WHAT BUSINESS ARE YOU IN? THE ANSWER MAY SURPRISE YOU!

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Introduction
Quoting Winston Churchill, you spent a lot of time, toil, sweat and tears to become a veterinary doctor; hopefully a good doctor. When you purchased or founded your veterinary practice, you became a small business owner. If you are typical, you spent most of your time and energy practicing quality medicine and were a little surprised if financial success did not follow you like day follows night.

In a ‘perfect world’, your financial success would be commensurate with your skills as a veterinarian. Unfortunately, your financial success does not depend on the quality of your veterinary skills. Clients don’t know whether you are a great doctor or not. Since you have a medical degree, they assume you are skilled and competent. Medically speaking, all of you are equal in their eyes. They might like you better than another doctor but that is not based on your skills as a doctor but on your ‘bedside manner.’

Financially your success depends on the public liking your hospital better than the competition and choosing to place its pets in your care. As a business, then, you are not in the business of selling veterinary services; you are in the business of pleasing customers. If you want to be more successful, you have to attract more clients and you have to make them happy, you have to make them feel good.

Beware: you also have to deliver great medical care. If you look good but practice sloppy medicine, the truth will get out and failure will follow.

From self-centered to client-centered
A hundred years ago a veterinarian could blow into town as the only veterinarian in town and hang out his shingle and run the practice the way he wanted. The practice revolved around him. If he wanted a two-hour lunch, he took it. If he wanted time off, he hung out a sign ‘gone fishing.’

As soon as another doctor came into town, customers could start choosing based on which doctor best met their needs. Suddenly what the customer wanted became important and had a direct influence on the hospitals’ financial success.

During the last fifteen to twenty years, meeting the client’s needs was no longer good enough. The goal posts moved farther away. Other high-end retail services began to stress high-touch service trying to exceed the client’s expectations. Some of us, coming out of the field of retail marketing, began to preach the importance of moving from a doctor-centered practice to a client-centered practice, helping veterinarians achieve totally unexpected levels of business success.

Financially, you are in the business of making people feel good. Part of the way you do that is by delivering high quality veterinary care.
Moving from brand to meaning
In the 1950s, business owners and advertising agencies began to understand that a company’s most valuable asset was not its product, product inventory or properties, it was something much less tangible, something called brand. Owning the name Coca Cola was more important than owning all the factories and distribution centers. You could burn down all the factories and the ‘brand’ would still be very valuable.

Developing a recognized brand became the cherished goal of every business. How valuable is brand? In 1971, a coffee shop named Starbucks opened in Seattle, Washington. They thought they were in the business of selling coffee and for years they were just another coffee shop in Seattle. Around 1985, under the guidance of the new owner, Howard Schulz, Starbucks began to understand that it was not in the business of selling coffee—it reinvented a nine hundred year old business.

First, it built brand identity by placing its name and logo on everything from napkins to coffee cups. Careful staff training stressed making the customer feel at home. By creating a warm experience associated with food and beverage that tasted good, Starbucks made people feel good and became an essential part of their lifestyle. The success became astounding: by the mid 1980s they were opening a new store every weekday until they owned more than 16,000 coffee shops worldwide.

Brand is a synaptic response in the brain. Like Pavlov’s dog, which salivated when, the food bell was rung, if we say ‘coffee’ Starbucks pops into our brains. In your community, what happens if you say ‘veterinary hospital’? How do you get your hospital’s name to pop up in the public’s mind? How do you become the brand name hospital?

Brand is created by the sum total of all experiences that the client associates with your hospital. Just as Starbucks has become a meaningful part of the daily life of millions of people, the new goal of business is to create meaning. It is increasingly important for companies to address their customer’s essential need for meaning.

At the beginning of the 20th century, companies stressed the benefits of their services. In the 1950s the focus moved to branding that stressed the emotional benefits of the service—identity and status benefits. The focus is now shifting to experience and meaning. Most veterinary advertising is still back in the early 1900s. A few hospitals are beginning to understand branding. If you want to leap ahead of the pack, pay attention to the experience you are creating for the client and create meaning in her life.

Making meaning
From a marketing point of view, experience is delivered to the client through a system of touch points—message, architecture, advertising, staff training, customer service—that all deliver or evokes the essence of the hospital and the quality of its medical care. As human beings we demand an explanation of our world. Meaning helps us understand the world and ourselves, learn, and make sense of what’s around us. Meaning provides a framework for framing what we value, believe and desire. Meaning makes a product or service very valuable to us.

References
