

Taming the Internet Pharmacy Monster

How can you rescue lost revenue and win back clients who want the convenience of online prescriptions?

By Wendy S. Myers



A busy summer brings the joys of a full yet sometimes overloaded appointment schedule. You strive to see clients as quickly as possible and provide conveniences of TV, coffee and educational brochures when wait times incur. Wait time is an issue at many hospitals, and it gets worse the larger the practice, according to the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (www.ncvei.org). In a five-doctor practice, a client typically waits 19 minutes during a busy part of the day before being escorted into an exam room. Then the same client waits nearly 9.5 minutes to check out. With a 20-minute wellness exam, the visit to the veterinarian takes a total of 49 minutes.

While clients wait in your lobby they watch Animal Planet. A PetMed Express commercial plays, asking “Tired of waiting for your pet’s prescriptions?” As a veterinary consultant, I often advise practice owners to turn off Animal Planet because animal abuse shows shock clients and commercials rob you of pharmacy income. Instead, play PetCare TV (www.petcaretv.com) that features wellness topics and emphasizes the expertise and professional services of veterinarians.

Why do clients choose Internet pharmacies over your veterinary practice? Veterinarians are quick to assume price but convenience is often the deciding factor for consumers. About 20 percent of pet owners use home delivery for products and 65 percent of PetMed Express sales are non-prescription items such as preventatives.

Clients understand the importance of protecting pets year-round from fleas, ticks and heartworms. While many fill one-time prescriptions for illnesses through your in-clinic pharmacy, they may shop Internet pharmacies for preventatives and long-term medications.

Try these strategies to take the nuisance out of filling prescriptions for your clients:

Add a prescription refill request line. To provide better client service and reduce call volume at the front desk, add a prescription refill request line. This direct-dial phone line with



voicemail and/or an answering machine can be installed in your pharmacy. Print on every prescription label: “For prescription refills, call 555-555-5555 or visit our website at [www.yourwebsite.com](#).” If the prescription refill request line rings and a technician is in the pharmacy, she answers the phone and says, “*Thank you for calling our prescription refill request line, what medication can we refill for you today?*” If a staff member is unavailable, the voicemail or answering machine has a recording that states, “*Thank you for calling (your hospital name) refill request line, please leave your name, your pet’s name, the medication name and dose you need to be refilled, and the phone number where you can be*

reached today. A technician checks this voice mail once each hour during business hours and will call you to let you know when your pet’s medication will be ready for pickup. Thank you for calling our prescription refill request line, and we look forward to speaking with you soon.”

Offer the convenience of online ordering. Add an online store to your hospital website. The task isn’t as daunting as it might seem. Companies such as Vetcentric and Pet Portals make it easy.

Vetcentric lets you fill special order items such as therapeutic diets and compounded medications you don’t regularly stock as well as preventatives. You can add its “Vet Store” feature to your existing website that lets clients order online and get home delivery. Vetcentric also sends clients e-mail reminders from your clinic on the day of the month they need to administer preventatives and e-mails and direct mail when repurchase is coming due. You set product prices and authorize all prescriptions, and Vetcentric fills and ships orders.

Pet Portals drives compliance with e-mail reminders from your hospital and lets clients view online vaccination status and purchase history. Pet Portals work in conjunction with your practice-management software to automatically create personalized, private web pages for each of your clients. For your clients, the experience is similar to that of online banking: They go to the bank’s website to learn about hours and services, then sign in to their own accounts to view personal information, pay bills and manage accounts. Compliance rates jumped to 56 percent when clients received Pet Portals e-mail reminders in addition to traditional reminder postcards, according to a VetInsight study based on 1.8 million services that were due in 279 clinics from



October 2005 to February 2006. Compliance is 40 percent for clients receiving only traditional reminder postcards.

Evaluate whether to charge a prescription writing fee. Check with your state board of veterinary medicine to determine whether you can charge clients a fee. Some hospitals charge clients a nominal prescription writing fee of \$5-\$10. Depending on state regulations, some practitioners refuse to write prescriptions. Texas and 25 other states don't require veterinarians to issue prescriptions to clients. Only

21 states require veterinarians to honor prescription requests from clients.

Let clients know the five steps you must take to fill a pet's prescription, including:

1. Checking your pet's medical history and confirming that your pet is well enough to take the medication. Weak, sick or older pets should not take certain medications.
2. Reviewing your pet's medical record to ensure that tests are current. For example, your pet needs a heartworm test with negative results before taking a heartworm preventative. Certain arthritis medications also require routine blood tests to check liver function.
3. Confirming the appropriate dose, how often the medication should be given and the number of refills.
4. Verifying that the pharmacy you are using is licensed with the state board of pharmacy. Our doctors will only write a prescription that will be filled by a company with a state pharmacy license.
5. Recording the prescription in your pet's medical record so we can carefully monitor its interaction with other medications your pet may be taking.

A sample client handout on "A Word of Caution About Internet Pharmacies" is featured in *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD* (Visit www.csvets.com for a book order form or call 720-344-2347).

Educate clients about the dangers of Internet pharmacies. Several companies have been disciplined for dispensing drugs not approved by the FDA. If clients purchase prescriptions through such pharmacies, they should be aware of these risks:

- The drug manufacturer may not guarantee medications.

- Some medications may be foreign drugs that may not have the same quality and purity assurance as the United States does. It is illegal to dispense foreign drugs in the United States, including foreign versions of U.S. products.
- Some medications may be imitations of approved drugs.
- Selling prescriptions directly to consumers without a veterinarian-client-patient relationship may pose health risks to patients.

The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy website (www.nabp.net) lists all state pharmacy boards, which often feature online directories of pharmacies licensed in their states. You can file a complaint against an Internet pharmacy with the FDA and AVMA. For the Prescribing and Dispensing Complaint Form, visit the AVMA's website at www.avma.org/issues/prescribing/complaint_form.asp.



Remember, you're not fighting Internet pharmacies; you're fighting your clients. Develop proactive strategies that show clients the value of your in-clinic pharmacy, offer the convenience of refills and home delivery and communicate the importance of a veterinarian-client-patient relationship. With a smart approach to Internet pharmacies, you can ensure patients' welfare and limit revenue loss.

AVMA Position Statement on Internet Pharmacies

The following recommendations are offered as a guide to prescribing and client purchases:

1. Drug therapy, when medically indicated, should be initiated by the attending veterinarian in the context of a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship.
2. Drugs may be dispensed or prescribed. Veterinarians should honor client requests to prescribe rather than dispense a drug (AVMA Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics). The client has the option of filling a prescription at any pharmacy.
3. Clients might be advised to select an Internet pharmacy certified by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (www.nabp.net) whose program and accompanying seal of approval identify to the public those online pharmacies that are appropriately licensed and prepared to practice pharmacy via the Internet.
4. Veterinarians asked by pharmacies to approve prescriptions they have not initiated should do so only if the prescription is appropriate and a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship exists.

5. It is within the veterinarian's (not the pharmacy's) purview to determine the medical criteria whereby a drug is indicated.

6. As with any prescription, a written record should be maintained.

7. Prescribing veterinarians should assure that information regarding the proper use of the prescribed drug and the risk associated with its use are communicated to the client, regardless of the drug source.

Use of drugs of foreign origin that lack FDA approval generally are not permitted.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.