

*"Freedom."* When I talk with veterinarians who run their own mobile practices, that word comes up over and over again. Freedom from busy schedules and management. Freedom from overhead expenses and debt. Freedom to practice their own style. Sounds great, so what's the catch? I wonder if Janice Joplin didn't say it best: "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose." Let's look at the costs and benefits of this unique practice style.

"I started the mobile business because I was tired of the hustle and bustle of stationary practice," says Leslie Dragon, DVM. "My clients and I enjoy the one-on-one attention without the pressure to rush to the next client." Dr. Brian VanHorn had similar reasons: "The most significant reason I went mobile is the breakdown of the doctor/patient relationship. Corporatized hospitals have created assembly lines of patients, who may or may not see the same doctor twice, and with doctors expected to turn over 3-4 patients an hour."

Clearly there is a trend here. Mobile doctors tend to place especially high value on the doctor/patient relationship, and have a maverick streak with a lot of self-assurance. People with these attributes often find it easy to overcome the initial hurdles of starting a mobile practice. Dr. Dragon says, "I set my practice up myself for the cost of a lawyer, accountant, and basic supplies; it cost around \$12,000. I work out of my Ford F150 pickup and do all clinical work in the client's home." Dr. VanHorn's experience was remarkably similar: "I started my practice on \$10,000. Enough for a box of meds, motorcycle, business license, paper record system and insurance. I've taken what I need to live, reinvested the rest, and never borrowed a penny."

As you can see, mobile practices can be very inexpensive to start. They require minimal investment in capital and staff. They do, however, require a relationship with an established hospital for surgeries, X-rays, and hospitalizations. Because such pared-down practices own so little, they are generally considered to have minimal business value. Without tangible assets or specialty services, their primary value is in the reputation of the doctor. Dr. Dragon's advice: "Start off small. Do house calls. You must have a sweet disposition and great communication skills." Since you can't sell your own bedside manner, these practices may allow the practitioner to make a decent living as long as he/she is actively working, but generally are not expected to create a valuable business that can eventually be rented or sold.

In my experience, many mobile vets first establish a relationship with a facility, and eventually come full circle by building their own. "I am about to open a commercial office with a reception area, pharmacy, lab, and necropsy table; we will not see patients there," says Dr. VanHorn. "My next investment may be my own small radiology, surgery, and recovery unit, to avoid the costs and inconveniences of renting."

Mobile practices have a kind of romantic, throwback allure to them. With low startup costs and minimal initial risk, this practice model has something to offer for vets in any stage of their career, providing they are fully aware of the difficulty of resale options in the future.

### **Sidebar**

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