

Looking beyond the credit crunch...

AS the recession starts to bite, many practices will be wondering what effect a prolonged period of economic uncertainty might have on them.

Some are already looking for ways to strengthen their position ... but without spending more. And it is possible, provided you find new ways to engage with clients and motivate your team, as I've seen during a recent visit to Bishops Veterinary Surgery in Hatfield.

Recent changes at this practice include the introduction of surveys asking how satisfied clients are with various elements of the service and evaluating how important each of these elements is to them. This activity is driven by all members of the team, with vets, nurses and receptionists targeting those clients whose opinion really matters.

The responses have given some useful insights into which aspects of

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employment that prevent employees from discussing their pay;

- allowing employers to take into account under-representation of a particular group when selecting candidates for appointment or promotion; and

- requiring public bodies to report on inequalities in gender pay, ethnic minority employment and disability employment.

Improving rights of agency workers

Following the publication on 5th December 2008 of the EC Directive on temporary agency work, agency workers have been given the right to equal treatment in relation to basic working and employment conditions. The Government is facing increasing pressure to make full use of the three-year implementation period, but it must ensure that the provisions of the Directive are implemented into UK law by 5th December 2011.

service clients really appreciate and where the practice team should focus future efforts. "In addition, if owners move practice we also now take the trouble to call and ask why," says Yves Gisseleire, the practice principal. "It gives us valuable feedback and the clients really appreciate that we care enough to call."

The practice has also started collecting clients' e-mail addresses and mobile telephone numbers, asking people which method they would prefer when the practice makes future contact with them. Whilst there are some IT hurdles to be overcome before this can happen, the comments from clients have been positive; they see this as a welcome development and it's reassuring that the clients want to interact with the practice.

Having some fun...

Some of the changes also involve having some fun. In the reception area the practice now has a case board which the nurses are responsible for creating and updating. For example, for a recent picture of a foreign body, clients have to lift a flap to see what it is.

The receptionists say that people are regularly seen reading the display, lifting the flap and exhibiting surprise at what they find! Yves adds, "This is not just for fun. You can tell clients about your fancy bits of equipment, but this is of little value to them if they don't understand how that benefits their animal."

Showing them a scan, x-ray or picture gives them tangible evidence of what you can do for them". Therefore, the board is of interest to waiting clients, it brightens up the reception area and also serves as an educational and promotional tool.

Katharine Richardson, head nurse, added: "Creating the board has been motivational for the nurses too. Some of the other changes we have recently introduced, such as monthly practice meetings, have also brought the team together and helped move things forward."

Other changes include improving signage, illumination in and around the building, and re-evaluating advertising spend so that it can be more effectively targeted; spend on media advertising has been reduced, with more being channelled into

website development.

So what was the catalyst for all this activity?

Some months ago, Bishops Veterinary Surgery won the Impact Practice Management Award from Merial Animal Health and had Caroline Johnson take a look at his practice as part of a Spotcheck.

Effectively, this Spotcheck was an audit of how the practice presents itself and interacts with clients. The end result has been a number of readily-implemented changes that have helped pull this dynamic team together, with no increased cost to the business.

Re-allocation of funds

In the quiet periods time has been spent on practice development in areas brought out by the report; these have been funded by a re-allocation of existing budgets.

Whilst some of the recommendations had far-reaching consequences for the future health of the business, many of the changes were quite simple but effective, enabling the practice to do more with the same amount of money.

Asked how he felt about winning the Impact award, Yves said, "Very pleased indeed. I was happy with the way things were going but it's always helpful to have an outside view. In this practice we are all committed to continually improving and it has made a real difference to us."

So just as Yves and his practice did, in these times of doom and gloom it's good to take a step back and look at your practice from outside, then say to yourself that you can do more with what you've got.

The fact is that despite the credit crunch there is a healthy market now, and there will be when the downturn in the economy is over. It's likely to be the practices



Yves Gisseleire, practice principal at Bishops Veterinary Surgery.

that best understand their clients and who strive for continual improvement that we will see flourishing.

Having seen the recent improvements and experienced the positive buzz at Bishops Veterinary Surgery, I am confident that regardless of the economic climate, this is one practice that will continue to go from strength to strength.



Christine attends to the "case of the month" display on the practice noticeboard. Below: Bishops Veterinary Surgery in Hatfield, Herts.



■ **Big Chat draw winner** – at last year's BVNA congress, Onswitch again hosted the "Big Chat" for veterinary nurses. In all, 273 nurses took the chance to talk about their hopes, worries, ambitions and ideas. The winner of the Big Chat 08 draw was Lisa Gorley from Millcroft Veterinary Group in Cockermonth, who won vouchers worth £100 for use at a local health spa.