

Rural practice startup – Maintaining low overhead while providing exceptional service

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Abstract

A startup rural practice requires time, dedication, resilience, and determination. The confounding factors of practicing lay people and unscrupulous drug and distributor reps makes starting a veterinary business all the more challenging. Have a clear picture of what you want from your practice and what the area needs. It is necessary to consider the practitioner's strengths and weaknesses and how these correspond to the needs of the area. New owners should strive to keep a low overhead and grow incrementally as their client base increases. Determine what the largest income sources will be and tap into those at the beginning. Follow this with what the area next needs (education, facilities, advanced services) as your practice grows. Having tenacity and resilience will assist the new owner in maintaining a steady composure throughout the first years. Owners should set themselves up with a network of advisors from throughout the veterinary and local community to contact with business and professional questions.

Key words: veterinary, rural practice, startup

Résumé

Une pratique rurale en démarrage nécessite du temps, du dévouement, de la ténacité et de la détermination. Les services offerts par des gens non-formés et le manque de scrupule des représentants de distributeur et de produits pharmaceutiques amplifient ces problèmes rendant la mise sur pied d'une pratique vétérinaire encore plus difficile. Il est important d'avoir une image précise de ce que vous envisagez pour votre pratique et de ce que la région a besoin. Il est nécessaire de prendre en compte les forces et les faiblesses du praticien et de déterminer comment ces dernières correspondent aux besoins de la région. Les nouveaux propriétaires devraient s'efforcer à garder les coûts indirects bas et à grandir progressivement en fonction de l'augmentation du nombre de clients. Il faut déterminer quelles sont les plus grandes sources de revenus et en profiter dès le début. On enchaîne avec ce que la région a besoin (formation, installations, services avancés) en fonction de la croissance de la pratique. La ténacité et la résilience vont aider le nouveau propriétaire à tenir bon durant les premières années. Les propriétaires devraient s'intégrer à un réseau de conseillers

du monde vétérinaire et de la communauté locale pour des questions d'affaires et professionnelles.

Introduction

Many rural areas are lacking in veterinarians to service the local clientele. Often this is a result of being in an economically disadvantaged area that is unable to sustain a traditional practice. In rural Ohio, there is a practicing lay person who is often called first, followed by the feed or distributor reps, and the veterinarian may receive the last (and often dismal) call. Even though the area has experienced economic growth, the pecking order seems to be the same. We as veterinarians need to decide where we want to be in that lineup and position ourselves for success. We must decide when we are going to stop giving our services away for free/less than we are worth and have the confidence in our own abilities and knowledge to be the first one called by area farms.

Build a Business to Fit the Area

Beginning a mobile large animal startup practice in many areas of the country is feasible. Not every area can support a traditional bricks-and-mortar practice, especially for a large animal practitioner. Our area has seen the closure of established small animal clinics, and the waning of large animal services provided by mixed animal practices. Having a clinic with high overhead and multiple employees in the area where I practice isn't a profitable business model.

Figure out what your clients need. It may be preventive or herd work, such as vaccines and palpations. Some farms don't even know when they need to call the veterinarian. Inviting these folks to a client meeting and sharing ideas and management skills may be what they need to get the ball rolling. Almost every client in every area can use more education. Some areas will need portable facilities or a haul-in facility. Some farms don't have a chute, or a trailer, so there can be challenges and opportunities there as well.

As you begin to purchase equipment, pare your list down to the most important items and products that will meet the practice and clients' immediate needs. In my area, this included an ultrasound, an electro-ejaculator, and microscope. I was able to pay off the latter 2 items from use alone during the first few months. This enabled me to put more

items on the list of what I felt would help grow the practice, while allowing my own skills to grow and be challenged.

Do not be afraid in the beginning to tap into local resources – a small animal clinic may have a blood machine that you can use for blood samples, and you may be able to provide relief work for that same clinic when you are slow and need some extra income. Try to work hand in hand with local clinics, as you can both benefit from such a relationship.

Know Yourself

Some of us are terrific with sick cows, others are more herd/production oriented. Surgery may be your strong suit. Starting a practice in a rural area requires you to wear many hats at once. You can tailor your practice according to your own talents, bearing in mind that your clients' needs are your first priorities. Clients have expectations of availability in 2018 that is unlike what we have experienced in the past. They have cell phones, are constantly texting, want to communicate via social media, and sometimes they even send emails to schedule calls or place orders. We need to be available, but make sure to set hours that you put the phone down to prevent burnout and compassion fatigue. That bottle of prostaglandin they text you about at 11 pm isn't worth getting out of bed and responding to them about until the next morning. Clients will learn this if you choose to teach them. I have found that most clients are teachable if the leadership is directed correctly. They understand that we need time to unwind and spend time with family and friends, just the same as they do when they return home from work. Communicating openly about this helps to ease any ill feelings if you aren't available for a non-emergency during non-business hours.

You Don't have to be Superwoman

As veterinarians, we have the knowledge to treat and prevent. Some of us find it challenging to work out the business aspects of a startup, including beginning the practice, knowing what to purchase and when, maintaining a lean yet useful inventory, figuring out billing and ordering, and still have some semblance of a life. For a lot of us, this is more challenging and stressful than fixing broken cows. As your practice grows, you should have a network of mentors in

place to assist you in making decisions, listening to ideas, and giving you advice. These folks can be veterinarians from throughout the country. My mentors are not all involved with beef practice; some of them are out-of-state dairy and swine practitioners. My network includes local small business owners from throughout the area, most of whom are not involved in agriculture. We feel comfortable sharing our business models, stressors, and highlights, while encouraging each other.

Healthy Practice needs a Healthy Owner

While the focus of this has been on setting up a successful startup practice in a rural area, we must not forget the largest factor in the equation - YOU! You must run this practice as a business. If not, you may flounder or fail, neither of which you set out to do. You must charge what you are worth and manage your accounts receivables. You must also take care of Number 1. If you forget about yourself while beginning your practice, you may end up burnt out and exhausted by the end of year one. To ensure that you have your batteries recharged, regularly spend some time doing something that allows you to relax and get away from practice. This can be a hobby, taking a vacation, turning the phone off for the weekend to spend time with family, or sitting on your porch in the evenings listening to the bullfrogs. Whatever it is that allows your mind and body to rest, put the effort into scheduling time for YOU as your practice grows.

Conclusions

While beginning a veterinary practice in an underserved rural area may seem daunting, it is a manageable task. It requires perseverance, planning, and tenacity. Having resilience when you are in a valley will help you to get back up and get through another day. Setting yourself up with a network of mentors and advisors assists with accountability and grounding. Have a realistic budget in place, which is followed strictly. Determine the needs of the community you are serving and align your practice as necessary. Most of all, take care of yourself as you manage your business with integrity, and clients will come, and they will stay.