Switched on to business

Alison Lambert describes her career path as being unusual; however, she says, since all vets know that there’s no such thing as an average day, why should there be an average way to get the best out of the valuable and varied skills that the veterinary qualification offers?

BORN almost exactly 50 years ago into a hardworking family full of animals in rural Yorkshire, I knew pretty early on that I wanted to be a vet. Through a combination of parental encouragement, determination to succeed, hard work and a large dose of healthy competition from my two brothers, at the age of 18 I found myself at Liverpool university, studying veterinary medicine.

It was all very old-school back then. We learned about muscle groups, disease management and preventative care – everything there was to know about treating animals. What we didn’t learn was how to run a business, manage budgets, hire and fire a team and communicate effectively with owners. Not surprisingly, hitting the real world in 1989 was something of a shock.

I lasted a few years in small animal practice before frustration got the better of me. Even back then I could see that things needed to be done differently; that veterinary medicine is a business, where consumers have choices. I could also see quite clearly that while my passion for animals and my determination to make a difference had not diminished, small animal practice was not going to be the place to do it.

Feeding success

In one of those fortuitous moments of fate, I applied to Hill’s Pet Nutrition for the role of veterinary adviser. I spent several years there, forging some great contacts and experiencing the ‘challenges and opportunities’ – as the commercial world likes to label the endless clashes of personalities and objectives found in business.

Always a glutton for punishment and keen to explore another side of the commercial world, I joined Mars and became a sales and marketing person, leaving the vet world behind. Managing teams of people and large budgets was certainly challenging at times, as was convincing this very successful business of the need to do things differently, but Mars created a customer-focused business person out of me.

There comes a time when you just have to move on and, for me, that time was 2001. The battle of wills that was a constant daily event was what drove the need for me to do my own thing – it wasn’t my business and there is only so much you can do as an employee.

Starting up a business

In 2001, my company Onswitch was born, mostly out of a genuine desire to help the veterinary sector deliver great service, but also out of the need to pay the mortgage. Being a decisive and forthright kind of person (cue harumphs from anyone who knows me), I set about headhunting a crack team of trainers and researchers from past associates.

Living in the Midlands is quite handy when you travel a lot, so with hindsight, setting up the office in south-west Scotland was perhaps not the best idea logistically, although it did allow us to take advantage of some useful business funding north of the border. Not surprisingly, we have since moved our office to Grantham, with my home office in the garden. Clearly, this means that some days my journey to work can be completed before the butter has even melted on my toast, but it also means that it is not uncommon for me to be scrawling things on a flipchart while more sensible people are heading off to bed.

Having acquired an office and a team, the next step was convincing the veterinary profession to agree with Onswitch’s simple proposition that providing excellent and consistent customer care is the fundamental key to success. Thus followed several years of wearing down the great and the good at
congresses, editorial meetings, college events and industry dos, while steadily building a reputation for providing good value, common sense advice that really works in hundreds of practices across the UK and Ireland. It was a kind of pincer movement, addressing the real issues in the profession from the top down and the bottom up.

**Putting the ‘bus’ into business**

At the end of 2010, Onswitch did what every growing business does, and bought a bus! ‘Bertha’ was no ordinary bus – custom-fitted with audiovisual training equipment, she was the answer to the age-old problem of how to train the whole team without shutting the practice for the day. Training in the car park – cost effective and time efficient; it was not long before Bertha’s schedule was full.

Bertha was a winner in the business innovation category of the 2013 Federation of Small Businesses awards and has played a significant part of the company’s success. Bertha now hosts four courses designed for the practice team, delivered by experienced trainers who have each worked in practice themselves – ‘5-steps’ telephone skills, ‘7-steps’ consulting skills, and equine-specific versions of both. Next year will see the launch of two new courses: ‘Dealing with difficult situations’ and ‘The customer journey’.

**Walking the talk**

I like to think that Onswitch has been successful primarily because of how we do what we do. It’s important to me that every member of the team conducts themselves according to our values, which are that we are: inspiring, passionate, honest, innovative and collaborative.

Importantly, these are not just some words stuck on the wall, it’s how we strive to be, every day, and with every client. We also eat a lot of cake, which always helps.

**Motivation**

It’s easy to paint a rosy picture, especially with hindsight. In fact, getting to where I am now has been stressful, exhausting and more than a little bit mad. It’s also been hugely rewarding – both to be able to earn a decent living doing something I love and am passionate about, and seeing real improvements follow my recommendations and actions. Those were the reasons I wanted to be a vet in the first place, so it’s not surprising that they still motivate me now – it’s just that instead of me making cats better as a vet, my business is helping practices perform better through the delivery of an excellent customer experience.

Now, I’ve had a great idea...
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Alison Lambert

Veterinary Record 2014 175: i-ii
doi: 10.1136/vr.g7629

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