

How to Host an Open House

Get details on how to organize a successful event that showcases your facility and staff members' talents while creating a community buzz about your clinic.

By Wendy S. Myers



On a sunny Saturday afternoon, more than 400 pet owners visit American Animal Hospital in Randolph, N.J., for its 14th annual open house. In the parking lot, guests enjoy perusing vendor booths, kids smile as Kennel Manager Diane McKenzie does face painting, and everyone laughs as adults race in the Pooper Scooper Contest, a game with brown and black water-filled balloons

that must be picked up with a scooper and placed in buckets at the opposite end of the parking lot. The next scheduled event is a pet costume contest with the hospital's best clients as judges.

Inside the hospital, pet owners get a behind-the-scenes tour. Receptionist welcome clients with goodie bags and balloons. A staff member in each exam room shows displays and discusses topics such as veterinary acupuncture, heartworm and flea prevention, exotic pets and pet first-aid. In the surgery suite, Christie Stockmal, DVM, sutures a teddy bear and performs ultrasound on the bladder of a staff member's dog. Clients also see x-rays of exotic pets, broken bones, pregnant cats and unusual items that pets have swallowed. In the treatment area, Willa Turner, CVT, shows dental equipment and before-and-after photos of pets' dental cleanings.

"Our open house increases awareness of what goes on behind the scenes and our high-tech equipment such as laser surgery and ultrasonography," says Brian T. Voynick, DVM, a certified veterinary acupuncturist and owner of American Animal Hospital. "It also gives the staff an opportunity to show off their skills in a relaxed atmosphere. We always see a spike in appointments after an open house and gain new clients."

Hosting an annual open house lets you thank current clients while attracting new ones. The event often garners media attention and boosts staff morale. To plan a successful event, follow these steps:

1. Plan early. Nicole Duncan, office manager at American Animal Hospital, starts planning five months before the event. A team of staff members volunteer for a variety of tasks, including organizing demonstrations, contacting vendors about exhibiting and donating door prizes, ordering snacks and beverages, hiring off-duty police officers to direct traffic, writing news releases, creating cleaning checklists and more.

The hospital initially held its open house each May to coincide with National Pet Week, but cold, wet New Jersey springs often damped attendance and spirits. “After dealing with five rainy open houses in a row, we decided not to fight the weather and move our event to June,” says Dr. Voynick. “We have so many outdoor activities that it was hard to move everything indoors.”

He also suggests avoiding scheduling conflicts with Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and baseball events. Check community calendars published by schools, chambers of commerce or local newspapers to be aware of potential competing events. Saturday afternoons work best because you can attract families and gamble on favorable weather.



2. Involve your team. Delegate tasks to as many staff members as possible. More people can pay attention to more details. Brainstorm ideas for demonstrations, interactive games, tours and other fun events. “We assigned different topics to receptionists, kennel attendants and technicians,” says Duncan. “Each staff member created a demonstration or

decorated an exam room to educate clients. An open house is good for staff education as well as client education.”

3. Contact vendors and area businesses. Invite pet food and pharmaceutical company representatives to set up educational booths, give away promotional items such as T-shirts or Frisbees and donate door prizes. Look to your neighbors for more opportunities. Harold’s Jeweler across the street from American Animal Hospital donates a piece of jewelry for the raffle each year.

At TenderCare Veterinary Medical Center in Greenwood Village, Colo., business manager Terri Terry sent a letter to surrounding businesses in the shopping mall about the open house and invited them to attend and donate items. More than 20 donated door prizes were raffled,

including a European facial, framing gift certificate, ski passes and rentals, restaurant gift certificates and a year's supply of pet food. The raffle created goodwill while promoting neighboring businesses.

4. Set a budget. Dr. Voynick spends \$2,000 each year on the event, but this amount



includes updates to landscaping, painting and repairs. Plan to spend a few hundred dollars to print and mail invitations, order cookies and lemonade and create displays. Develop your wish list of activities, and then prioritize them based on your budget.

5. Choose your activities. Consider these favorites: dog agility demonstrations, mock surgery, ultrasound demo, x-rays of unusual cases, exam-room displays, teddy bear surgeries that let clients bring torn stuffed animals for “surgery,” vendor and rescue group exhibits, balloons and face painting, pet costume contests, grooming demonstrations, humane society

adoptions and goodie bags filled with brochures, refrigerator magnets and samples.

6. Get the word out. The more external marketing you do for your open house, the more pet owners you'll attract. Try these low- or no-cost ideas to promote your event:

- **Mail invitations.** Use your veterinary software to set selection criteria, such as active clients visiting within the past 12 months who spent \$500 or more. Ideally, you want to mail invitations to your top 1,000 clients. Review the list before printing labels so you don't miss special clients who have visited your practice for years. You can print 1,000 postcards with color photos on the front and black ink on the back for about \$200. Contact local printers or national chains such as Alpha Graphics (www.alphagraphics.com), FedEx Kinko's (www.fedexkinkos.com) and Office Max (www.officemax.com).
- **Print a message on the bottom of invoices the month before the event.** Customize the footer on your statements using your veterinary software. Try a creative message such as “Want to see the real Animal ER? Join us July 20 from 1 to 4 p.m. for a mock surgery, dog training demonstrations, hospital tours, door prizes and more!” Also print a teaser on the bottom of reminder postcards when you send out monthly reminders for veterinary services.

- **Stuff fliers in bags.** When a client leaves with medication, tuck a flier about your open house in the bag. You also can display fliers in an acrylic countertop literature holder, which costs \$2.99 at Office Depot (www.officedepot.com). Ask neighboring businesses, grocery stores and libraries if you can post a flier in their storefront windows or on community bulletin boards.
- **Hang a banner.** A vinyl sign that will tolerate weather averages \$10 per square foot at companies such as Fast Signs (www.fastsigns.com) or FedEx Kinko's (www.fedexkinkos.com). Display the banner at least 30 days before the event.
- **Send a news release to local media.** Write a one-page news release that summarizes the event and mail it to local newspapers and TV and radio stations at least two to three weeks before the event. Getting the news release in the hands of the right reporter is key, so call ahead to find out who covers pets, science or environmental stories. Call the reporter one week before the event to confirm that he or she received the news release and point out photo opportunities, including mock surgeries, demonstrations and costume contests. Also send your news release to the editor who publishes the community and/or business calendar of events as well as your local cable access channel.
- **Write an article for your newsletter.** If you publish a hospital newsletter or e-newsletter, include a story about open house activities. Whenever possible, use a photograph to grab readers' attention and give them a preview of fun events.

7. Give your hospital a spring-cleaning. Because you see your hospital every day, you



might overlook dirty corners, peeling paint on doorframes or overgrown hedges. Walk every inch of your facility and parking lot to look for signs of needed repair. Make a checklist and ask your practice manager to coordinate landscaping, painting and cleaning tasks. "Every hospital needs an annual spruce-up, and an open house motivates you to make it happen," Dr. Voynick says.

8. Arrive several hours early on the day of the event. Walk through the hospital for a last-minute inspection and to set up exam-room displays and demonstrations. American Animal

Hospital stops seeing appointments after 10 a.m. to prepare for its open house from 1 to 4 p.m. Emergency care is still available, but the appointment book is cleared.

9. Show your appreciation. Send thank-you letters to vendors and businesses that donated items to your open house immediately following the event. Also host a staff appreciation cookout or dinner to thank employees for their hard work.

“When you host an open house, you’ll increase client awareness of the compassionate care and advances of veterinary medicine,” Dr. Voynick says.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.