

Virtual Care is the Lifeline Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

We're living through a very challenging time. Millions of pet owners, veterinarians and veterinary practices need help. They are all struggling to balance the needs of their families, pets, livelihoods and businesses. With the stunning and confusing directives surrounding COVID-19 - social distance, self-quarantine, isolation and shelter-in-place - one thing is clear, the usual flow of animal health care has been disrupted and the impact of COVID-19 will be deep and long-lasting.

As business and thought leaders, it is our responsibility to think out-of-the-box and reimagine the pet care delivery experience. Now is the time to champion the best use of technology and virtual care as a lifeline to help pet owners, veterinarians and veterinary practices survive this crisis.

COVID-19 MAJOR IMPACT

Based on Ask.Vet's thousands of daily interactions with pet owners and veterinary practices, we have first-hand knowledge of the coronavirus' cascading effect on people and pets. Virtual care is no longer a "nice to have..." it has become a "must-have." Ask.Vet has seen a dramatic increase in demand as pet owners reach out from their homes, desperate for immediate answers and guidance from a veterinarian. The AVMA says that telemedicine is a critical component in the protection and monitoring of patients while preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Major global crises create tectonic shifts in human behavior, and there will be clear business winners and losers. Every player in the animal care ecosystem - from pharma and food to pet insurance, products and services - will see their business change due to the global pandemic. But change, while potentially threatening, also brings opportunity. Here are some macro trends we are seeing:

PET OWNER HEALTH

Risk of exposure

- Given how rapidly the virus is spreading and the subsequent draconian response, many pet owners either cannot or do not want to seek in-person veterinary care, as they strive to minimize human contact.

Loneliness, fear, stress and uncertainty

- In these times of social isolation pet owners, more than ever, rely on the companionship and love of their pets for comfort and a sense of normalcy;
- A pet's presentation of symptoms compounds the stress of an already anxious and uncertain situation;
- Pet owners' phone calls to their vets are going unanswered due to the sheer volume of calls, which only increases stress and feelings of helplessness.

PET HEALTH

Exclusive focus on injury and illness, not wellness

- The AVMA has mandated that veterinary practices defer elective procedures and non-essential pet care to limit interactions and preserve medical supplies when circumstances call for them. This move ignores ongoing wellness programs and care for pets with chronic conditions.

Degraded service availability

- Staff availability is decreased, as vets and staff deal with their own exposure to COVID-19, illness in their family, children home from school and reduced clinic hours;
- Veterinary practice phone lines ring off the hook as nervous pet owners struggle to reach their practitioners. Staff is not able to manage the large volume, leaving clients on long holds or with dropped calls. With limited staffing and availability, pet owners have no access to veterinary expertise;
- The AVMA has instructed practices to adopt a “curbside” plan, placing a strain on office efficiency and forcing pet owners to wait in their cars as their pet is being examined alone inside the clinic.

VETERINARY PRACTICE HEALTH

Steep declines in income and revenue

- Appointment cancellations for practices in our network are nearing 30%;
- Future appointment bookings are down by as much as 40%, strong evidence that pet owners are making the difficult tradeoff of putting their pet’s health at risk to protect their own health;
- Veterinarians are being furloughed and working fewer hours, which reduces their income and creates even greater anxiety about being able to make ends meet;
- Clinics are closing due to staff and client exposure and outbreaks that require 14-day shut-downs, vastly impacting service availability, practice revenue, veterinarian pay and ultimately - pet health.

Protecting the health of veterinarians and staff

- Hypervigilant sanitation protocols are being enacted, putting a strain on efficiency and supplies;
- Hospital staff are anxious about potential exposure and the impact to themselves and their families;
- Lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) at vet offices is rapidly becoming a critical issue.

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

The current pandemic is the tipping point for pet owners, vet practices and animal brands to rapidly adopt, utilize and embrace new platforms for pet care. Some key ideas for immediate change are:

- **Find creative solutions.** Find new and different ways to help your pet owner and vet practice clients navigate these difficult times. Virtual care can be offered by many effective means through text codes, webchat, phone, video consults and more;
- **Implement virtual triage.** The ability to triage a pet from home and receive veterinary guidance 24/7 is critical in the COVID-19 environment. Limiting exposure, while also knowing when a pet has an emergency and must go to the hospital, is key to lowering pet owner anxiety and keeping pets healthy;
- **Practice telemedicine.** After a virtual triage session, pet owners may need further medical guidance or the pet may need continuing care or monitoring of a chronic condition. Many states have anticipated this and have relaxed their rules regarding the establishment of VCPR over electronic media. This permits virtual care clinicians to intervene immediately by refilling vital medications when needed;

- **Utilize remote diagnostics.** There are new options for at-home mail-in diagnostics that support a variety of routine tests needed for the healthcare of pets. Test result review can be performed virtually, needed medication can be prescribed with home delivery and care plans can be created digitally. If a telemedicine consult has recommended in-clinic diagnostics, it is now possible to have them performed in a partner hospital, with results reported back in real-time to the virtual vet;
- **Launch online pharma and food delivery.** As store shelves sit empty and pet owners shelter-in-place, adding an online pharmacy and food delivery method is critical for practices and pet owners.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

COVID-19 will eventually pass, but the changes it brings will have a lasting impact on the global pet health care industry.

- **Virtual care will become the de facto norm** and your key engagement point with pet owners. Virtual care subscriptions will be a major revenue opportunity as consumers permanently adjust how they behave and interact;
- With VCPR rules shifting for COVID-19, we expect every VMA and state veterinary board across the US to amend their policies around VCPR so that vets can use both in-person and virtual care to provide more comprehensive and engaging care.

From our Founder & CEO, Cal Lai

“As industry leaders, we have a responsibility and a duty to use technology, compassion, creativity and vision to throw a lifeline to our constituents to help them through this very challenging time. We must provide a value proposition and the technology capabilities necessary for them to successfully survive this catastrophe and thrive into the future.”

“The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word ‘crisis’. One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger—but recognize the opportunity.”

John F. Kennedy

In this time of crisis, join in our mission to protect the health and wellness of pets, people and businesses. Stay safe, champion change and live the future now!

The Ask.Vet Team