

Text Message Marketing and Client Communications

Article by Roxanne Hawn



It's time to take a real look at the opportunities texting can bring to today's veterinary practice. The reason why? Text messages engage people in four distinct ways that other avenues of veterinary client marketing and communication can't:

- 1. Consent.** SMS (short message service) marketing requires user consent. In other words, clients have to opt-in explicitly to receive text messages from a business. Consent can be given on paper forms at appointment check-in, via an online form on your website, or by texting a specific keyword into your text messaging system.
- 2. Immediacy.** According to Frost & Sullivan research, more than 90 percent of text messages are read within three minutes, and 98 percent of them are ultimately opened. That's much higher than email open rates.
- 3. No SPAM filters.** So far, mobile carriers have not instituted SPAM filters the way internet service providers have done for email. That means if you send a text message, the client will get it.
- 4. Very, very short.** Both a plus and a minus, text messages must be short because they are meant for people on the go. Being short, though, also means

people are more likely to read them.

"With all the emails I get for work and my personal life, they sometimes get lost in the shuffle of day to day life. Signing up for text message marketing makes it easier to quickly find what I need within my text. They are always right in front of me," says Catie Connolly, a digital marketing consultant based in Atlanta, Ga., who is mom to two young children and a French bulldog. "I consider texts a much more efficient way of communicating quickly. No images. No superfluous marketing, just want I need to know, right in front of me in a quick, short format."

How to use text messages for marketing

Reminders are the easy win. Right?

- It's time to schedule a wellness exam. Call us at xxx-xxx-xxxx.
- Reminder! Appointment with Dr. Smith, May 15, 7pm

But, text messages can be used for so much more in veterinary medicine. Here are a few ideas:

Fill empty appointment slots. Let's imagine that it's a Tuesday morning, and you realize that the Wednesday schedule looks a little barren. You could send a text message letting clients know that you have openings if they need something.

Order reminders or alerts. For clients who regularly order food or other products, you could ask if they need anything before placing an order, or you could alert them when special orders are ready for pick-up.

Send promotional alerts or coupons. Alert clients to promotional discounts by sending them a coupon code to use at check-out.

Share educational information. It's called "poll marketing," where basically you send a text that tells people if they text back a specific keyword (such as dental), then your text messaging system will reply with a link to your latest client education information on dental cleanings. Not only do clients get access to educational materials, but it also helps you segment your other marketing efforts to clients who've demonstrated an interest in certain services.

Why use text messages for client communication

Text messages can also be leveraged for one-on-one client communication that can build loyal client relationships. People like text messages for many reasons:

"I love the immediacy. It's even more immediate than email. It's nice to get a text alert that says your pet is done with surgery or some other procedure and in the recovery room. It's perfect for staying informed in the moment."

"I like not getting a phone call before an appointment. I get a text. I send a Y that I'm coming, and it's done. No interruptions."

"Well, first off, I don't hear well, so any opportunity to do something in writing is a plus."

"I got updates and photos when I would have to leave [my dog] all day for radiation. Really helped ease my stress of not being able to be there with her, and there was more of a personal connection with her care team. I didn't feel like just another patient."

Sure, there will always be clients who do not like texting for a variety of reasons, but a lot of clients do enjoy the fast and personal connection.

Text messaging tools

Relax! You will not be using your personal phone number to do any of this. Veterinary practices can use enterprise-level tools for text capabilities.

Busted: Text Message Myths

When first discussing or implementing a text messaging plan for your veterinary practice, you'll likely face objections like these:

Myth: Clients will have the veterinarians' personal mobile phone numbers and be texting them all the time.

Reality: Nope. If you use one of the text messaging platforms, you'll be able to send and receive text messages as if from your existing practice phone number. The only way clients will have a specific veterinarian's private mobile number is if that veterinarian gives it to them.

Myth: Even if clients are texting to the practice's main phone number, they'll expect to have 24/7 access to us.

Reality: That's where strategic use of text message autoreplies can help. You can set up your system to send an automated reply to anyone who texts the practice after hours. Similar to what's probably on your phone's after-hours voicemail, that message can say, "The hospital is now closed. If this is an emergency, please contact [insert on-call or emergency location referral]. If it is not an emergency, we will reply after the hospital is open."

Myth: Only young clients want text messages.

Reality: Older clients and others with hearing loss sometimes prefer written communications (text or email). A Better Hearing Institute survey found that 1 out of 6 Baby Boomers and 1 out of 14 Generation Xers have hearing loss.

Myth: Veterinarians will be constantly interrupted by receiving and replying to text messages.

Reality: Text messaging systems can be loaded onto specific computers, tablets or phones so that only those assigned to monitor and respond to text messages will see them. Just like veterinarians don't typically answer the phones, they won't be burdened with every single text message either.

For example, Zipwhip is two-way conversational texting software that works on existing land lines, voice-over-IP lines, or toll-free phone numbers. Daniel Grushkovskiy is a veterinary practice specialist with Zipwip, and he explains that practices can pay a monthly (no contract) fee to use the tool.

It works both for one-on-one text conversations with clients as well as for text blasts to lists of clients using a blind-carbon-copy model so that no one can see the phone numbers of the others also receiving the message. You can even schedule text message marketing in advance, rather than managing it day-of.

With individual incoming text messages, the process is much like how you likely handle ringing phones—certain people will have responsibility for monitoring and replying to messages.

“Using the notification tool, they don’t need to change workflow in any way. They don’t need to physically go to a website, email, or anything like that to check for new messages. The notifications just pop up on their computer screens in front of everything else, and they can put this on as many computers or as few as they want; they don’t have to assign it to one particular person,” Grushkovskiy explains.

Rather than calling, people might text you to:

- Schedule or cancel an appointment
- Request prescription refills
- Ask questions
- Share case updates

Think of it as a way to make your existing number more useful. In all advertising and marketing efforts (online or otherwise), you could now say “Call or text us at xxx-xxx-xxxx.” Links from your website, social media posts or Google ads could now function as texting portals.

Grushkovskiy recommends setting up autoreply text messages—both for when your practice is open and when it’s closed. During hospital hours, the autoreply can remind people to call if it’s an emergency, but it can also set expectations for when you will reply (usually within the hour). When the practice is closed, the autoreply also reminds people what to do in an emergency (use your on-call number or contact your emergency referral hospital).

Promoting your text capabilities

Grushkovskiy suggests the following ways to promote the fact that people can text you:

- Through your on-hold or voicemail messages, encourage clients to text instead of waiting or leaving a message
- Include “text or call” along with your phone number in email signatures
- Email clients a brief note telling them they can now text you at the practice’s existing phone number
- Include “text or call” along with your phone number on all printed materials, including invoices and reminders
- Add click-to-text links on your website, social media posts and online ads

Extra benefits to texting

Texting systems have no way of tracking how veterinary practice call volumes change when clients can suddenly send text messages to the phone number they’ve always known, but anecdotally, Grushkovskiy has heard from one practice manager that the number of calls dropped by 40 percent after adding text messaging capability.

Grushkovskiy also has heard from practices that have been tagged on social media when clients share photos and text message updates from veterinarians about their hospitalized pets. In other words, clients appreciate the extra attention and information enough to share it online and even brag about it on your behalf.

The more that people see their friends and family having these text connections with their veterinarians, the more they may want that functionality too. Text message marketing and client communication could provide an edge, especially in communities with high levels of veterinary competition.



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*.