affects more than just the mouth, they become more invested in preventive care. By teaching clients that professional dental care protects their pet's overall health, we shift the conversation from cosmetic cleaning to systemic disease prevention.

SECTION 2: WHY RETENTION OUTPERFORMS ACQUISITION

One of the first concepts I learned in my MBA program is a simple rule: *acquiring a new customer often costs far more than retaining an existing one.*

In our field, this is even more true. A loyal client already trusts your clinical judgment. They are far more likely to follow through on recommendations and maintain a long-term relationship with your team.

The Mixed Animal Perspective: Normalizing Maintenance

My clinical experience in both equine and small animal medicine has shown me a stark contrast in how we approach dentistry.

In equine work, dental floating is viewed as routine yearly maintenance. Owners understand that if they don't float their horse's teeth, the animal will suffer. Dental care is a standard expectation of owning a horse.

In small animal medicine, dental care hasn't been normalized in the same way. It is often sought after as a reaction to a problem (stinky breath, loose teeth, mouth pain) rather than a proactive standard. Internal marketing helps us shift that narrative. By educating clients early and consistently, we move dental care from an urgent, expensive surgery to routine maintenance.

Solving the Cost Barrier: The Power of Membership

The biggest barrier to dental compliance is often cost. An \$800+ estimate for a cleaning is a sudden, unexpected expense for many clients. This is where pricing strategy becomes a marketing tool.

By offering a "Dental Membership" or "Preventive Care Subscription," you can change the dynamic completely.

How it works: Clients pay a set monthly fee (e.g., \$50-\$80) that covers their pet's annual exams, vaccines, and one annual dental prophylaxis.

The Result: When the time comes for the procedure, the financial friction is gone. The service feels "already paid for."

It's important to note that this doesn't mean you're selling an insurance product; it's simply a predictable budgeting tool. It aligns the client's budget with the pet's medical needs and stabilizes practice revenue.

SECTION 3: A 3-STEP INTERNAL MARKETING PLAN FOR DENTAL HEALTH

Step 1. Identify Your Dental Opportunity

Dental disease is likely the largest untapped opportunity in your companion animal practice. Don't believe me? Start by running a report: how many active patients have never had a dental cleaning? The number will likely be staggering. This likely reflects how unclear dental recommendations have been for clients in the past rather than a lack of care on their part. These clients are now your target audience.

Step 2. Build Educational Tools and Address the Fear

Clients decline dentistry for two reasons: Cost, which we addressed in Section 2, and Fear of General Anesthesia. You must address this head-on with your educational tools.

The "Safety Protocol" Handout: Create a specific resource that explains your safety measures. Explain that we have come a long way in veterinary anesthesia. Discuss your monitoring equipment, your dedicated anesthesia technicians, and your pre-surgical bloodwork and/or ECG requirements.

The "Age is Not a Disease" Discussion: Many clients with senior pets assume they are "too old" for anesthesia. We need to educate them that age is not a disease. While some animals may not be candidates based on their specialists' recommendations, most senior pets can undergo anesthesia safely with the right protocol. In fact, leaving a mouth full of infection is often a greater risk to their systemic health than the anesthesia itself!

Step 3. Create Systems That Keep Education Consistent

Tools are only effective if they are part of your daily workflow.

The "Dental Health Report Card": A one-page sheet your technicians complete during every exam. Use this standard 0-4 grading scale to make the diagnosis concrete for the owner:

Grade 0 (Normal): No tartar, no gingivitis, and healthy gums.

Action: Maintain with regular professional cleanings and daily home brushing.

Grade 1 (Mild): Very mild gingivitis and some plaque. No significant attachment loss.

Action: Brushing and professional cleanings can often reverse this stage.

Grade 2 (Moderate): Moderate plaque and tartar with mild to moderate gingivitis.

Action: Requires professional cleaning and continued home care.

Grade 3 (Severe): Significant tartar, severe gingivitis, and deep pockets.

Action: Requires intensive professional cleaning and potentially extractions.

Grade 4 (Advanced Periodontitis): Severe tartar, extensive bone/tissue loss, loose teeth.

Action: Tooth extraction is often the only treatment option.

Proactive Communication: Use your PIMS to identify patients due for a dental. Send a specific email campaign explaining the systemic risks and the safety of modern anesthesia.

The "Forward-Booking" Protocol: Just like a human dentist, book the next exam before the patient leaves the current one. "Let's get Bella scheduled for an exam in 6 months to make sure we're staying on top of that gingivitis."

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION – BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE, LOYAL PRACTICE

Internal marketing is not a separate part of practice management but is woven through communication, workflow, and medical advocacy. It provides a clear and consistent way to educate clients so they can make informed decisions about their pet's pain and health.

Dental health is the perfect place to start. It is a service that relieves silent suffering, helps extend lifespan, and builds immense trust when done well.

Whether you use a subscription model to make it affordable or a safety handout to make it less scary, the goal is the same: to remove barriers to care.

A practice that prioritizes dental retention is a stronger business. It generates predictable revenue, which allows you to pay your staff better and invest in modern equipment. But more importantly, it is a practice filled with healthier, pain-free patients. That is the definition of success.