



Increasing efficiency on the road

Maximize your time in the truck and on the call with a capable assistant.

In 16 years of practicing equine medicine as a solo ambulatory practitioner, the dumbest thing John Gifford, DVM, ever did was to not hire an employee, he says. In the six years since he brought on Chris Fazekas as his assistant, his revenue has almost doubled. Why? Because he can get more done. In the days B.C. (before Chris), Dr. Gifford could see an average of six clients in a day. Now he can visit 10.

In the truck

First, an assistant is a huge help when you're on the way to a farm call. "You've got to have someone who can work in a moving vehicle—they can't get carsick," Dr. Gifford says.

Dr. Gifford, like every equine doctor, receives many calls while on the road. Rather than pulling over and losing time or

endangering himself and other drivers by fumbling with his cell phone, he places Fazekas in charge. She answers the phone, writes down the address and phone number, and gets directions if necessary—all while Dr. Gifford keeps driving. If they're running late, Fazekas calls the client and makes arrangements without losing driving time.

Also while Dr. Gifford is driving, Fazekas uses the laptop to review the upcoming patient's chart. They may remind themselves, for instance, that they need to check the right hock for swelling. When they arrive, they're ready to go with that horse.

On the farm

Once at the site, Fazekas helps handle the horse. "Most clients can't hold their own horse for routine veterinary procedures," Dr. Gifford says. "When you move a horse's head one way, the butt goes the other way. Most clients don't know that."

While a technician with medical training and equine knowledge can be a considerable asset to your practice (see *Utilizing a large animal technician effectively*, page 5), a competent assistant with horse knowledge can also fill the role. "A technician is more than what I need," Dr. Gifford says. "I need someone who can hold horses."

Plus, as a horsewoman herself, Fazekas speaks clients' language and can answer many nonclinical questions. "Chris talks to clients about bit sizing, harnessing, and riding, plus behavioral and training issues," Dr. Gifford says. "She knows things I don't."

And it doesn't stop there. An assistant can't perform medical procedures but can help the doctor work as efficiently as possible. "Chris prepares the vaccinations, gets the gelding equipment ready, preps the meds or stomach tubing, and sets up the X-ray or ultrasound machine," Dr. Gifford says. "That way I can focus on talking with the client and working on the horse."

When Dr. Gifford finishes the procedure, Fazekas hands the bill to the client (either preprinted with handwritten additions as necessary or written out on site on carbon paper), the client pays, and away they go to the next call. Once back in the vehicle, Fazekas records all the logs immediately while they both remember what's been done.

A worthwhile investment

The benefits of having an employee with horse sense are obvious: You don't waste time chasing the animal around the corral or struggling to keep it still while you work. Plus, it's safer. "Horses can hurt you badly," Dr. Gifford says. "If I get hurt and can't work, there goes my business."

Many equine doctors believe they can't afford to hire an assistant when they're already struggling to make ends meet. Dr. Gifford's response? "You can't afford to not," he says. "It's a way to expand your practice without hiring another veterinarian. When you look at the dollars and cents, it's well worth it economically." ■