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Entrepreneurship Drives Veterinarian

by Joan Capuzzi Giresi, C'86 V'98

He owns a wildly-successful veterinary practice, one of the largest privately-owned ones in the country. But **Anthony J. DeCarlo, V'82**, is hardly complacent.

"I wake up every morning and tell myself I have the worst hospital in the country," says DeCarlo, who, with partner and classmate **Thomas S. Trotter, V'82**, owns and operates Red Bank Veterinary Hospital, a specialty referral practice in Red Bank, N.J.

This DeCarlo-brand pep talk, he says, spurs him to make constant improvements in his hospital. Like novel medical protocols, better equipment, a new 58,000-square-foot building complete with a 150-seat lecture hall, 2,400-square-foot pharmacy, fitness room and daycare facility that they will relocate to next year, plus staff

education initiatives and fresh hires. For example, DeCarlo recently augmented his staff of 180 with client-service coordinators, whose chief function is to flit about the waiting room, where they modulate the traffic flow, provide updates to owners, and dole out coffee and conversation.

He also leans on his employees to act as change agents: "I tell my staff, 'Every time you go to the dentist's office or grocery store, take all the things you like and practice them here.'"

DeCarlo has banished phrases like "We're too busy," "I don't know," "We don't do that" and "That's not our policy."

An admitted meeting fiend, he participates in most staff brainstorming sessions. At his regular management meetings, he keeps the focus on serving the patients and their owners. While he allows his supervisors plenty of leeway in making decisions, each of their proposed initiatives has to satisfy DeCarlo's do-or-die question: "How does that make it better for the client?"

He eschews many practices that predominate today in veterinary medicine, such as ordering automatic complete blood counts on every pet over six years of age, charging for euthanasias, and overvaccinating. Red Bank began offering vaccine titers five years ago in order to eliminate

unnecessary vaccination, and discourages the use of vaccines that are ancillary or of questionable safety/efficacy. He says his clients are often delightfully surprised that products and services are not being pushed on them.

In an effort to stay as recession-proof as possible, Red Bank offers neither boarding nor grooming, and tenders little in the way of pet products. DeCarlo, who laments that "veterinarians try to make money today and not 10 years from now," has opted for a more client-centered and long-sighted operations strategy.

For example, he stayed the course with his evening emergency service, even though it incurred losses in its first six years. Ultimately, it produced net gains by bolstering the daytime business and providing the 24-hour service his clients desired.

DeCarlo, who has never taken a business course and does not use practice consultants, netted much of his business acumen as an adolescent in his family's printing business. Born in Passaic, N.J., he grew up just minutes from the George Washington Bridge. His lower-income family found financial stability in the printing company his father started when young Tony was in grade school. He worked there during his school years, learning about sales and negotiations, employee issues and union dealings.

DeCarlo began college as a philosophy major, but floundered academically. Unsure of his career interests and feeling pressure to eventually take over the family business, he sought counsel from a friend. She suggested that he set out to do that which he liked reading about; at work, he often picked up books about medicine and animals. So he began volunteering at Oradell Animal Hospital in Oradell, N.J., and set his sights on veterinary medicine, which also held for him the allure of a challenge. After several false starts, he graduated a biology major from Ramapo College of New Jersey in Mahwah, N.J., at the age of 25.

With persistence, DeCarlo beat the odds – 12:1 at the time – and eventually was accepted to Penn's veterinary school, where he served as class president for four years and student gov-

ernment president for two. After graduation, he completed an internship at Oradell, and returned to Penn to do a residency in neurology. He had become enamored of the specialty, he says, because it allows "a lot of room for thinking, and everything is not always black and white."

And neither is starting a veterinary hospital. Shortly after finishing his residency, DeCarlo returned to New Jersey, where, by pure serendipity, he ran into former classmate Trotter. The two set out to open a practice together. After some creative cajoling, DeCarlo was able to convince a bank to provide 100 percent financing for their hospital, which began offering 24/7 service out of a tiny, dilapidated building. That was 17 years ago.

Today, after almost two decades of 25 percent average annual growth, Red Bank grosses over \$15 million a year. This ranks it in the top twenty largest veterinary practices nationwide. The hospital's 35,000 active clients, not including referrals – the bulk of its business, are scattered across a portly circumference that stretches from upstate New York to Virginia, east-central Pennsylvania to the Atlantic Ocean. Red Bank employs nearly 40 veterinarians – two thirds of whom are specialists in neurology, oncology, ophthalmology, internal medicine, dermatology, cardiology and orthopedics – and has internship and residency programs.

Due to his successful career, DeCarlo was invited to share his professional experiences and advice with current veterinary students at Penn as part of the Dean's Alumni Career Speaker Series this past January. According to Dean Alan M. Kelly, DeCarlo helped to "educate students on the opportunities and challenges facing them after they graduate." When he hires recent graduates, DeCarlo, who stopped seeing patients two years ago to focus on the growing demands of running the business operations, seeks those who "know how to intellectually approach a case." He adds: "I don't care if they know how to do a spay."

DeCarlo, 52, acknowledges he has hit on a winning business formula. However, he hopes that the inevitable growth can be maintained at a steady rate. He says his biggest challenge is to run a mega-practice with the intimacy of a two-person shop. He relies heavily on his employees to supply the personal touch to his clientele.

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D. Christine Anderman, V'98, married Jeffrey S. Leigh, C'93 D'97, on September 21, 2002, on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay near their home in Annapolis, Md. Dr. Leigh practices at Arnold Veterinary Hospital in Arnold, Md.

Back Row: David F. Zeyher, D'61 GD'64, Alan G. Harquail, Jr., D'54 GD'60, Russell S. Anderman, Jr., EE'67, Matthew Baron, D'99, Greg E. Dalin, D'97, Jeffrey S. Leigh, Thomas M. Drummond, D'97, Mark J. Robinson, D'97, Brian Duffy, WG'97, and Robert A. Leigh, D'69.

Front Row: Lois Hicks Zeyher, DH'59, Asra Saleem, C'93 D'97, Bethany J. Grohs, V'98, D. Christine Anderman Leigh, Kwanrak Wongse-Sanit, D'97, and Maira M. Robinson, D'97.

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His staff hear his favorite mantra – “Attitude reflects leadership” – again and again. “If I set a good attitude at my level,” explains DeCarlo, an avid motorcyclist with a longtime involvement in the Ronald McDonald Camp for children with cancer, located in the Pocono Mountains, “it will filter down to the receptionist and then to the client.”

Head veterinary technician Janet McConnell, who joined Red Bank 10 years ago when it was a five-doctor practice, notes that Red Bank employees rarely leave. She attributes the low turnover to DeCarlo’s ability to connect with the staff. “Out of the blue, he’ll say, ‘Let’s buy the hospital pizza today.’”

He also hosts frequent staff get-togethers at his home in nearby Ocean Township, N.J., where he lives with his two cats. In addition to investing in his employees’ friendship, he invests in their intellect: Each employee, from the veterinarians to the janitors, has a continuing education budget.

As for the future of his profession, DeCarlo sees the tides shifting in favor of large practices like his own that, because of their sheer size, can offer a wider breadth of services to their increasingly-demanding clients.

When he appraises his hospital in self-talks each morning, he is downright critical. No matter. As a veterinarian and a practice owner, DeCarlo has arrived. But he’ll never admit it.

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