

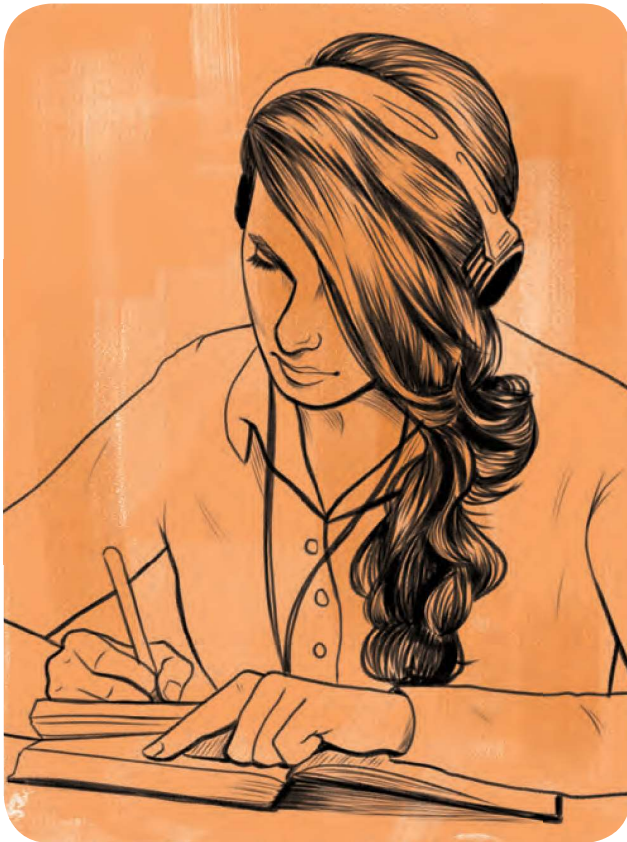


A blurred cityscape at sunset with birds flying in the sky. The image is a composite of a city skyline and a dark sky with silhouettes of birds in flight. The city buildings are in shades of orange and yellow, while the sky is dark with some light rays. The birds are silhouetted against the lighter sky.

wonder women

Female Entrepreneurs Innovate to Advance
the Veterinary Profession

by Jen Reeder



WHEN JUSTINE LEE WAS STUDYING for her emergency critical care boards in 2003, she felt like she didn't have time to go for a run with her dog.

"I was just so stressed out that I felt like I had to study constantly," she said. "That's when I thought, 'I wish someone could just read me this journal article while I'm running, on my Walkman.'"

Nearly a decade later, when she was studying for her toxicology boards, the feeling returned—this time, she wished she could learn while listening to her smartphone. So she decided to do something about it.

Now Lee, DVM, DACVECC, DABT, is CEO of VETgirl, a subscription-based podcast and webinar service offering online veterinary CE. VETgirl podcasts provide clinical vignettes or scientific veterinary journal articles that range from 5 to 30 minutes long. While it takes about two hours of work to create a 10-minute podcast, she said the sweat equity has paid off: VETgirl podcasts have been downloaded more than one million times in 170 countries.

"If you've ever walked into a veterinarian's office, their office is full of stacks of journals they don't have time to read," she said. "Veterinarians are such workaholics and have a constant passion to learn, so people love these veterinary podcasts."

Though VETgirl's target demographic was originally Millennials, most subscribers are female members of Generation X. Lee said one reason could be that 40-something moms can't always travel for CE. She can relate—she's juggling her job as CEO with raising an eight-month-old son and practicing two days a week at AAHA-accredited Animal Emergency & Referral Center of Minnesota, which has offices in St. Paul and Oakdale.

"There's a lot of CE out there right now that's very 'infomercial,' but we try to stay really clean," she said. "We pride ourselves on making sure VETgirl's CE is given by board-certified specialists or experts in the field, and that it's unbiased and clinically relevant."

More Women, More Innovation

Lee is part of a growing number of female entrepreneurs in the veterinary field, which reflects the influx of women into the profession.

"As late as 1963, there were only 277 female veterinarians in the United States. Today, there are more than 63,000," said Michael San Filippo, MS, senior media relations specialist at the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). "Women made up a majority of the profession starting around 2009, when around 75% of veterinary graduates were women and around 95% of retiring veterinarians were men."

In 2017, US veterinary school enrollment is 80.5% female and 19.5% male, according to the AVMA.

Kelly Baltzell, founder and CEO of Beyond Indigo Pets, a veterinary marketing company she started in 1997 in Hanover, Minnesota, said young female veterinarians are opening their own practices because they graduate with large debt loads and can't always find positions to pay the bills. The key, she said, is hiring the right people. That's been a boon to her own company, which has swelled to 35 employees who telecommute from around the country.

"We're not individuals coming to work, we are a team," she said. "I look at them as human beings and not as a cog in the wheel. I trust them."

Baltzell worked for America Online in the “gold rush” days of the nascent internet before creating the website Grieving.com. When she would reach out to veterinarians to request website content for people grieving the loss of a pet, they’d ask, “What’s a website?” So she’d offer to build them one.

She credits her first employee, Jeanne Pelletier—now COO—with helping her keep the ball rolling as the business has evolved.

“My strengths are big ideas, defining the culture, relationships,” she said. “But you have to have somebody who takes ideas and makes them a reality on a day-to-day basis.”

Dani McVety, DVM, cofounder of Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice & In-Home Euthanasia, a nationwide network of veterinarians dedicated to end-of-life care, agreed that collaborating with people with different strengths is valuable. She conceived of Lap of Love in 2009 while practicing in emergency medicine and offering personalized euthanasia services on the side to help pay off her student loans. After a client whose Chihuahua needed to be euthanized asked McVety to leave the dog on her lap instead of prepping him in a back room, she knew she had a name—and a business model.

“Everyone deserves that type of goodbye,” she said. “From a logistical standpoint, euthanasia is simple, but the details are where it’s amazing. How could I take something that’s very simple and make this an

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—MICHAEL SAN FILIPPO

experience that is worth every tear that the family sheds during their time with me?”

As word of mouth spread—and veterinarians around the country started calling to ask her for advice on how to start similar practices—McVety realized she needed to expand. So, she partnered with Mary Gardner, DVM, a former classmate at the University of Florida.

“I’m extremely lucky to have found somebody who complements my strengths so well,” she said. “Every single day, both of us think about what is best for the company. . . . It’s really about how we can help the families the best.”

Stacey Santi, DVM, was managing veterinarian at AAHA-accredited Riverview Animal Hospital in Durango, Colorado, when she decided the practice should offer an app to help connect with clients.

“When I went to buy my app, there wasn’t one to buy for veterinarians, which was surprising to me,” she said. “So I thought, ‘Well, I guess I’ll just make my own.’”

Santi developed an app with a loyalty card, which proved popular. Soon, friends at other practices began asking her to create an app for them. She founded Vet2Pet App Builders in 2013 and had her first client within 12 hours of the website going live. Now, she works on the company full time.

“It’s growing so fast. It’s fun and exciting, and it’s a whole new set of problems,” she said. “But nobody is going to die doing apps. I like to remember that.”

She enjoys networking and learning from other veterinarians and has found a strong camaraderie among female veterinary entrepreneurs. Santi spoke on



a panel at Texas A&M University's inaugural Veterinary Innovation Summit in April 2017 and encouraged would-be entrepreneurs to pursue their dreams.

"It's not the idea itself—it's how hard you are willing to work to make your product successful. Because an idea is just an idea until you start doing something about it."

Jessica Xu, DVM, who graduated from Texas A&M in May 2017, attended the Veterinary Innovation Summit after working with a team to invent an award-winning surgical training model for veterinary students.

"Dr. Dani McVety and Dr. Stacey Santi impressed me with stories of how they discovered a need in the veterinary world and took steps to solve it," Xu said. "I also realized that success has a lot more to do with persistence and passion than being brilliant, which is reassuring, as it means we all have the potential to make a difference."

Cindy Barnes, DVM, owner of Prescott Area Pet Emergency Hospital in Prescott, Arizona, graduated from veterinary school in 2012 after working as a veterinary technician for more than a decade—and raising five children. As an emergency veterinarian, she wanted to develop a way to give clients better access to their pets' medical records to allow for continuity of care.

Her son Kirk Castro, a graphic designer, suggested she create practice management software with an app for client records. They founded Shepherd Software, and on

February 1, 2017, Barnes had her staff start using the beta version of the product, which automatically captures anything added to the medical record for the invoice.

The benefits were immediate. "My practice grew by 20% in February, and 20% in March, and 20% in April," she said. "There aren't any missing charges with the software. Little charges add up to a lot over time."

She hopes when the product launches in the fall of 2017 that it will help veterinarians provide high-quality care to their patients while freeing up more time for their families. She's active in the Facebook group Moms with a DVM, a group with roughly 5,500 members, and often sees complaints about being exhausted and overworked.

"I've been able to have a good work-life balance and run a successful practice that is very profitable, and the key ingredient is being able to get my records done quickly and get out of there," she said.

Katie Lubovich-Schroeder founded a veterinary marketing company, now called InTouch Practice Communications (an AAHA Preferred Business Provider), in 1993 on her dining room table. It's grown to a team of 25 people who work in a 7,500-square-foot building custom designed for her company in Highland, Indiana.

"If anyone asks, I have three children: Madison, Lilly, and InTouch," she said. "I love it. Nothing makes me happier than seeing my team successfully help a veterinary practice. . . . Our office is filled with brilliant young women who want to make a difference."

She worked as a radio reporter before deciding to start a business with hours more suited to a new wife and mother. After her veterinarian hired her to create "on-hold" programming, she said she found her people. Her business expanded into veterinary marketing and has continued to evolve alongside the internet. While she's passionate about the work—"I actually jump out of bed ready to see what the day has in store"—this company president said potential entrepreneurs should understand the level of commitment involved.

"It always rattles me to hear people say, 'I want to start my own business so I can do what I want.' The only time I did



Katie Lubovich-Schroeder (front and center) founded InTouch Practice Communications in 1993. The company now employs 25 people.

what I wanted was when I worked for other people! It is not for the faint of heart,” Lubovich-Schroeder noted.

Jennifer Garcia, DVM, DACVM, CHCP, cofounded a digital resource company called VetCompanion that launched on “May the Fourth, 2015—yes, we are *Star Wars* nerds.”

“We are the first point-of-care resource of this kind in veterinary medicine,” she said. “We compile all of the latest evidence for a variety of conditions and put it all in an easy-to-navigate format so that clinicians can find answers quickly. What is the best test for this disease? What are the latest treatment recommendations? What is the prognosis?”

Each topic includes the references used and is rated by strength of evidence. The company has flourished with positive word-of-mouth advertising, but Garcia said starting a company truly is like jumping off a cliff and building your wings on the way down.

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help. I am constantly amazed and overwhelmed with the generosity of the women in our profession,” she said. “I think we all want to support each other and are incredibly proud when we see female veterinarians doing well in the business arena.” ✨



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is the president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She is grateful to her dog’s former veterinarian, Stacey Santi, DVM, for suggesting she interview these inspiring women.



Advice for Potential Entrepreneurs

“You have to be an advocate for yourself and really stick up for yourself. Go get it! If the tide rises, we all rise.”

—Stacey Santi, DVM, CEO of Vet2Pet

“Don’t be discouraged about how old you are, how young you are, how much student debt you have. There are a ton of free small-business resources out there, like AAHA’s.”

—Justine Lee, DVM, DACVECC, DABT, CEO of VETgirl

“Stock a lot of chocolate or whatever gets you through the day. . . . It’s easy to see the other sharks in the tank and think that you’re going to be eaten next. Either you live in fear, or you live in empowerment.”

—Kelly Baltzell, CEO of Beyond Indigo Pets

“A lot of times, women are concerned about not being able to afford to start their own practice or their own business. . . . Don’t let that stop you. There are really great companies out there that are willing to fund you.”

—Cindy Barnes, DVM, CEO of Shepherd Software, Inc.

“I challenge any business owner to look at the tasks at hand and ask, ‘Am I the right person to be doing this?’ If not, delegation is not something to feel guilty about.”

—Katie Lubovich-Schroeder, president of InTouch Practice Communications

“You’ve got to understand your business and where the revenue comes from instead of sitting around, hemming and hawing about a business plan. Just do it.”

—Dani McVety, DVM, CEO of Lap of Love