

## **THE BUSINESS OF ANIMAL REHAB**

Laurie Edge-Hughes, BScPT, MAnimSt(Animal Physio), CAFCI, CCRT  
The Canine Fitness Centre Ltd, Calgary, Alberta

‘Why should I read this article’, you ask yourself? Quite likely you are not engaged in animal rehab. What would you have to gain by reading an article on the business of animal rehab? My first goal is to explain exactly that!

I am a physical therapist, and proud to say so. I have made the brave decision to use my physiotherapy skills on animal patients, and as if that were not challenging enough, I have opened a business dedicated entirely to the provision of rehabilitation services to animals. Now it’s not exactly like opening a Starbucks, Gold’s Gym, Canadian Tire, or even a ‘human’ physiotherapy clinic. It’s been much harder in that ‘animal rehab’ isn’t a house-hold phrase. People don’t know what this means, and even if they did, it doesn’t mean that they can wrap their head around paying for physio for their dog, cat, or horse! So, why should you read this article? You should read on because if I have been able to grow a successful business from a relatively unknown concept (albeit in a related field) then perhaps you can swipe and deploy some of my strategies and successes in order to grow or market your relatively well understood and well defined ‘human’ physiotherapy clinic!

Firstly, let me state that all great entrepreneurs did not start off with innate entrepreneurial knowledge. Thus, one should expect to bolster their education and relish in the opportunities to develop such skills and knowledge. I have taken courses on small business start up, managing, & marketing. In the past, I tested my entrepreneurial skills with other ventures (i.e. a ‘weanling to finished’ pig enterprise, a laundromat, and an awful network marketing business). None of these am I engaged in today, but I learned something from each and every one of them! I love listening to & reading information provided by Prosperous Physical Therapy, MPowered Marketing, Robert Kiyosaki, and Glazer-Kennedy Marketing. Many of my ideas are not my own, but what I have done is implement a few of them successfully.

### **RICHERS IN NICHES**

It has been said that there are riches in niches, and this is most certainly true in my area of practice. I treat dogs, but not every dog owner would consider rehab for their dog. My target dog-owner is either a) a breeder, who has a vested interest in the health of their animals; b) a person that competes in dog-sports – (agility, obedience, flyball, competitive Frisbee, carting, dock diving, freestyle dancing, etc to name a few); c) D.I.N.K.s, that is dual income, no kids (or the kids have moved out, and dogs now replace the children). Not to say that regular families with dogs don’t seek rehab services, but if I had to categorize my clients, these first three groups comprise the majority of my clientele. The first two groups are easy to find – I can advertise in show/event catalogues, I can sponsor events & prizes, and I have space in my facility to rent out to groups that train for these activities. The D.I.N.K.s are harder to find. They don’t congregate together, they don’t all read the same publications...but they do go looking for services such as mine, and if they see that my clinic caters to and has a ‘special interest in’ sporting dogs or show dogs, they figure that my clinic must be ‘on top of our game’ and should come to see us as compared to a generic competitor. It reminds me of my aunt. She must weigh all of 101 pounds, and

Edge-Hughes L. The Business of Animal Rehab. The Animal Rehab Division Newsletter. Summer 2010: pp 7 – 10.

that's when wearing a sweater. Her most athletic activity could be lifting the Christmas turkey from out of the oven once a year. However, when faced with the decision of where to go to obtain physiotherapy following her cruciate reconstruction surgery, she felt that she would be best served by going to the 'Sports Physio' clinic in town. Now, is that because she is an athlete herself or because she perceived value in this niche? So, I ask you, who is your target market? Can you describe them? Can you list ways to advertise specifically to them? Are you best equipped and fully prepared to serve their needs? If not, can you develop those skills or acquire what is necessary to do so?

## **PUBLIC INTERFACE**

What is the message that can be conveyed to my prospective clients? So many animal rehab providers & clinics will simply list their services and describe themselves on their website or print advertising. As I stated before, 'animal rehab' isn't a household phrase, so listing that I have laser, muscle stim, ultrasound and an underwater treadmill, and that all of our therapists are trained in manual therapy, means nothing to the average consumer. So, I have tried to make my website answer as many questions as possible, provide information, evoke an emotion, and make it about the consumer and the consumer's needs and expectations. Often this is my potential customer's first interaction with my business and if I don't shine there, they may never pick up the phone, let alone walk through the door. Just some things that I have incorporated from my marketing education:

1. Make your site clean, clear, and easy to navigate
2. Provide information and resources. This shows that you have already worked with certain kinds of cases and/or anticipated the customer's needs.
3. Can you make a guarantee? I chose "We guarantee you will have a positive experience!"
4. Tell your story. The site not only includes each of our individual stories and background but the story of how the clinic came to be and the dog that started it all.
5. When using testimonials, say "What our clients say about us", and if you have obtained permission, use the names that go with each testimonial. It's more personal and more believable.
6. Pictures! Interesting, eye-catching, and real photos draw attention, and if your customers are like me, they will want to see what you look like so that they can decide if they will get along with you or not. (Honestly!)

So please check out my website. I know it's not perfect, but I am very proud of it!

[www.caninefitness.com](http://www.caninefitness.com).

Print advertising can and should be different than the usual 'rank, file, & serial number' (name, location, contact info). I took some of the basic teachings from Glazer-Kennedy and constructed the following ad:

# She's not 'Just A Dog!'



We 'get' that!

## *The Canine Fitness Centre*

[www.caninefitness.com](http://www.caninefitness.com)

**Physio for your four-legged family members.**

**Ph: (403) 204-0823**

Bring in this ad to receive a 10% discount  
on services.  
Exp. February 30, 2010

Some of the things you might notice are the eye-catching picture, the eye-catching phrases (all of which serve to evoke emotions that our target customers value), a limited time offer with an expiry date (which commands a sense of urgency to make an appointment, and provides a way for us to track the success of this marketing strategy), and contact info (including the website, where we know they will receive more information). You will also notice that I use the word physio, not physiotherapy or physical therapy...that's just politics unfortunately, as I cannot use the latter terms to advertise my animal rehab services. But that's okay, because the public understands and likes the term physio! These coupon-ads have been tremendously successful. We use them as print advertising in catalogues/newsletters, provide them on card stock paper for vets to hand out to their clients, and give them to the instructors of the dog-sport classes to provide to their participants as part of their welcome packages when they start a new series of classes. We have several different ads that target the various nuances of each group. Recently, I drafted some to send to our VIP clients as a 'thank you for your patronage', and 'friend of a friend' coupons for these VIP clients to refer us to their dog-owning friends. Lastly, one coupon was created with the catch phrase "Y'all come back now ya hear!" and a 1 year expiry to send to clients once they have been discharged from active service. We love repeat customers but they are often neglected in marketing strategies! I would like to learn more ways to honour and maintain these valuable sources of business!

### **SUPERIOR CUSTOMER INTERACTIONS**

Do you establish a sense of family with your clients? This is the sort of thing that has kept customers coming back and referring friends and acquaintances to the Canine Fitness Centre for years! You see, my clients think of their dogs as family members, as kids! So, it is important that they feel entirely comfortable and trusting in all of the staff at the Canine Fitness Centre, and the care we provide. I think that most physiotherapists possess this ability, but to remind ourselves that clients NEED this, will also

serve us well. Fostering these feelings of trust and comfort is important for every staff member to adopt as an ideology, and making this the corporate culture at the clinic ensures that everyone is on the same page when interacting with clients and their dogs. One of the strategies that I used in communicating with my human patients (back in the day), was to find out just what was interesting about each person. Everybody has something interesting about them and the same holds true with dogs. Fortunately, most dogs are lovable, but even in the case of those that aren't there is always something you can say about them that shows to their owner that you appreciate their dog for 'who he is'. "My, isn't she a feisty little thing!" "His hair is a remarkable colour and so soft!" "I bet she was an adorable puppy." "I'd love to have a dog like this to guard my house when I wasn't home!"

Are you easy to do business with? Generally, the majority of my clients still contact the clinic directly. Their information is taken, an appointment is made, and the receptionist sets forth to obtain the referral from the veterinarian. Appointments are made in advance, reminder calls are consistent, and accommodations are made when needed and when able. Unfortunately, at this time the clinic is unable to provide any evening appointments for physio, but that is simply a matter of finding and training like-minded physios who are willing to work those hours. Finding and training such physios is likely our greatest hurdle. To serve my target clientele, I need good manual therapists, who are willing to undertake training in canine rehab, spend time apprenticing, and who possess a knowledge or willingness to learn about dog behaviour. They are out there; I just need a few more that live near Calgary!!

## **VETERINARIANS**

Perhaps some of you are old enough to remember the days before 'direct-access'! I do, and it's funny to me, that here I am, full circle, working from a position of requiring a veterinary referral or veterinary clearance before I treat an animal. The requirement, actually helps to foster our political movement within the veterinary industry, and has begun to 'train' veterinarians how to work with allied health care professionals (a new concept in vet medicine). It is also more appropriate, with animal health care, as the animal rehab certification programs in North America are lacking in the depth seen in human physical therapy training, so it is in the animal's best interest to have the vet and the animal rehab person jointly aware of the issues that each has identified. It is my understanding that despite the 'human' physical therapy profession having direct-access in Canada, that a large percentage of patient still access our services by obtaining a referral from their general physician first. So, perhaps all physios need to take a little bit of extra care in the treatment of this potential referral source. At the Canine Fitness Centre, we consider every communication with veterinarians as a marketing endeavour, and a chance to educate. All new assessment forms go back to the referring veterinarian, with a note that thanks them for entrusting us with the care of their patient. Progress notes and discharge notes are sent to the referring vets much more regularly than I ever (if ever) did in human practice. This is all so new to vets, and it is important that we 'wow' them with every opportunity! Even after we discharge the patient, we request that the owner thank their veterinarian for referring them to The Canine Fitness Centre. For without their support, we could not have helped their pet! (Sneaky now isn't it??!!)

## **MY GOOD FORTUNE**

I have been truly blessed to have been given the opportunity to create the Canine Fitness Centre with my business partners who share a vision to expand and change the physical therapy and veterinary professions. We have maintained our values: that physical therapists are the most qualified persons to deliver physiotherapy to patients, regardless of the species; that rehab services for dogs should be affordable yet fair; that customer service is paramount; and that change can be made by simply existing and pushing the envelope! I am fortunate to have associate therapists and support staff that adopt these values and are keen to be a part of this remarkable new field. I am grateful to the CPA for having the vision to adopt this emerging area of practice, and give gutsy physiotherapists a legitimate outlet to round-out their career aspirations and entrepreneurial goals in a new and rewarding way!