

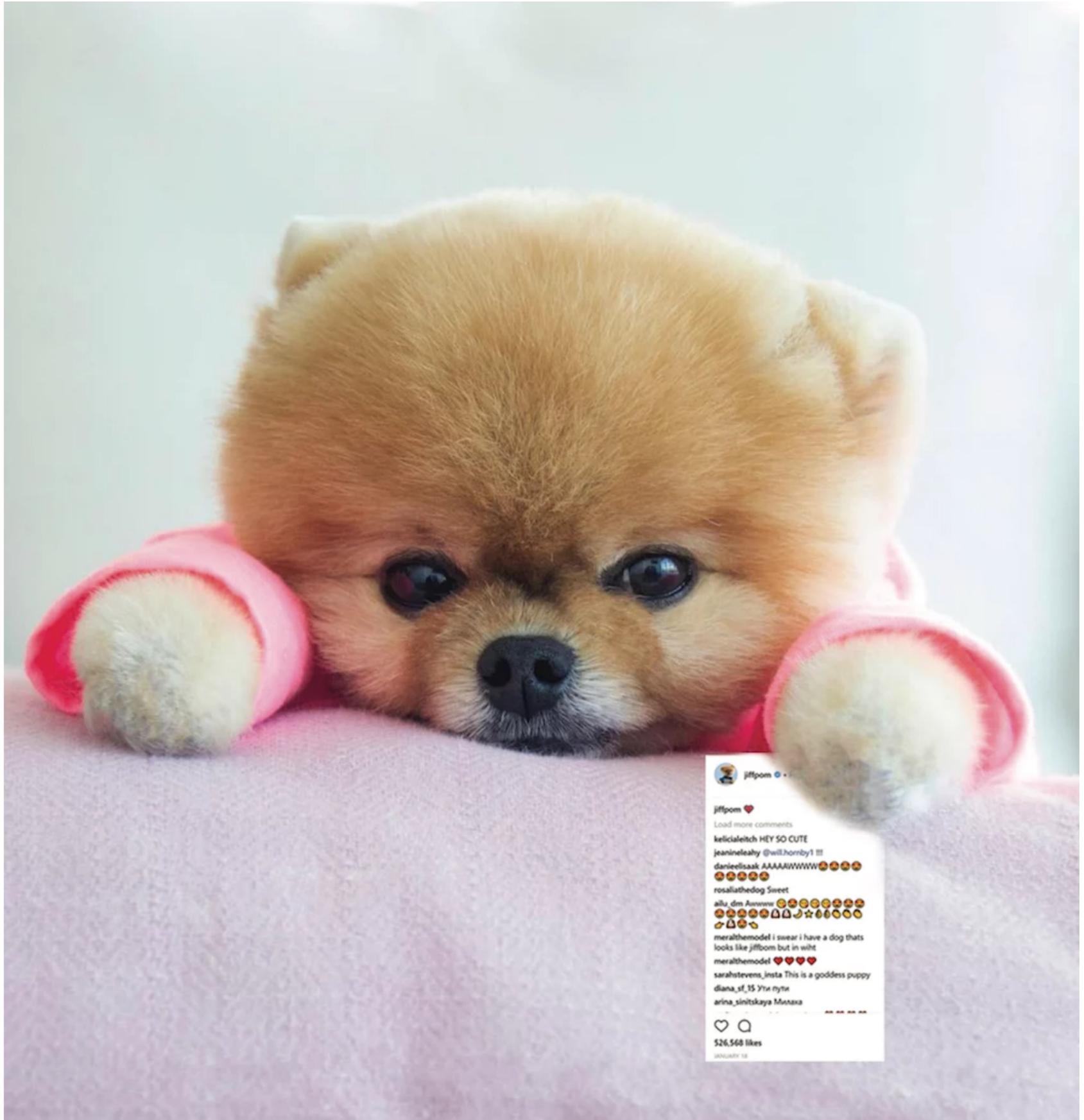
A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Likes

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Use these 3 winning Instagram strategies to attract more followers and gain new clients.



With well over 2 billion monthly active users,¹ Facebook may be the reigning king of social media, but it is not necessarily the most brand-friendly social network platform for businesses. Instead, Instagram is the rising star of the social sphere. The image-based network now has 10 times more brand engagement than Facebook² and is expected to soon reach the billion-user milestone.³

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This growing platform is especially well suited for veterinary content. If you are wondering how many animal lovers and pet parents use Instagram, consider these numbers: There are more than 85 million posts tagged #catsofinstagram and 108 million tagged #dogsofinstagram, but just 4.5 million tagged #kidsofinstagram as of press time.

If your practice doesn't already have an Instagram account, the good news is that getting started is easy and business accounts are linked to Facebook pages. Simply log in to your personal Instagram account, go to settings and select "Switch to Business Profile." If you administer multiple pages, you will need to select your veterinary practice from the list. Instagram will pull information from your Facebook page, so very little is needed to complete your business profile.

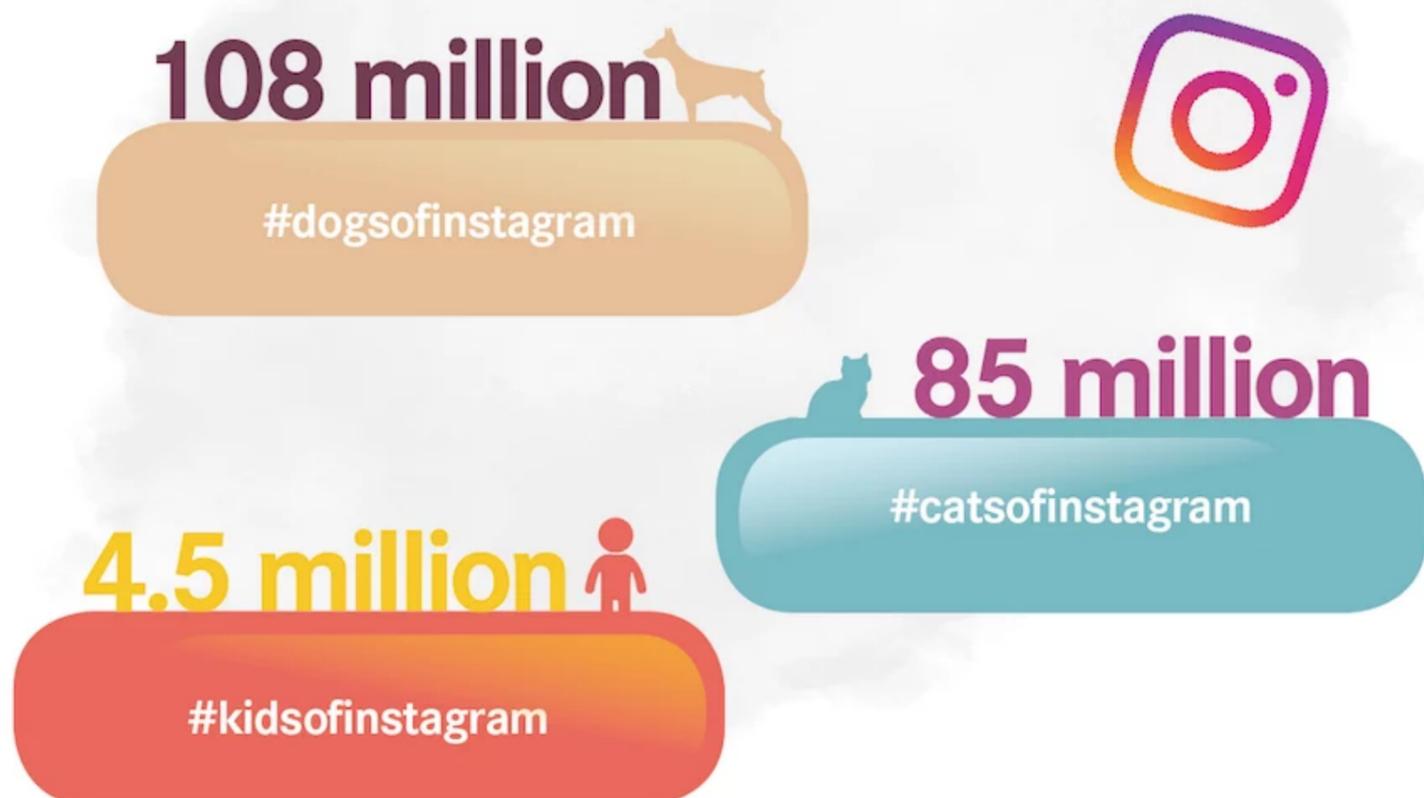
Now you have an account on an engagement-eager network with millions of pet lovers. How can you get their attention, build an audience and acquire leads?

Create Amazing Visuals

Because Instagram is a photo-sharing network, it should come as no surprise that a photo is the most important feature of any post. Every picture makes a statement. Poor-quality photos and uninspired clip art will appear unprofessional and sloppy. Try these tips to create top-notch imagery:

- **Use the right tools.** You can download apps such as Adobe Spark and Canva to create collages, memes, and more, and they require only minimal technical skills. Simply start with a template and customize it with your image, text, and practice logo.
- **Choose stock photos carefully.** When possible, steer clear of using stock photos. Original images are more authentic, interesting, and personalized. If you need a stock photo, make sure the picture is high quality and relevant to the post. Avoid overused images—if you recognize them from ads or memes, other people will too.
- **Hire a professional.** Do-it-yourself options are available, but for maximum customization and quality, consider hiring a professional photographer or graphic designer.
- **Don't be basic.** Simple photographs are ideal for Instagram, but don't be afraid to mix it up with funny pet memes, cartoons, quotes, and videos.

**Considering these hashtag numbers,
it's clear how many pet lovers use Instagram.**



Take advantage of hashtags to generate buzz around your brand and make your content more discoverable. Posts with 4 or 5 hashtags earn about 60% more engagement than those with none.⁴ Tips for choosing hashtags:

- **Do your research.** When you begin typing a hashtag, Instagram will generate a list of options and show the number of posts that already use each tag. You can also use tools such as hashtagify.me or hashtag.org (both subscription services) for in-depth hashtag research.
- **Be descriptive.** The more popular a hashtag is, the higher the competition for it will be. Additionally, the highest-rated tags tend to be general. For example, #cat is used in millions of posts, meaning you will quickly be crowded out of search results. On the other hand, #mamacat and #kittencare have around 1000 posts each, indicating a more targeted audience with less competition.

- **Use local hashtags.** General hashtags are used around the world, whereas location-specific tags will target people near your practice. If you are in a larger city, you will probably find a number of relevant tags that are already trending. For example, there are over 27,600 posts tagged #catsofseattle and more than 89,000 with #miamidogs as of press time.
- **Create your own.** Generic hashtags (those not specific to your practice) aid discoverability, but branded hashtags draw people together around a specific topic. They are most often used with contests, promotions, special events and anything that will create social media conversations. For example, if you hold a free vaccination clinic, you might encourage people to share pictures of their vaccinated pets using a designated hashtag.
- **Use tags sparingly.** The Instagram audience is more tolerant of excessive hashtags than users of other networks. However, that doesn't mean more is always better. Too many hashtags can make your post look spammy and unprofessional, especially if they're not relevant to the image.

Run Contests

This is probably the fastest way to generate buzz on Instagram. The simplest contests can be administered manually. For more complex promotions, or those attracting a high number of entries, consider purchasing a subscription to contest management software such as Wishpond or Woobox.

Before you launch a promotion, check your local laws. Depending on your location, accidentally stepping over a legal line may be surprisingly easy, even for a contest with a very modest prize. Additionally, familiarize yourself with Instagram's rules.⁵ They are rather basic, but you should take the time to read and understand the latest guidelines before you get started.

Once you know what you can do, it's time to create your contest. Start by identifying a goal and choosing a relevant theme. If you want to attract cat owners, for example, you might have a contest for the funniest cat photo.

The next step is creating your own rules and guidelines. Summarize them in 1 or 2 lines for inclusion in contest promotions, and make a detailed version available on your website. Rules should include:

- **Prize.** The best option is usually a gift certificate for your practice or a free sample of a product you sell.
- **Entry eligibility.** Decide what qualifies as an entry and whether there are restrictions. For example, in a photo contest, each picture is an entry. You might require that the image be original and inoffensive and include a pet. Alternately, in a "caption this" contest, each suggested caption is an entry. You might include an acceptable character count and forbid explicit words.
- **Participant eligibility.** Are there age restrictions? Can people enter more than once? Is the contest open to the public or just your clients?
- **How to enter.** The simplest Instagram photo contest requires a participant to share a photo, tag your practice, and include a branded hashtag. There are other options, such as requiring a like or comment and allowing entries on other networks. However, you cannot ask people to tag others who are not actually in the picture.
- **Judging.** Who will choose the winner? If the voting is going to be public, will you provide an online ballot, count likes, or use another voting system? What will you do if there is a tie?
- **Dates.** You need to establish when you'll begin accepting entries, the final deadline, when voting will begin and end, and when the winner will be announced.

The internet loves pictures of animals, making Instagram an ideal marketing opportunity for veterinarians. If you aren't making use of it, now is the time to start.

Mr. 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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