

## **A Makeover Never Looked So Good**

“Is it me or is the smell in this hospital getting stronger?” you ask yourself. Perhaps it’s the fraying carpeting, a tangle of dusty computer wires, or the random supplies piling up in the top row of cages. In this article we’ll focus on relatively simple strategies for giving an aging veterinary practice a powerful facelift, without major renovations.

### **Does your practice need remodeling?**

Having visited thousands of veterinary facilities, I can say that the majority of practices allow the physical facility to fall too far into disrepair before considering a makeover. But the fact is that staff and clients expect medical facilities to be clean and comfortable. Additionally, the adage about “an ounce of prevention beats a pound of cure” certainly holds true with building maintenance. When done correctly, a hospital makeover is a win-win situation for clients and the practice.

### **What are typical areas of improvement?**

Cleanliness and orderliness in the office reassures clients about the quality of your clinical care. Dirty floors and bad odors convey a sense of poor attention to detail. Lighting, flooring, sound control, and ventilation are key building systems that can make or break these client perceptions. Unfortunately, the simple nature of veterinary work challenges these systems; when thousands of animals pass through an office year after year, their claws, urine, hair, and dust are going to take a major toll on the physical plant. Additionally, veterinary offices seem to have an especially strong tendency to succumb to general clutter.

### **How do you get started?**

Once you turn a critical eye on your hospital, you’ll notice many possibilities for easy improvements. Write down everything you see, draw up a list of improvements, then prioritize the list according to impact and achievability.

First and foremost, every hospital can use a good cleaning and de-cluttering. Start small, keeping costs and headaches to a minimum. That dead ficus tree in the corner? Trash it – you’re not going to water it back to life. Those supplies stacked in the upper cages, the dust ball tumbleweeds nestled in the computer wires, the “kinda broken” IV pumps you haven’t dealt with? Get out the trash cans/donation bin and fill ‘em up. Examine everything on the walls; you’ll be shocked at some of the corny old decorations and fraying posters. Anything decorative should be framed and professional. Go out and buy some decent, tasteful animal-themed art.

While you’re taking things down, put a fresh coat of paint on the walls. This is not the time to get creative with your color schemes. Keep it clean and neutral, and limit your colors so that you can easily touch up scratches and stains later. Install fiberglass-reinforced plastic (FRP) below waist height to resist animal damage.

Look carefully at your floors, which typically become quite worn and stained in veterinary hospitals. If you’ve got wood, have it refinished. Tear up old tiles and lay down fresh linoleum, vinyl, or epoxy. You will be shocked at the difference this makes.

If you already have insulated windows, make sure they are cleaned both inside and out. If your windows are older, having them replaced with modern pre-fabricated windows can be surprisingly easy and affordable. Add shutters or sun screens to prevent unwanted glare and heating in the summer. Doors are also easily upgraded. Your clients walk in and out of your front door every day; make sure it conveys professionalism.

Look at your ceiling. Does it need a fresh coat of paint? Clean acoustic panels? In all likelihood you’ve got dust and stains accumulating on ceiling panels and vents. Pop your head into the space above. You might be able to raise your ceiling without much difficulty.

Now on to lighting. Replacing fixtures is fairly easy and cheap, so make sure you have plenty of light with uniform fixtures throughout the facility. If done well, fluorescent lighting using either CFL's or traditional tubes can be efficient and pleasant. LED's aren't suitable for lighting large spaces, but a few strategically placed LED fixtures can add a lot of "punch" to a room's vibe, especially at the reception and refreshment areas. If you want to take lighting to the next level, put in a few solatubes. These mirrored tubes gather sunlight on your roof and reflect it downward, bringing warm sunlight into the work space.

Temperature and environmental control are important to clients, animals, and staff. Ensure your HVAC system has been serviced and all filters replaced. Check out some of the new "smart" thermostats that learn your habits for maximum efficiency.

Another simple improvement is to create refreshment and education centers for clients. Free sodas, water, coffee, and snacks are cheap to keep stocked. Ditch the paper pamphlets and upgrade to tablets running interactive education software like VisioCare Consult.

Lastly, the outside of your practice needs to be inviting and tidy. Lighting is key both for safety and ambience. Make sure you have plenty of outdoor lighting. Your sign says something about your hospital beyond simply the words on it. Make sure it is freshly painted, with tasteful colors, fonts, and images. If it is faded, tattered, or shabby, invest in a new one.

If there's a lawn, have it professionally fertilized, aerated, and seeded. If you have concrete or asphalt, fix any cracks or uneven surfaces to ensure safety and reduce weeds, then consider putting in planters or other elements to dress things up. I also advise hospitals to have an outdoor "signature touch", which gives clients a positive mental association. An electric four-season bird bath and a few bird feeders is affordable and creates a wonderful ambience. Fountains and koi ponds are a step up in price and maintenance, but are visually and emotionally pleasing. Some people love topiary, others hate it; I suspect most people *love to hate* it, and it gives everyone a chuckle. You can buy topiary wire frames in the shapes of all kinds of animals and even specific breeds. Why not be that unique animal hospital sporting the flock of cute topiary pets?

### **Who can help with the makeover?**

The point of this article is creating a large impact on client experience without the headaches of major renovation. Many of these improvements can be done yourself, or using a general handyman. However, consider bringing in outside design expertise. While the planning and execution of a makeover can be done without professional help, many times the value added by specialists offsets their price tag. Professional veterinary architects and contractors have a wealth of knowledge on construction materials, methods, and design principles. They often identify many improvements the untrained eye may overlook, and they can help you tailor your list of priorities. The end result is often better overall value and a more comprehensive practice makeover.

But whether you use a professional or do it yourself, makeovers need not be a major hassle. Many improvements that are simple and affordable make a huge impact in the feel of the space, and it's often the right decision for boosting client satisfaction and practice revenue over the long term.

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Challenge areas	Typical problems encountered	Example photos
Flooring	Dirt, gouges, worn carpeting, broken tiles	
Ceilings	Poor sound insulation, dirt, gouges	
Ventilation	Odors, clogged vents, temperature issues	
Storage	Clutter, vermin, physical/chemical hazards	
Desks	Tangled computer cords, dust, fire hazards	