

Case Study: RxWorks client, Douglas Kunz of the Animal Medical Hospital explains how he has used technology to assist his practice



Pets, People and Technology: Striving for Excellence in Veterinary Practice Management

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Let's face it: the practice of veterinary medicine is a profession of the heart. As a clinic partner at a practice that has been serving pets in the Palm Springs, California and surrounding areas since 1965, it's clear to me that the main reason for our long-term success has been a single, shared goal: to provide the very best medical and surgical care for the pets we see in a caring atmosphere, and to serve all of our clients well, regardless of their income level.

That approach has clearly paid off over time. Animal Medical Hospital now treats more than 13,400 companion animal and other pets and serves nearly 7,500 clients. But, dedication and a skilled staff aren't the only factors driving our success. We would not be in the strong position we are today without the aid of technology. Our use of practice management software to support clinic activities has been a mainstay of our operation for years. And recent breakthroughs in software developed specifically for today's busy clinic environment have taken us beyond the realm of a tracking and billing system to one that truly helps drive increased quality of healthcare, better client service – and increased profits.

The Heel-Dragging Syndrome: Moving Beyond Outdated Technology

I've had the good career fortune to have worked in the same clinic setting for the past 28 years. My partner, Garry Roberts,

DVM, who took over the clinic in 1969, brought me into the fold eight years later, when I graduated from Colorado State Veterinary School. After one year, Garry offered me a partnership, and we've worked side by side ever since. We've seen our clinic grow over time from a small, companion-animal-focused practice to one that offers a complete range of clinic, surgery and boarding services through three full-time and one part-time vet, plus 21 additional staff members. As a Palm Springs-based clinic, our clientele include movie stars, famous musicians – and lots of just plain ordinary pet owners who want the best for their companion animal.

Like many clinics, we had a practice management system in place that was adequate at one time, but had long since passed the point of optimal usefulness. And, like many of our fellow veterinarians, my partner and I dragged our heels on upgrading. We were running a busy clinic, after all. The time, training and angst involved in a system selection and transition caused us to make do with what we had – that is, until I had a wake-up call.

The First Step: Understand Your Clinic Goals and Process Challenges

At Animal Medical, continuing education is stressed for all staff, and I'm no exception. I frequently rely on web-based courses offered through the Veterinary Information Network (VIN) to keep myself up to speed on the latest techniques for effective practice management. Last year, I signed up for a course given by Dr. Thomas Catanzaro, a noted DVM and industry consultant, who heads a group dedicated to educating clinics on "best practices" for healthcare delivery and practice management. I took the opportunity to email "Tom Cat" as he is known by colleagues, to share with him

the current challenges our clinic faced. Our subsequent discussions helped clarify not only our goals, but how our current processes – and technology underpinnings – were standing in the way of progress.

- Goal: Provide a clinic setting where clients are comfortable seeing any vet on staff. We like to encourage an environment where our clients are at ease dealing with any of the skilled veterinarians we have on staff, rather than relying always on one specific vet.

- Challenge: While our current practice management system provided for adequate automated billing and basic record tracking, we were still tied to the necessity for hand-written medical records. Deciphering each other's hand-writing wasn't easy, and since we couldn't come up to speed quickly on a pet's medical records, we couldn't achieve the goal of seamlessly serving our clients.

- Goal: Increase quality of care through better medical record tracking, reminders and follow-up. Like any good clinic, at Animal Medical Hospital we have specific quality-of-care standards when it comes to areas such as vaccinations, dental care, heartworm prevention, etc. Our goal was to track each pet's health in a way that allowed us to consistently meet these standards of care.

- Challenge: Again, technology was impeding our progress, since our current practice management system was oriented more toward billing than capturing, tracking and flagging medical records. Once again, we were too often forced to rely on hand-written records to determine treatment history – and were unable to meet the quality standards of care we had set for ourselves

- Goal: Drive better business efficiency to enable growth and achieve increased profits. While we are a service-oriented

business, we are in business, after all, and attention must be paid to the bottom line! Also, we recognize that our ability to decrease missed charges and increase profits in turn affects our ability to invest in new equipment and medical processes that can benefit our clientele.

- Challenge: With the number of pets and clients we serve, there was no way to increase productivity and decrease the human error that leads to inefficiency and missed charges without moving beyond our current practice management system. We realized the key was to seek out a system that allowed us to automate the medical records process in a way that truly mirrored our clinic workflow.

Out with the Old: Selecting a Medical Records-based System

Once we had evaluated our situation, we knew we had to make a change – and we looked literally around the world for the right technology vendor. Based on our goals and current challenges, we ask an array of questions that spoke to our clinic's particular needs. For example:

- Will the system enable us to truly automate and manage medical records from the time a client walks in the door to the time he or she checks out?
- Can we virtually eliminate hand-written charts, and keep all vet-specific notes online with the pet's medical record?
- Can we set automatic alerts and reminders regarding vaccinations and other quality-of-care standards?
- Can we automatically flag special conditions – for example, a pet's allergic reactions to medication?
- Can we reduce human error through the use of this system? For example, will the software support our goal of reducing missed charges?
- Can we customize the system and individual screens to fit our particular clinic workflow?
- Does the system have a sophisticated search facility that lets us easily locate information related to a particular pet or client?
- Will our staff be able to adapt to the system and find that it directly benefits their daily work?
- Is the vendor willing to work with us, listen to us, and provide the kind of ongoing partnership and support we need?

Our search quickly narrowed to two vendors, and we ultimately selected software from RxWorks, an international

supplier of practice management software that expanded operations to the U.S. last year. Our decision was based largely on the fact that their software was truly centered on medical records and workflow management – the areas that were key to achieving our clinic goals.

Preparing for the Change: Involve Your Staff!

We transitioned to the new system in September of last year, but before then, we took steps to prepare and involve our staff. Change is difficult, and a move to a new system affects the working lives of every clinic staff member. We held staff meetings prior to the changeover, to educate and motivate our staff on the features of the system and how the new medical records-centric technology would benefit each individual staff function. We also handed out copies of “Who Moved My Cheese”, the popular best seller by Spencer Johnson on the challenges and rewards of change in the workplace. In one case, this careful preparation had unintended results, since one of our long-time staff members thoughtfully reassessed her life priorities – and promptly decided to retire! But on the whole, our efforts to involve and motivate our staff paid off in a climate of positive anticipation as we moved toward the transition.

The installation and training process took four days, and while there was obviously temporary disruption to normal operations, we found our clients were distinctly unruffled by the process! As to our staff, RxWorks held group training sessions, followed by one-on-one training support, so that all staff members were as comfortable as possible the day we went live. Our Windows 2000-based, ten-workstation system was soon put to the test and we were prepared to take a hard look at the results

The Payoff: Assess and Measure

It's obviously critical to track results of a change this major. Fortunately, I saw payback in the new system from day one. The ability to automate medical records (no more hand-written notes to decipher!) and to mirror our clinic workflow was a huge plus. We're able to serve clients more quickly and effectively – for example, if another vet happens to serve a client I last worked with, he can review the online record to come quickly up to speed.

Workflow management is perhaps the most valuable aspect of the new system. Since a patient's record travels from workstation to workstation as the pet

moves through the clinic – from the front desk, to the exam room, to the lab and/or surgery – and back to checkout, staff productivity is up, human error is down, pets and their owners are served more quickly and comprehensively. No more brushing by the issue of vaccinations, for example – our staff is alerted when a pet isn't up to date! Finally, the ability to print out customized take-home instructions is a major benefit to our clients and their pets – it means our care and support doesn't end when they leave the clinic.

Did the entire staff immediately see the positives? No, of course not – it took time to adjust. But I believe they would all now agree that the new system has benefited their individual roles. Specific staff members appreciate both major and minor features that affect their work. Our receptionist loves the scheduling features. Our business manager says the billing goes smoothly and the label printing is excellent. There's an across-the-board appreciation of the online search facility – and so it goes. When questions arise (and certainly, they do), RxWorks provides online support with a web-based program that allows us to talk live to support staff. And since RxWorks has support personnel in Australia and the U.K. as well as the U.S., we can reach someone virtually 24 hours a day.

Anecdotal evidence is great, but it's also important to see measurable results. Fortunately, the evidence is in. Within three months of installing our new system, we had added 350 new clients! We've also experienced a five percent increase in gross income this year versus the same period last year. The numbers speak for themselves.

Becoming the Best: Technology Alone Isn't Enough

There's no doubt that moving past our old system to new technology that supports our quality-of-care standards and business goals has been a major step forward for Animal Medical Hospital. But no system can, on its own, provide all of the answers. That's why we plan to re-engage with Dr. Catanzaro and his team this year, to execute a thorough review of our clinic processes and discuss optimal use of our new technology. We'll also continue to engage with RxWorks on learning nuances of the current system, discussing potential enhancements that can enable even better quality of care and more efficient practice management. The goal? To continue to be the best that we can be.

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