

The Engaged Clinic

By Patrick Malone

A recent article on employee engagement began: “With so much being written about the lack of employee engagement it is a wonder that the business community accomplishes anything. While the lack of employee engagement is an issue, there are many organizations where employees are fully engaged and those businesses are thriving.” It caused me to think about clinic engagement and the different levels of clinics I see across a distributor rep’s territory.

Struggling clinics consistently point to the economy and competition from other clinics, OTC products, Wal-Mart, PetMed Express and manufacturers as the problem. On the other hand, thriving clinics continue to grow at double digit rates, compete effectively for their pharmacy and OTC business and partner with suppliers to best serve their clients. Their starting points are different, and their attitudes – negative or positive – illuminate a sharp contrast in their approach.

My first advice to distributor reps is to start with the mindset that it’s possible to influence clinic engagement in your territory. Then, consider these strategies to create more engaged clinics while increasing the number of clinics that consider you as a trusted advisor, as opposed to just another distributor rep.

Identify the decision-makers’ goals

What are their aspirations? Objectives? Realistically, not every clinic owner is interested in growing the business. Some owners may be reaching retirement age and would like to maximize the valuation of their business. They may be looking for ways to increase their profitability. There are a wide variety of potential objectives, so don’t assume, or if you do, at least verify your assumptions.

When you ask your clinics about their objectives, you may get a blank stare, primarily because no one ever asked them. So ask, but give them time to think it over. Once established, an annual follow-up to insure their goals haven’t changed is appropriate. You cannot help your clinics

reach their objectives until you know exactly what those objectives are.

Connect your presentations to their goals

Why would I (the clinic owner) be interested in anything that isn’t helping me get where I want to go? This is where Decision Goals have the greatest impact. Consider this conversation piece:

“I’m convinced that adopting a competitive flea and tick strategy will protect your top line revenue while enhancing the overall valuation of the clinic. Let me run some numbers for you, and then you can decide if this approach is right for your situation.”

To accomplish this on your calls, remember these three criteria:

- A.** Start with a confident statement about your idea, product or service that contains a benefit important to your listener.
- B.** Transition to neutral. It is safe for the listener to be invited initially to simply look and/or listen.
- C.** Acknowledge the listener as the decision-maker, and that as such you are okay with a well-informed yes or a well-informed no. Again, it makes the conversation safe for your listener.

This type of opening also positions you different than your competitors, and moves you toward the trusted advisor status and away from being just another distributor rep.

Approaching the practice manager or buyer

The primary responsibility of practice managers and buyers is to take routine tasks off the DVMs and the practice owners. However, they also have a secondary role of shielding the decision-makers from sales reps whose only interest is selling something. Further compounding this situation is their goals may differ from the decision-makers. While the

practice owner may want to maximize the clinic's value so he/she can retire comfortably, the buyer's goal may be to minimize his/her own workload.

So, a benefit to the owner may be a burden to the buyer. That is, unless you are creative enough to reposition your idea, product or service to improve the buyer's life, or not further complicate it. The same three criteria above come into play, repositioned to the buyer's point of view, which then opens the door to the clinic owner. And you have become even more valuable because you've helped ev-

eryone get what they want, while getting what you want.

These strategies hinge on your confidence in your knowledge, skill, ability to think outside the box and create solutions that are flexible enough to provide value to all involved in the decision-making process. It isn't easy, but the value of a territory filled with engaged clinics will pay dividends for years to come for you and your organization. And you will have transitioned from just another distributor rep to a trusted advisor and invaluable asset. ■

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