

UAM dog registrations via veterinary practice – a *win-win* venture that's working well for Marion Council in South Australia

Terry Nicholas

ABSTRACT

In collaboration with the local veterinary practices within its boundaries, Marion Council has provided dog owners new payment options under the Dog and Cat Management Act 1995. The agreement creates a *win-win* situation for all parties.

INTRODUCTION

In South Australia, dogs have been required to be registered since 1852. Council's are responsible for collecting registration details, fees and enforcing dog registration. Traditionally, Council offices have been the only points for dog registrations and for payment of fees. Customers were previously offered the choice of posting their dog registration renewals, or personally attending a Council office to complete a registration application. The City of Marion has approximately 14,000 dogs registered.

Late in 2001, discussion commenced between Marion Council and the four veterinary practices within its boundaries regarding the possibility of providing customers with additional payment options. An agreement was reached between the parties to enable residents to register or renew dog registrations at veterinary Practices. Residents continue to have the option of completing these transactions by post or in person at the Council's main office.

BACKGROUND

How the idea became reality

The new payment arrangements were originally mooted through the Marion Dog Consultative Committee (DCC). This committee was formed in March 1999. Membership consists of a number of relevant stakeholders, including local veterinarians.

During a DCC meeting one of the vets, Dr Alan Mawhinney, suggested Council investigate the possibility of using local vets to assist with dog registrations. Alan was aware of arrangements between the Rural Council of Murray Bridge and their local vet, and believed we may also benefit from a partnership. Marion Council has four veterinary practices well spread throughout the area.

Further discussion confirmed that all four local vets were interested in participating in an agreement. They agreed to accept new dog registrations, registration renewals, registration transfer applications, and to provide deceased dog information. A legal opinion later influenced the vets to withdraw from providing deceased dog information. The vets offered these services to Council and residents at no cost. Alternate agencies charge payment transaction fees.

Details of arrangements were developed and then a report was put to, and adopted by, Council. The benefits of the additional payment options for dog owners were clear.

Although the arrangements with the veterinary practices is not a commercial one, Marion Council formalised it with a written agreement with all parties.

THE PROCESS

Council agreed to provide all relevant materials, support and training for practice staff. This included creation of new data sheets, supply of tags and supply of promotional material. Customer Service Staff spent time at each practice explaining the process and answering questions. The Council promotes the veterinary practices and the various payment options, whenever the opportunity arises.

Vets issue new registration forms, accept re-registration forms, issue registration discs, and calculate and collect the relevant fee. They then sent data sheets together with a cheque, or credit card details for the total of fees to Council for processing. Practice staff contact Council if they have any queries.

When the Council receives data sheets, staff enter information into the computer system which completes the transaction. Payments are banked by Council.

THE ADVANTAGES

For Council, vets and dog owners:-

- Greater promotion of responsible pet ownership.
- Promotes a better relationship with dog owners (good PR).
- There are more locations for residents to register or renew dog registrations.
- The opening hours of Veterinary Practices include evenings and weekends, so for those dog owners who work normal hours this provides more flexibility/accessibility.
- There are less people queued at Council offices at renewal time.
- Veterinarians can recommend owners register their unregistered animals.
- Dog owners can register their pups at three months whilst at the vet for vaccination or check ups. This improves capture of new dog registrations and compliance with the Act.
- Vets can also advise dog owners of training schools and dog owner groups in the local area.
- Vets have the opportunity to meet potential new customers and sell additional services.
- Vets can increase the promotion and sale of health products for dogs and provide better education on caring for dogs.
- Vets receive some promotion of their practice.
- There is minimal ongoing cost to Council and establishment of arrangements was achieved with existing labour resources.
- **Win-win** for all.

STATISTICS

Marion Council has a dog population of approximately 14,000 registered dogs. In the first full year of registration and renewals (July 2002 to June 2003) 13974 dogs were registered or renewed. Of the 13974 dogs the veterinary practices accepted ~30% of the registrations (4249).

| | New registrations | Renewed registrations | Total dogs registered | No. pups of all new reg |
|---------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Vet Practices | 845 | 3404 | 4249 | 350 |
| Council | 1654 | 8071 | 9725 | 502 |
| Total | 24991 | 1475 | 1397 | 4852 |

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Privacy

The vet practices raised the issue of privacy of information in relation to deceased dog details. All parties were concerned about the potential for breaching the Privacy Act. Council sought a legal opinion and all vets choose not to forward details. This service was not considered essential.

Initial contact with vets

All the veterinary practices in the Council area were contacted and a meeting was arranged to discuss the proposal. Some of the issues discussed included staffing, training of staff, payment to Council of the fees collected, data collection etc. All issues were able to be resolved. Staff at all practices were also involved in resolving issues.

IS IT WORKING?

The program of dog registration/renewal has been monitored since its inception. Statistics have been kept, not only on the numbers of dogs registered, but also the age of the dogs, and whether they have been desexed. No accurate stats were kept prior to the agreement with the vets in relation to the age dogs were first registered. The data on new registrations does suggest a high proportion of pups being registered at their local Vets.

Council is hopeful that the total number of dogs registered will increase.

Feed back from the dog owners has shown appreciation for the provision of additional payment options. Not only because of the location of the vets but more importantly, the hours the service is available to the dog owners

There were very minor teething problems initially and as practice staff have become familiar with the process, it has become a seamless service.

CONCLUSION

The agreement has proven to be a success for all parties. Although, Marion Council has not been the first to negotiate an agreement, we are pleased to have all the local vets involved. Without the support and enthusiasm of the vets this project would not have been as successful.

COMMENTS FROM A VETERINARY PRACTICE

“The idea was discussed initially by the principals of the four veterinary practices in the City of Marion. All agreed to propose to Council that a trial period be considered.

The concept allows veterinary staff to promote registrations to owners of new puppies, in a “one-stop” situation. Dog registration is thus encouraged at an early age.

Registration renewals can be handled when the owner visits their veterinary practice for vaccination, worm medication purchase, etc. Most people who register their dogs at Council offices need to make a specific journey to do so.

Council advertises that all Veterinary practices in the Council area carry out dog registrations. Considering that “Pets Need Vets”, exposing the dog owning public to their local veterinarians is a good way of promoting Responsible Pet Ownership. We like to think that people who formerly may have registered their dogs but not run preventive medication programs such as worming and vaccination, will be more open to those concepts.

Is it profitable to the veterinary practice? – probably not at this stage. Few people made extra purchases at their first visit if they came in initially solely for registration, but some are starting to return to make other purchases. In a service business, growth and trust go hand in hand and trust is not earned in a short time frame.

We have completed just over one year of registrations, and any increase in business is probably balanced against the extra administration costs and bank fees in transferring money to Council.

Would I change anything? Delete 31st August from the calendar”

Dr Alan Mawhinney,
Veterinarian Small Animal Hospital

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special acknowledgement is made to the four Veterinarian Practices in the Marion Council:-

The Small Animal Hospital (Dr Alan Mawhinney)
827-831 Marion Rd, Mitchell Park SA 5043

Somerton Park Veterinary Clinic (Dr Mark Hill)
76 Byer Ave, Warradale SA 5046

Morphettville Veterinary Clinic (Dr James McBride)
90 Morphett Rd, Morphettville SA 5043

Hallett Cove Veterinary Clinic (Dr Robyn Sharp)
Hallett Cove Professional Centre.

Zwerner Dr, Hallett Cove SA 5158

And to all the Council and Veterinary Practice Staff involved in implementation and continuing support of the program.

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Terry Nicholas is employed at the City of Marion, South Australia as the Team Leader, Inspectorial Unit. Terry is also a partner in TNPK Consulting, a Local Government Training Provider. He has been in Local Government for over 25 years in the General Inspection area. He has been employed with the City of Marion for six years and is responsible for dog control from both Legislation and education as the Registrar of Dogs for the Council.

