

Veterinary Practice and the Internet

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A recent study of American household internet penetration shows that 75% of homes in rural areas, and up to 92% of homes in metropolitan cities have some form of internet service. Meanwhile, a survey from 2008 indicated that roughly 69% of veterinary practices and hospitals host their own website. This number has surely grown over the past 12+ months. I surveyed our own technical team here at Butler Schein Animal Health in an effort to provide both the pros and cons of having the internet available for use in veterinary clinics. Along the way, the team also provided me with some valuable solutions to potential pitfalls one may come across while using the internet within his/her practice. There seems to be a common wariness in our profession regarding the internet. This article aims to provide a list of essential tools available to both protect one's practice management network while also realizing the vast potential & benefits of the internet. Below is just a small sample of the positive benefits of having internet & network services in a veterinary clinic.

Remote Access

Having remote access to practice management software from home is now both simple and safe. Using a remote access service, such as 'LogMeIn' or 'GoToMyPC' (services that are typically completely secure because the entire communication session is encrypted), allows remote/in-field doctors to enter history, transactions, and other data.

Offsite Back-Up

Offsite back-up and data storage is another benefit of the internet. Emailing reminders, receipts and statements can save team members time and money on postage and other billing charges. Those clinics hosting a website would have worldwide access to keep information up to date.

Improved PC Support

Enjoy better support for practice management software online with faster issue resolution. With the internet, one has instant access to patches and other critical updates for both hardware and practice management software. Receive updates as soon as they are available, rather than waiting for an update CD to be mailed.

Lab Results Instant Download

Having the internet allows the ability to download lab results to any PC directly from a reference lab source. Equine practitioners, for example, have the capability of uploading Global Vet Link exports files straight onto the Global Vet Link website.

Information Resource

The internet is the ultimate information resource. With it, one has instant access to veterinary specific websites, such as www.lifelearn.com, to share information 'on demand' with clients.

Coming soon in some states will be the ability to upload controlled substance reporting (exported files) for compliance with government agencies. One can also export files to reminder services, such as Healthy Pet.

There are some disadvantages to having internet availability in your practice management network too. CDs, thumb drives (Flash USB) and other media can become infected with viruses that easily spread over the internet. Anti-virus software, which is protective software designed to defend a computer from malicious software, will be needed (Anti-virus software should be installed on each computer, and really should be in place whether you have the internet or not). Spyware is software that is installed without one's knowledge and transmits unauthorized personal information. Anti-spyware and anti-malware (malware is the general term for malicious software) is suggested, but first check with the software vendor to ensure compatibility with the practice management software.

Another protection essential for having the internet is a hardware firewall, such as a router. A router, or other stand alone device, can block outside hackers, which is highly desirable. A software firewall, or specialized defense system for a network, is also suggested.

One other concern often voiced is over the potential for employee abuse of internet access. Web filtering software tools, such as NetNanny, are available to limit and control websites that can be accessed from a network.

This column is published monthly in The Animal Health Solution. Questions or feedback should be directed to awright@butlerschein.com.