

## APPLYING E-MARKETING IN PROMOTION OF VETERINARY PRACTISE

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### ABSTRACT

The veterinary profession as a health service is facing new market conditions of business management. In the conditions of increased competition it is necessary to look for new ways of expanding the business and increase the economic efficiency and profitability. The introduction of the prospective customers to the activities and promotion of its services is one of the ways of expanding the veterinary clinic. The promotion is a crucial tool in the market penetration in every field, but one of the disadvantages of this tool is the often extremely high price and is not appropriate for small business, such as veterinary practice. This is why the Internet as a medium is interesting means of promotion of the veterinary clinic due to its many advantages. It is accessible to everyone, has a great number of users and at the same time, is fairly affordable. Its important feature is the room for modern, creative and interactive approach. In certain countries there are certain limitations in the promotion of veterinary facilities, and the Internet is useful in such cases. The veterinary clinic has a great choice of means of promotion. Some of them are completely free, and those which cost usually have a symbolic price. Their usage enables the veterinarian to be more competitive, and helps their clinic to increase its successful work. At the same time this type of promotion provides the opportunity for interactive relationship with the clients and for promotion of the facilities and the accomplishments of the clinic. The increase in the market share and the economic efficiency is also an important factor in favor of this type of promotion. The example with the veterinary clinic Animal Medica, which has managed to increase its frequency in 15 % is another proof. Almost 60% of the clients talked that they heard first time for Animal Medica on the net (Facebook or website). Therefore the veterinarians in their ruthless competition should use the limitless possibilities of the Internet as a medium, for a more successful management of the private veterinary practice.

***Key words:*** e-marketing, veterinary clinic, clients

### INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of information. The digital era which we live in has changed the manner of interaction among people, as well as the interaction of the individual with the public. Today even the most faraway village has Internet access. The Internet has become a constituent part of almost every home, a trend which can also be seen in the R. of Macedonia. For instance, Macedonia, as one of the less developed European countries in terms

of the use of the Internet currently has 906,979 (5) registered Internet users which is 43.9% of the entire population with annual increase in users of 2.9%. It is one of the fastest growing services in the world, including in Macedonia. The great number of users represents only 0.2% of all European Internet users. These numbers indicate the great potential of this sector, which is rapidly spreading in all spheres of life.

The research has shown that e-mail has become the most frequently used means of communication.

Accessing the internet offers the user unlimited possibilities – from visiting different websites, communicating via e-mail and interactive profiles, social networks (**Facebook, Google+, My Space** etc.), to buying products and services with only one click. All these possibilities direct the attention of the individual in front of the computer screen, thus spending more time “surfing” (a term which is used for the use of Internet services) on the Internet. On the other hand, the Internet allows the companies an easy and quite inexpensive way of presentation and contact with their prospective clients. Today there are hardly any the companies without a website and which do not use the Internet as a medium for self-promotion, and even for selling their products on a local or global level.

Veterinary health facilities (clinics and hospitals) are not an exception. They enter the tertiary economic sector offering services and currently marks the highest increase in the world market. (1) The services can be defined as acts, efforts or performances, i.e. the service is an economic activity which creates value and ensures benefit for the costumers in specific time and place, bringing desirable changes favor of the consumer of the service. (2) As a facility which offers a specific type of services, it is necessary to launch its corporate profile on a personal website available to everyone who has a need/desire to visit it. Why is the Internet attractive to the consumer? Because it offers the customer a wide range of choices from the comfort of their home, offering detail information and good prices. The attractiveness of the Internet for the service provider is due to its affordability, its accessibility to a wide range of prospective clients and its possibility for sharing detail information about the veterinary facility. For many years, there are specialized agencies in the USA offering their marketing services to veterinary hospitals and clinics, primarily the methods of on-line marketing which are particularly recommendable for this particular economic segment (4).

With the rapid growth of computer technology and Internet communications, the marketing in the world has acquired new dimensions. Internet marketing, also known as e-Marketing, web-Marketing and online-Marketing is the marketing of products or services over the Internet. E-Marketing is quite a controversial topic, considering the fact that no one has ever managed to unite the various theories about it. Yet one thing connects these theories: e-Marketing has first appeared in the

shape of various techniques developed by certain companies which had been selling their products over the Internet in the early '90s. The frenzy about these new marketing techniques created by various companies supported by the Internet resulted in a new marketing dimension called e-Marketing (electronic Marketing).

The simplest and shortest definition of what e-Marketing is was given by Mark Skeets: The e-Marketing is a marketing which uses the Internet as a medium for presentation and expression. According to the draft definition the e-Marketing is a sum of all activities conducted by the business through the Internet whose goal is to find, attract, win and keep the clients. (6)

The Internet is a medium with global popularization. The interactive nature of the e-Marketing in terms of providing a fast and qualitative response is the unique feature of this medium. The e-Marketing unites both the creative and the technical aspects of the Internet including: design, development, advertising and sales.

#### ***Advantages of e-Marketing:***

1. The e-Marketing is relatively inexpensive. Companies can attract the interested customers with a small amount of the financial assets which would otherwise be intended for advertising. The nature of the medium has enabled the clients to assess the services offered by the companies which are being advertised.
2. E-marketing also enables easy measurement of the statistic data, which provides information on the website's number of visitors when an information is being posted or an advertisement is placed on a different website (there is an opportunity to follow the link from which the website has been accessed).

#### ***Disadvantages of e-Marketing:***

1. The e-marketing requires that the clients use new technologies rather than the traditional media.
2. The slow Internet connections (such as the Dial-up or the cell-phone Internet) are another obstacle, especially for the complex and large websites.

On the other hand, the veterinary practice is under great pressure to increase the number of services, as well as its methods for acquiring and keeping the clients. Besides care and medical treatment, the clients have access to reminders and brochures,

advice on care and diet, examples from the local and international practice etc. (3) The internet is an adequate medium for presenting such information, whose benefits shall be further analyzed through the example of the veterinary clinic ANIMAL MEDICA. In the USA with Long tradition in the serious approach in veterinary practice management, the Internet with all its possibilities of promotion is becoming the most recommended instrument which in 2010 is to excel all the other means of promotion of veterinary facilities.

### TYPES OF INTERNET PROMOTION APPROPRIATE FOR VETERINARY PRACTICE

There are different ways in which the Internet can be used as a means of promotion, which are:

**I Free e-Marketing** - In the beginning one can access the cheapest, or free of charge solution.

1. Various information providing companies in Macedonia can be included in this category, first and foremost the directories Yellow Pages, Zlatna Kniga etc. These are companies which provide alphabetical listing of other companies and their general information such as their activity, seat and contact. This is the place on the Internet where most of the clients will access for information, in this case to look for a veterinary service (from the statistical data at

www.animalmedica.mk). When the clients are looking for a veterinary facility (hospital, clinic) at one of these informative web sites, besides the contact information they will also look for a web site of the veterinary facility. Before dialing the phone number of any veterinary facility most clients prefer to visit their website, interactive profile or blog to gain some more information on the health facility and where they are to take their pet for a medical examination. Therefore the basic rule of the veterinary clinic is creating and maintaining of their web page with various contents.

2. **Facebook** - The Facebook (FB) is a social network which enables interactive communication in various spheres enabling people to make the world more open and connected. Millions of people use Facebook on a daily basis to keep in touch with their friends, exchange links and pictures and learn more about the companies which have FB profiles, including information on veterinary practice. FB in Macedonia has a great number of members (table 1), suggesting the great marketing possibilities it offers. The formation of separate groups enables the owner free informing of a large number of prospective clients for all the possibilities offered by the veterinary clinic, thus providing a more affordable expansion of its business and attraction of new clients.

**Table 1:** Internet and Facebook users in Europe

COUNTRY	% of population on internet	number of users	number of FB users
EU	60%	300.000.000	40.000.000
Macedonia	44%	906.979	90.000
Slovenia	65%	1.300.000	220.000
Croatia	44,20%	1.984.000	525.000
Serbia	32,40%	2.602.000	600.000
Slovakia	55,30%	3.018.000	170.000
Greece	46%	4.932.000	1.110.000
Czech Republic	48,80%	4.991.000	230.000
Hungary	52,50%	5.215.000	105.000
Israel	74%	5.263.146	850.000
Ukraine	14,60%	6.700.000	45.000
Romania	33,40%	7.430.000	70.000
Turkey	35%	26.500.000	8.107.820
Russia	27%	38.000.000	135.000
Latvia	59%	1.324.800	35.000
Bulgaria	32,6%	2.368.000	160.000

FB represents a perfect tool for promotion, since it is easy to reach the target group of interest. People leave information about themselves on their profile: age, sex, nationality, education, interests, and even private information. The target is readily accessible. For instance: Macedonian between 20-40 years old, graduated from high school or university, interested in pets... and so on. Thus 90 000 people were reduced to 15 000 for this particular target group. Of course they ought to be on the company's friend list or fan club (provided it owns such a fan page) and receive the latest news, and be able to see when something new is uploaded. The company should often update its account (not too often, however), for instance once every 5-6 days.

1. **Blog** - If possible a corporate blog should be created to popularize the veterinary medicine.

It would be even better if a specific blog community is created. Bloggers are always popular, especially those with good writing skills who write on a regular basis. With 50 active bloggers there would be at least two new blog posts a day, which would attract new visitors. This would also contribute to increased number of visitors of the web site behind the blog.

**II Paid marketing** - Another way is paying for the Internet services for promotion. These include:

1. **Website** - On its website the veterinary facility is presenting its services it is willing to offer, the medical staff, reference of the clinic's work, the location, contact and additional content which would contribute to the positive impression the client receives.



Figure 1: Examples of successful websites for veterinary services

The webpage leaves the first impression on the professionalism and seriousness of the veterinary facility and provides additional information on the services being offered. The clients have the

opportunity to get to know the services offered by the veterinary facility, as well as the staff conducting the aforementioned services. In short, the website is a kind of reception ward which



leaves a great impression about the manner and the quality of operating of a company and a reflection of its organization. Therefore the initial step in the paid Internet marketing of the veterinary practice is creating a website. Its starting point should contain all the necessary information which would attract the clients' attention. Here one should bare in mind the concept of the website itself and the information it offers. The concept should imply interesting table of contents and free advice in the field of pet hygiene and care, as well as veterinary advice on their overall health. It would be interesting to issue a Newsletter as well, in which the members of the website would obtain free information on the news in the clinic, and advice on care for their pets.

1. **Banners** - Banners are places on a website where the websites of other companies can be advertised. This is where the logo is placed, the name of the company (website) and brief information, which represent a link to the original website. With a click on the banner, the Internet browser is going to open the webpage which the banner represents. Also banners can be arranged of veterinary related topics on the website (for example, a manufacturer of pet food).
2. **E-mail marketing** - E-mail marketing is also a part of the Internet marketing, which entitles companies sending selected material in the form of a banner over electronic mail, i.e. e-mail. It should list basic information on the advertised company, as well as additional information on the offered services and the possible promotional offers. This banner is a link to the website of the veterinary facility. A good example is the company Data Bank, with its few years of experience in the field.

## CONCLUSIONS

As already mentioned, the case study shall involve the veterinary clinic ANIMAL MEDICA. It was founded on July 2, 2009. The slow beginning of generation of a sufficient number of clients so a veterinary clinic can start to operate was one of the issues, but also an inevitable destiny, which was not to be left to time and chance. In the beginning the limited financial assets offered only what was readily available in the beginning, and yet something which would be used as part of marketing strategy in each stage of development of the business plan. Hence began the use of the Internet as an initial marketing medium. ANIMAL MEDICA's website was in use 6 months after the opening of the clinic. The next step was the announcement of contact information, i.e. telephone number, address and the website on the business directories Zlatna kniga and Yellow Pages which enable a fast and simple retrieval of information for services, products, institutions and companies. According to the statistic data on ANIMAL MEDICA, these directories are the most frequent starting point to access ANIMAL MEDICA's website. This resulted in 15% increase in the frequency of the clinic as well as the overall sale of its services, after the launching of the website. From the interaction with the clients it was obvious that they frequently visited the website in order to gain basic information on the location and the offered services, as well as advice on care for their pets etc. 60% of the clients, which has answered on the survey which was made that first information about ANIMAL MEDICA ambulant was from the facebook and from the web. It was obviously that this cheap promotion is much successful than paid promotion in the mediums, especially for veterinary services promotions, which is limited with regulation.

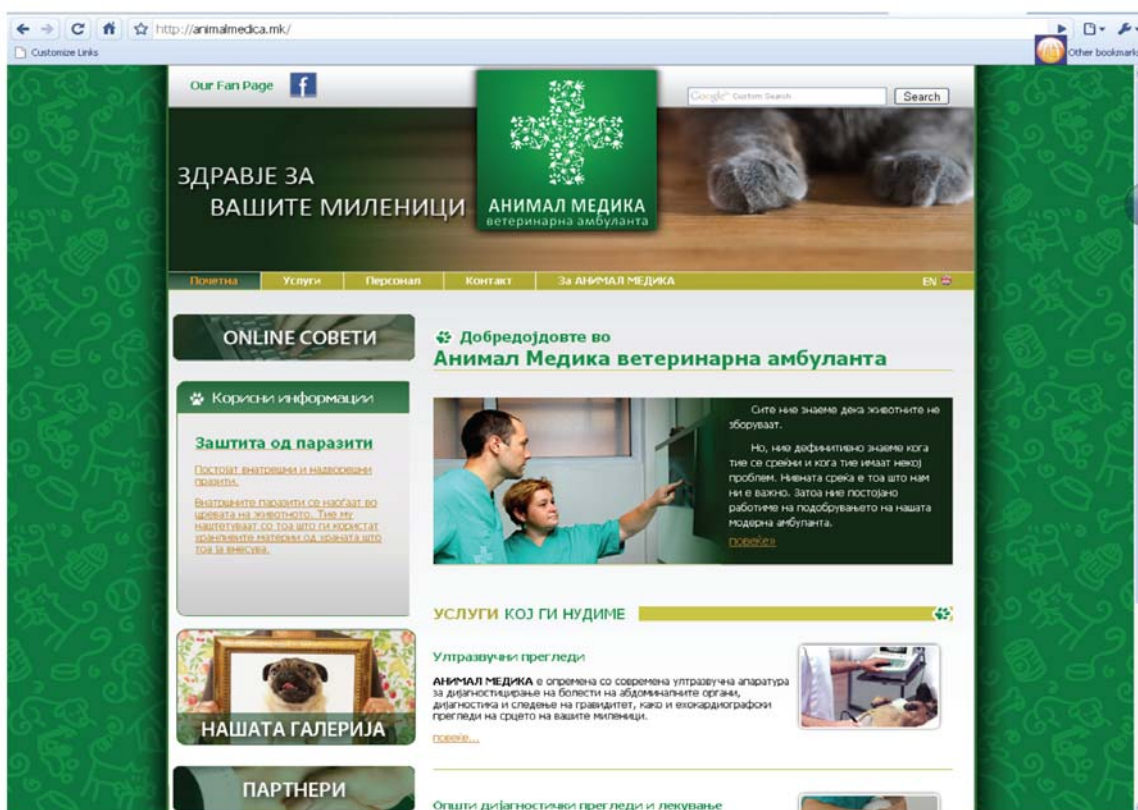


Figure 2: Animal Medica's website

Later on, the social network Facebook was also applied as an e-marketing medium. It contains a fan page which provides daily information for the fans on all news, special offers, promotions and advice. Additionally the fans can ask a question or publish their own piece of information on the Facebook wall. A smaller part of the visitors have accessed the website from the Internet search engine Google by writing "veterinary clinic" in the search field or part of the text posted on ANIMAL MEDICA's website. The search engine then lists all websites containing the written text, hence the website in question is listed. The website was enriched with information of great relevance to the clients, so they can acquire it as a choice on Google search. Also a banner was set up on another website, which has also increased Animal Medica's website visitors in about 30%, which is a quite satisfactory percentage of visitors and possible prospective clients.

According to the statistics from the survey conducted in the clinic, approximately 60% of the clients found out about the clinic and contacted it through the Internet (website, Facebook).

In the USA in one month more than 1 million Internet users have looked information on veterinary services through Google search. (7) Macedonia is lagging behind with the new trends, which does not necessarily mean they won't eventually be accepted.

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