

Business Management and Veterinarians

By Linnea Thraen

When I was in high school dreaming of one day becoming a veterinarian, the images floating around in my mind mainly involved caring for animals, diagnosing medical problems, and saving lives. I think most of us imagined something like this and never considered that our future careers might involve less glamorous tasks like managing a business's finances. And yet, in order to be successful veterinarians, it is crucial to have at least a baseline understanding of business management. I wish I knew this prior to beginning vet school. If I had, I may have taken some business and finance courses during undergrad to prepare me for the non-medical side of being a veterinarian. There's an understanding that you won't know everything about medicine when you graduate vet school, but at least we're given the tools to critically evaluate scientific literature in order to find answers. This is less true for topics on business and finance, yet business acumen and other related skills are needed for career achievement¹.

The vet school curriculum can seem overwhelming. In the span of four short years, we need to learn about every major species of animal, their anatomy, diseases, treatments, and impacts on human health. We develop tunnel vision as we scramble to prepare for one exam after another, culminating in The Big Exam. But fortunately (or unfortunately), this is not what life in practice is like. Yes, understanding diseases is important, but this is only one thing clients care about. Among other things, they also highly value confidence, quality explanations, and decisiveness². Clients often don't know how much medical knowledge we have in our brains. They choose us because of quality communication and relationship building- all of which is part of a good business curriculum that incorporates other aspects of professional development.

Knowledge of practice and financial management is crucial to success even if you don't own your own practice. In veterinary school, grades and medical knowledge are emphasized, however studies have shown that there is no correlation between grades and class rank and average transaction fees³. Of course we need to be on the cutting edge of medicine, but understanding veterinary hospitals as a business is important so that you can connect with clients, meet production, and understand why things are priced the way they are (thus avoiding guilt when making recommendations). Additionally, as concern rises over the growth of corporations and practice consolidation at the expense of the independent clinic, veterinarians who want to run their own practice need to understand how finance and business work.

The AVMA has recognized that understanding business is important for veterinary schools to teach their students, and it is even part of their standards for accreditation: there should be "opportunities throughout the curriculum for students to gain... personal and business finance and management skills⁴". To meet this standard, my school offers a professional development curriculum that includes lectures on personal finance, client communication, economics, marketing, personnel management, accounting, and client relations. This is a good start, but most of the practice management/economics lectures took place over an intensive 2-day course of lectures. These were interesting and informative, but two days over the course of four years felt more like an introduction than actually gaining practical skills. As a fourth year student, business learning is minimal apart from completing a "Partners for Healthy Pets" online series of modules, part of which focuses on communication, business marketing, and seeking client feedback. What I found most valuable during my four years of vet school was the Veterinary Business Management Association (VBMA). The mission of this student-led organization is to help students develop business skills that aid both their careers and the entire profession⁵. Through 32 hours of lunch lectures, I learned about Business Finance, Business Operations, Management, and Ownership, Business Leadership Skills, and Career and Personal Development which are the four pillars of the VBMA business certificate⁶. These lectures started the learning process about business and finance, but there is much I still do not know and will need to learn on my own, or hopefully from good mentors.

My school has made some good steps towards preparing students to understand veterinary practice as a business, and the VBMA fills in a lot of the gaps. But we can do better. Other schools such as the University of Florida offer courses for students to complete a business management certificate⁷. I suggest that all schools at least develop an elective class for 3rd years about business management, delving deeper into complicated but practical subjects such as contract negotiation, evaluating practice finances, logistics of buying into/starting a new practice, when to buy new equipment or hire a new vet, and marketing. Additionally, offering an elective rotation to fourth years with an emphasis on business management would be a great supplement to our education. Students could develop business plans, assess marketing strategies, and learn more about what goes on behind the scenes of a veterinary hospital. There is precedent for this kind of rotation: VBMA students at Georgia put their training into action by performing a business evaluation of the primary care service⁸. We can also do better when it comes to preparing our

prospective students. Requiring a business/finance prerequisite course in addition to all the liberal arts and science courses would be a simple way to ensure that new vet students were at least somewhat business and financially literate. I think that making these changes would better prepare students for graduating and entering a practice, and would also impart additional skills such as communication that would translate to better client relationships. Regardless, I encourage students considering veterinary school to invest part of their time in developing business and financial literacy. Being a successful veterinarian requires not only a strong foundation of medical knowledge, but also understanding how to communicate with clients and support a business. I believe that schools can and should do better at preparing their students for this reality.

Sources:

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