Hidden gems

Veterinary hospitals get more out of their practice management systems, and generate more revenue, when they tap into underutilized software features.

By Scott McKinney

Who remembers managing a veterinary practice before the era of computers? Using paper, sticky notes and whiteboards to keep track of patients, prescriptions and billable services added up to missed opportunities.

Enter the computer and practice information management systems. Today's PIMS come in a variety of forms, including cloud-based, server-based, freeware and custom-built. They remain a key component of every veterinary business, tracking patient flow, client communications, billing, patient history and other actions.

Each PIMS offers different sets of features and benefits, so we spoke with five popular providers to uncover lesser known or underutilized features in their software.

Covetrus/Vets First Choice

As hospital manager at Pond Point Animal Hospital in Milford, Connecticut, Katy Joyce knows the importance of building trust with pet owners.

"The vet industry is a fine line between medicine and business, and building a relationship with clients is important," she said.

Joyce, who has worked in veterinary medicine since the mid-1980s, sees prescriptions as a way to keep a foot in the door with clients. She likes how the Vets First Choice prescription management platform integrates with her practice management software.

The platform automatically tracks prescriptions, whether the item was purchased through Pond Point's online store or staff posted the prescription as a suggestion to the client.

"When I arrive in the morning, I log in to see what prescriptions are coming up," Joyce said. "The new format lists prescriptions coming in for renewal, so I can see, 'Hey, Roxy's due for a heartworm prescription renewal next week.'"

Veterinarians can type notes to clients directly through the software when a prescription is renewed, avoiding the need to place calls to help guide pet owners through the prescription-filling process.

Covetrus, headquartered in Portland, Maine, was formed in February 2019 through the merger of Henry Schein Animal Health and Vets First Choice.

Hippo Manager

Lexington, Kentucky-based Hippo Manager bills its cloud-based PIMS as easy to use. It comes with a learning management system for new clinic team members.

"Clinics lose about a third of their staff every 12 to 18 months, so we provide a full library of training, including quick videos for new hires, and we track their progress to ensure they're going through it," President and CEO Sam Razor said.

To help users leverage all the features, Hippo generates reports that identify trends in user behavior. Practices then can easily identify frequently used or unused functions in the software. Identifying and improving user behavior can increase revenue by up to 30%, Razor said.

Hippo also connects treatments with the payment software, allowing users to set up charges through the medical charting feature and process payments from the exam room.

"Instead of sitting in an exam room, going through the visit, and then moving outside to the waiting room, they can pay with their card in the exam room when the vet is done," Razor said.

This option saves data-entry time, avoids missed charges and improves the checkout experience, he said.

Vetter Software

Automation is a key differentiator for Vetter Software, said Sagi Solomon, the Santa Clara, California, company's founder and CEO. He considers the software's wellness plans to be a hidden gem.

"Vets have shied away from wellness plans because they've been difficult to manage — you have to check whether a customer is a member of a plan, check that they're getting the right discount, and collect payments," he said. "We developed a system that takes care of all this complexity. The discounts, renewals and payment collections are handled automatically."

Wellness plans are common at larger practices, but Vetter is seeing greater adoption by smaller practices. The main reason clients drop out of wellness plans, Solomon said, is because of manual mistakes in managing the plan. Vetter automatically handles the discounts, payments and renewals, ensuring that clients get the value for which they pay and reducing dropouts due to missed renewals.

Christie Krepol, practice manager at Unity Animal Hospital in suburban Philadelphia, said integrated wellness plans sold the hospital on Vetter Software.

"None of the software we used in the past had built-in features we could use to implement the plan," Krepol said. "With our old software, we had to print a list every day to check who was coming up for renewal. Administratively, Vetter's plans are a lot easier, thorough and more accurate. You can store a credit card securely. Our old software was not able to do that."

Another gem Krepol sees is Vetter's internal task system, which allows team members to leave messages for each other.

"If there's a doctor that's out of the office that day, we can leave a note about something they need to check when they're back," she said. "Instead of paper notes everywhere, it's accessible in the software, and since it's cloud-based, if it's important and they're at home, they can see it from their kitchen table."

ClienTrax

The Grove City, Ohio, company promotes a few features it considers unique among veterinary PIMS:

- Integration with Veterinary Pharmacy Reference Cloud (VPR Cloud), a database of drug indications and formulary.
- Integration with VisioCare, a veterinary graphics communication tool. "VisioCare has over 3,000 graphics that describe almost every condition that's diagnosed," Vice President Jeff Good said. "It shows how animals contract a disease or disorder, shows what happens inside the animal, and includes anatomically correct graphics that help explain the condition to the client. You can right-click a diagnosis, or do a search based on keywords in descriptions diagnosis, and it's integrated throughout ClienTrax. The graphics can also be emailed to a client's home."
- Integration with pet ID microchips. "Only about 80% of microchips get registered," Good said. "ClienTrax inte-

grates with the databases, so every time the vet invoices a microchip, the pet's information gets uploaded."
- eClaims. ClienTrax partnered with Petegrity to integrate pet health insurance claims.

Idexx

Ivan Zakharenkov, DVM, BSc, the general manager of Idexx veterinary software and services, points to how the Westbrook, Maine, company's Cornerstone and Neo practice management software integrate with SmartFlow, a workflow optimization system that automatically captures every detail of a patient's visit, including charges.

"This unique innovation helps practices go paperless, increases revenue by capturing all charges, and provides customized solutions to address individual practice pain points," Dr. Zakharenkov said.

North Carolina's Denver Animal Emergency Hospital is a veteran user of Neo.

"About a year ago we went

fully paperless with SmartFlow," said practice owner Andrew Pierce, DVM. "When a [new] owner shows up, they'll sign in on an iPad, which creates the patient through SmartFlow. That alone saves [time] since it keeps the receptionist from having to read the handwriting and figure out, 'What does this say?'"

The receptionist enters the patient information into Neo while technicians plug the animal's temperature, pulse, respiration rate and other data into SmartFlow. SmartFlow's flow sheets help keep track of everything going on with in-hospital patients.

Templates are especially useful in SmartFlow, Dr. Pierce said.

"We'll have four or five cases in the hospital at a time, and when I diagnose a dog with, say, pancreatitis, that goes into Neo and SmartFlow, and in a minute or two I've got a treatment case," he

said. "Most of the time when you see a case, it's going to be treated similarly every time, so this leads to more timely and efficient care."

Neo/Smartflow's charge-tracking feature saves Dr. Pierce's staff an enormous amount of time.

"I remember before we had this having to track charges at the end of each day," he said. "The inventory management is more efficient and better as well."

SmartFlow also helps make seamless transitions at shift change. Checkboxes show open cases.

"I can check on the SmartFlow board that there are two more patients I need to see, and that makes things a lot more efficient," Dr. Pierce said.

"As new staff comes on shift, the moment they arrive they can look on that SmartFlow board, see what things need to get done, and jump right in." ∎

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Educate Yourself

The first step is knowledge. Spend time reading the newest published information on vaccine frequency, what diseases to vaccinate for, what vaccines are best, where to vaccinate on the animal, and the role of titers. This information is changing rapidly and we need to be the expert.

After you feel comfortable with the most current scientific-based knowledge, educate your support team and clients. Everyone should know why you do not recommend titer testing for FeLV instead of vaccinating. Your recommendation might be different today than it was five years ago and likely will be different five years from now.

The next step is getting clients to bring in their "healthy" pet. If your emphasis is on the vaccine, many clients will go to a vaccine-only clinic or, if they are scared of the vaccine, not go anywhere. You need to emphasize disease

prevention and early detection. Your team needs to be prepared for the question "What do they need this year?" My teams are trained to respond, "We will determine specifics during the examination."

Client reminders need to be changed to emphasize all the elements of the visit. One of the most impactful tools for driving future visits is how you and your team deliver the message during this year's visit. Verbalize the exam, discuss everything you are looking for, celebrate the normal, and tell the client why you are running bloodwork, a urine test and anything else. The better we do in communicating the value of a visit (and the invoice), the more likely we are to see the client again.

Other Tips

As for vaccine opponents, acknowledge their fear and recite data. Never knowingly overvaccinate. Accept titers when they are scientifically proven to be protective. Part of our job is to discuss the pros and cons,

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the risks and rewards. Tell clients you know about the risks associated with vaccines as well as the incidence and severity of a particular disease. We as a profession cannot be ignorant of the fear many clients have in regard to vaccines.

A very effective way to drive pets into our hospitals for a routine visit is the wellness plan. In 2018, 26% of millennial pet owners said their pet was on a wellness pro-

gram, compared with 13% among other generations. Clients today want predictable costs whenever they can. They also have trouble paying large single invoices.

I know many veterinarians are scared of wellness plans — why discount and let clients pay over time? I encourage you to revisit the concept. You do not need to discount to have a successful program. Look at wellness plans as a compliance tool. Great third-party software can help you interface a wellness plan with your practice software. Pet parents want these plans. If you do not offer them a solution, many will go elsewhere.

How will we change the trend of fewer pet visits? I have explored two of the many causes. There is not one magic fix. It is critical to the pet's health that we change the concept of "vaccine appointments" one client at a time. ∎

Dr. Peter Brown is chief veterinary officer of Cara Veterinary, a Denver-based network of family-owned veterinary hospitals.