

Options for your marketing plan

After researching your customers, you'll be ready to set a marketing plan that fits your practice's needs. Keep in mind, you likely won't use all of these strategies, because they won't all fit your needs and because of the cost involved.

"Any of these tactics can work," says Rebecca Hart, an accredited public relations professional and co-founder of TheVetZone.com. "But don't try to do everything at once. Make small efforts, track your results, and keep trying new things until you find a mix that works for you and fits your marketing budget."

Hart offers these estimates of cost and time investments, though she says the true cost will depend on the quantity and quality of materials, as well as how much outside help you require. One final tip from Hart: "When developing your marketing tools, be sure to include a call to action, which will help you track how well your investment is paying off."

Tool	Cost and time investment
Web site	Hosting costs about \$20 a month. Some services offer free design and content; custom site development generally runs from \$4,500 to \$7,500. Numerous resources offer veterinary-specific Web services and content such as prescription fulfillment and pet care information.
Seminars and events	You can either participate in events hosted by other people or produce your own, covering a topic that's timely in your area. Professional design and production run in the \$3,000 to \$5,000 range. Calculate the cost of your time to attend and run events, as well as any travel costs.
Referrals	Word-of-mouth marketing is the easiest, least-expensive way to build your business. If you can calculate your average cost per new customer, you'll know how much you can afford to spend on gifts for people who refer you. Handwritten thank-you cards are always appreciated.
Press releases/ media exchanges	Cultivate relationships with your local media by offering yourself as an expert to comment on current events. This requires only a small time investment of actually doing the interview. Newspaper and radio interviews require much less time than TV. Also count the cost of paper and time to prepare and print press releases to let local media outlets know what's going on in the equine community.
Direct mail pieces	If you mail letters using your existing letterhead and envelopes, you'll incur the cost of a first-class stamp. If you produce postcards or printed pieces, get at least three bids from local printers to ensure the lowest cost. Lists of new area residents or lists of households in a specific area are usually sold by the thousand and cost a few cents per address.
E-newsletters	These can be free if you write the content yourself or can cost several hundred dollars per issue if you contract out the writing. Distribution costs can also vary from free up to \$100 per issue, depending on the number of subscribers.
Brochures and educational materials	One-color fact sheets are a cost-effective way to get the word out, for the cost of a photocopy. For less than \$1 each, you can develop tri-fold brochures that you can also mail. Many practice-management software programs provide templates for client education brochures.
Advertising	The cost depends on your market. Weekly newspaper and cable TV ads are generally the most cost-effective for veterinarians.
Telephone- directory advertising	This is usually bought on an annual basis, and the cost depends upon the type of listing and the circulation size of the book. A basic one-line listing comes with your business telephone service.