



Strategic Generosity

Article by Roxanne Hawn

Demonstrating values and leadership through philanthropy.

The time, money and services donated and to whom say a lot about who you are and what you value. It saves a lot of stress to set rules about:

- Which events to sponsor and attend
- Which organizations to support with cash donations
- If you'll donate time/services and to whom
- What discounted rate, if any, you'll offer to pet rescues and animal shelters and for which services or products

Danielle K. Lambert, veterinary marketing expert and founder of Snout School (www.facebook.com/groups/snoutschool), explains, "It's all about setting boundaries and parameters, as opposed to giving things away on a whim. Structure empowers you to be empathetic and confident in your charitable choices."

For example, Jimmy Gleason, DVM, at West Plains Veterinary Hospital in Levelland, Texas, donates about \$10,000 each year to 4-H and FFA programs that provide direct assistance to young people. "These students have definitely applied themselves to improve their opportunities," Gleason says. "They have to really try and should have the opportunity for success."

First steps

Amanda Landis-Hanna, DVM, senior manager of veterinary outreach at PetSmart Charities, recommends looking for existing opportunities or partners within your current client base. Maybe you already know people who understand local needs and volunteer for rescues, shelters or other charitable organizations.

"Are there areas of the community which may be facing barriers to veterinary access, such as transportation barriers?" Landis-Hanna asks. "Identify the community of need and develop partnerships with existing parties who may be working within the same community of need. For instance, consider providing veterinary check-ups to the pets of individuals living in assisted living. They may have financial and transportation barriers which prevent easy access to a veterinarian."

Landis-Hanna also suggests thinking about whether you want your charitable efforts to involve the entire practice team or if there are ways you can support charitable work individual team members feel compelled to do.

If you ponder your options and budget and simply feel there is no room for major philanthropy or even if you simply want to add more to what you already do, Landis-Hanna recommends researching available grants.

That's another way to fund charitable projects. She says, "Remember to document each resource (time, energy, in-kind donations, supplies) which are used or needed. Also fully review the grant description and application *prior* to applying, as some grants have very specific requests, or may only be available by invitation. When in doubt, reach out to 'Contact Us' and review the FAQs."

Veterinary practice example

Lee Allen is the director of operations at Happy Tails Veterinary Emergency Clinic, which is his wife's practice. Together, they made key decisions about charitable giving when the clinic first opened in 2008. Happy Tails is known for accepting sick and injured strays, as well as wildlife brought in by good Samaritans, and doing what they can before handing them off to the shelter or wildlife rehab. "That will continue every year, every day," he says.

Allen estimates the clinic's strategic generosity hits about 5–8 percent of gross each year. A chunk of that is \$6,500 that Happy Tails pays to be a major sponsor of a pet adoption show twice a year on the local CBS television affiliate. For him, sponsorships are much more about branding and outreach within a 45-mile radius (about 1.2 million people) near Greensboro, North Carolina.

Event sponsorship decisions also depend on when the event is and if Happy Tails team members can attend. It's tough to spend the money if the team can't have a presence and connect with pet owners in person. That said, Allen will sometimes suggest a smaller sponsorship amount if the event organizers are willing to put the Happy Tails business card magnets in the giveaway bags.

Other cash donations go to organizations such as those that provide fencing, dog houses and bedding to help dogs currently being chained outside. Happy Tails also supports smaller rescue groups. "If it's \$200 or something," he says, "then I don't mind donating to help them out. I do a lot of research and background checks to be sure they are reputable, not just anybody who says they are a rescue."

When it comes to donations of time and veterinary services, Allen sets the rescue or shelter animal discount at 20 percent. He explains, "They get a 20 percent discount. That is our donated time, our donated service. That amounts to a whole lot of money per year [\$40K–\$70K]."

If Allen must decline a request, he typically says something like this: "We've already set our budget for the year, but we would be more than happy to look at being a [sponsor/donor] for next year."

Animal rescue example

Founded in 2009 near Boulder, Colo., Summit Dog Rescue typically includes about 45 volunteers and rescues about 80–110 animals per year, including cats. Most of the time, they have a maximum of 10 animals in their foster program at once.

Summit Dog Rescue partners with primarily three rescue organizations in Texas and Arkansas. Much of the required vetting happens in those locations prior to transport to Colorado. This includes vaccinations, heartworm testing, FIV/FELV testing for the cats, flea and tick prevention, and some spay/neuter surgeries.

Emily Wolf says, "We usually just take what we are given, but there are veterinary hospitals that we just can't work with because the discount doesn't make it worthwhile."



"...be sure that your clients know about your charitable efforts. It's not bragging when you demonstrate your values and leadership through generosity."

There is a fabulous veterinary clinic in Boulder that gives us 20 percent off, but the prices are so high that it doesn't make sense."

As of mid-August 2019, the group has spent more than \$27,000 on veterinary care, with January alone hitting \$5,355. Volunteer Kim Blonigen explains, "We really don't budget for vet costs. We've been blessed with donations and having a medical savings account that we pull from if we need to. Emily is great about getting donations from Facebook when we are pulling dogs from Texas."

In its local community, Summit Dog Rescue's team works with Jasper Animal Hospital (Kelli Space, DVM), as well as mobile veterinarian Mountain Veterinary Service (Lisa Cass, DVM). For the group, Jasper does feline spay surgeries for \$135 and heartworm treatments for around \$400, depending on the dog's size. "Our heartworm pricing is so good that we do not flinch if a dog is heartworm positive," Wolf says.

She adds, "Dr. Cass will see dogs for free if it's just an exam. She is very dedicated to our mission and will come by sometimes and just grab a cup of coffee and examine a new dog or cat free of charge. She is our only free vet care that I know of and, of course, she does charge if she treats them with anything."

Many of the adopting families continue to use these partnering veterinarians for care after adoption, so the effort does often result in a strong veterinary-client relationship.

If she could change one thing, Wolf says it would be to ensure that every community offers low-cost spay/neuter. "As much as we love rescue, rescue is not the answer," Wolf says. "... Vets in most rural areas cannot afford to provide super-low-cost spays/neuters, and many times a low-cost spay/neuter is a several hours drive away. Until we can help these rural areas with spay/neuter, we are just catching raindrops in a hurricane."

Your people, your partners

Ultimately, a veterinary practice's strategic generosity must fit its mission and goals, including financial ones. It's about clearly deciding what you care about, finding great partners working toward the same goals, and then setting good boundaries about how much you can give.

What your clients value may also play into your philanthropy decisions. In its 2018 Veterinary Client Perception Survey, 'cause Digital Marketing noted the following as pet-related causes clients care about:

- Pet adoption
- Spay/neuter
- Dogs for people with disabilities
- Veteran and working dogs
- Angel veterinary funds
- Animal rights legislation
- Pet owner education

The survey also found that:

- 70 percent of clients try to purchase services from companies that share their values and work to help others.
- 82 percent of clients would be more loyal and likely to recommend a practice doing good works.
- 71 percent clients would like to see (know about) this happening more often.

So, be sure that your clients know about your charitable efforts. It's not bragging when you demonstrate your values and leadership through generosity.



Roxanne Hawn is a professional writer and award-winning blogger based in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. A former writer/editor for the American Animal Hospital Association and the American Humane Association, she has written about veterinary medicine and pet topics for nearly 20 years. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, Reader's Digest, Natural Home, Bankrate.com, WebMD, The Bark, Modern Dog, and many high-profile outlets. Her first book is called *Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate*.