

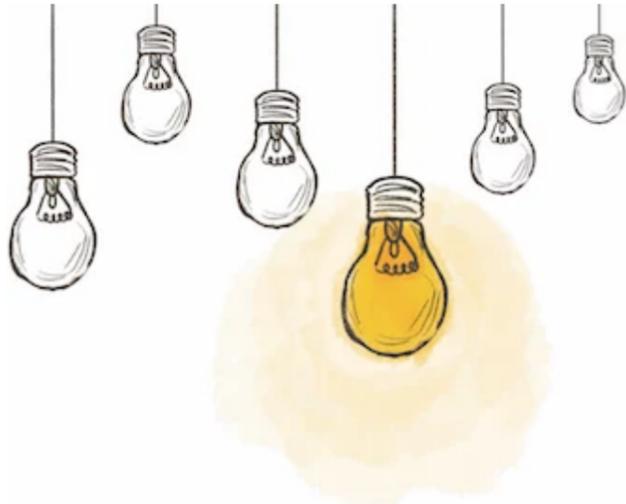
# Disruptive by Design

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[Naren Arulrajah](#)

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*To thrive in today's highly competitive veterinary marketplace, you need to set yourself apart from the competition and position your practice as an industry leader.*



With barking dogs, yowling cats and the everyday chaos that accompanies veterinary medicine, you probably figure your veterinary practice sees plenty of disruption already. However, there is another type of disruption – one you should welcome: disruptive innovation and marketing.

## **What Are Disruptive Innovation And Marketing?**

As one of the top buzzwords for 2018, “disruptive marketing” is taking the world by storm. The concept began with “disruptive innovation,” a term coined in the 1990s by Harvard professor Clayton Christensen, MBA, DBA, to define a business model that appeals to a fringe market and then expands to the mainstream.

In theory, disruptive innovation fills a need not met by existing products or services. Initially, the product or service is marketed to people who are not current customers or clients. After gaining traction in this very small market, it evolves until it appeals to the masses, taking over the industry and thereby disrupting the status quo.

Of course, being different does not alone guarantee success. In fact, most attempts to think outside the box and defy conventional wisdom prove spectacularly unsuccessful. Why? Often, it happens because the primary goal was simply to be different rather than to fill a need in a unique way.

One example of disruptive innovation: the pet food industry.<sup>1</sup> Not long ago, it was dominated by big brands and generics, all offering very similar products. Then, along came a few small startups offering organic, human-grade, raw and other types of “pet health food.” These companies gained traction with a small, niche market, then aligned with the broad cultural movement of healthy and environmentally conscious living. Soon, these small companies began posing a threat to big corporations, leading to more natural and healthier product lines from mainstream brands. Essentially, the entire pet food industry was disrupted.

Disruptive marketing is similar. It involves going beyond the tried-and-true techniques, taking risks and reshaping the status quo. Early digital marketing was a highly disruptive trend, not only delivering advertisements in new ways, but also fundamentally changing the relationship between veterinarians and clients, as well as the general public. A decade ago, the mere concept of email or social media was foreign to most people.

Today, these are not only staples of effective marketing, they are what clients expect.

## **What Is Set To Disrupt Veterinary Medicine?**

To know what is coming for the veterinary industry, we can take a cue from something that has already disrupted human medical care: telehealth. A few years ago, it was generally assumed that a patient needed to see a doctor in person. Today, real-time video conversations and other interactive forms of communication are making more and more doctor visits virtual. The same trend is set to sweep veterinary medicine, likely with even greater success.

For example, a pet owner might be unsure whether an animal's small wound requires medical attention. If the wound really is minor, an unnecessary office visit consumes your time and costs the client money – but a serious infection that looks mild to the owner's untrained eye might not get the immediate treatment it needs.

Using telehealth, the owner could send you photos via email and then discuss any clinical signs over Skype. The entire process would take less of your time than a physical examination, alleviate crowding in your reception area and reduce the use of practice resources. Because your cost is much lower, you can charge an affordable fee without reducing profit. On the other hand, if you note signs of a potentially serious problem, you can arrange an appointment right away.

Veterinary telehealth is gaining popularity among a small segment of the market. It offers a new level of convenience and the potential to reduce the cost of care, but many veterinarians and pet owners hesitate to embrace it. Like most disruptive innovations, however, telehealth is set to take over the mainstream market and usurp the status quo.

What can be accomplished with today's technology is nothing compared with what will be possible tomorrow. From glucose monitoring systems to wearable activity trackers, at-home consumer diagnostic technology has become the standard for humans. Expect the pet health industry to follow. In the not too distant future, you might conduct a urinalysis generated by a smart litterbox or monitor a pet's surgical recovery with real-time data transmitted by its collar.

Perhaps you think longingly back to the days of pens, paper and corded phones. However, social and business trends are racing forward at breakneck speed. One of the best ways to position your practice for success is to embrace rather than fight the high-tech era.



Becoming an early adopter of emerging changes in veterinary medicine is one way to use disruptive theory to your advantage. Another involves developing your own disruptive strategy. You might not be planning to revolutionize the entire industry, but you can certainly disrupt your local market. How?

In the words of one disruptive marketer, it is about developing something that “people didn't know they needed.”<sup>2</sup> However, that won't work unless people actually do need (or want) the product or service you offer. An ideal disruptive model follows these steps:

- Identify an unmet need in a specific market segment – before your competitors or even your clients are aware of the need.
- Find a creative and unique way to fill that need.
- Expand and improve your offering until it meets the needs of the masses yet still serves the original niche market.

Think about the specific needs of your clients and the demographics of your location. For example, in a city where most people rely on public transportation, taking a pet to the veterinarian can be challenging. Most veterinarians don't make house calls, which leaves an unmet need for a mobile service. In a high-end market where most people take their pets to the groomer regularly and give them premium foods, there may be an unmet need for a one-stop shop offering veterinary services, grooming, custom-fitted pet clothing and retail sales of boutique food brands.

### **The Bottom Line**

If you want your practice to survive, rely on proven techniques and stick to what has always worked. However, if you want it to thrive in today's highly competitive market, set yourself apart from the competition and position your practice as an industry leader. Be a trendsetter rather than a follower.

*Naren Arulrajah is president and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a complete internet marketing company that focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education and the online reputations of veterinarians/practice owners. With a team of 180+ full-time marketers, ekwa.com helps practice owners who know where they want to go, get there by dominating their market and growing their business significantly year after year. If you have questions about marketing your practice online, call 855-598-3320 to speak one-on-one with Naren.*

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