

SUMMER 2019

RELATIONAL MEDICINE

Focusing on top-notch service, Dr. Michael Brown's new business approach has reenergized his practice

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RELATIONAL MEDICINE

Dr. Michael Brown's new service-centered business approach has reenergized his practice. Why customers drive for miles for his brand of service.



Top: Children are encouraged to come in with their pets. Bottom: Pet-friendly floors are textured and non-slip, in soothing mottled shades.

In every cover story, **The Team** profiles a different PSivet practice to showcase the many ways that members are meeting and exceeding their goals, while doing business on their own terms.

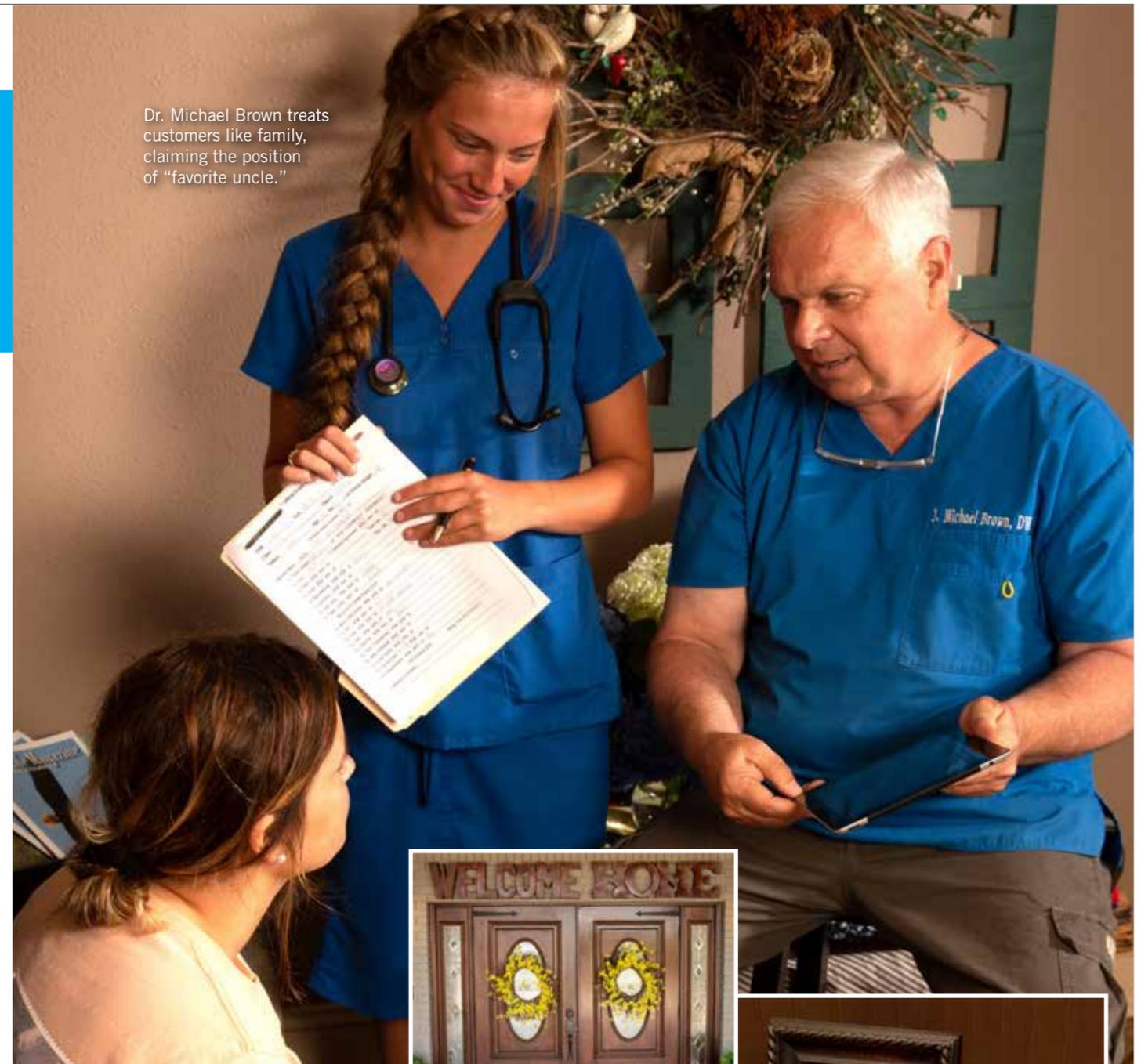
By Beth Pollock Bruch

At the age of 62, when most people are planning their retirement, Michael Brown, DVM, is in the middle of a career renaissance. Brown has revamped and revitalized his veterinary business, Arab Veterinary Hospital, in Arab, Ala., together with his wife Susan. Brown and Associate Veterinarian Jonathan Zeiger developed a new business approach focused on treating customers like family. They also designed a 13,000-sq.-ft. facility that reflects this approach, in a \$1.6 million eco-friendly renovation of a former chapel 3 miles up the road from their original location.

Comforts of Home

Now the practice, constructed with 75% repurposed or recycled materials, looks more like a home than a hospital. A sign above the door reads "Welcome Home." The decor evokes a cozy lodge, complete with a fireplace, rocking chairs and a front porch with swings. The practice is decorated throughout with family pieces, mementos, staff family photos and framed words of wisdom. "It's the story of my life told in bricks and heirlooms," says Brown.

Other features include solar-powered treatment ►



Dr. Michael Brown treats customers like family, claiming the position of "favorite uncle."

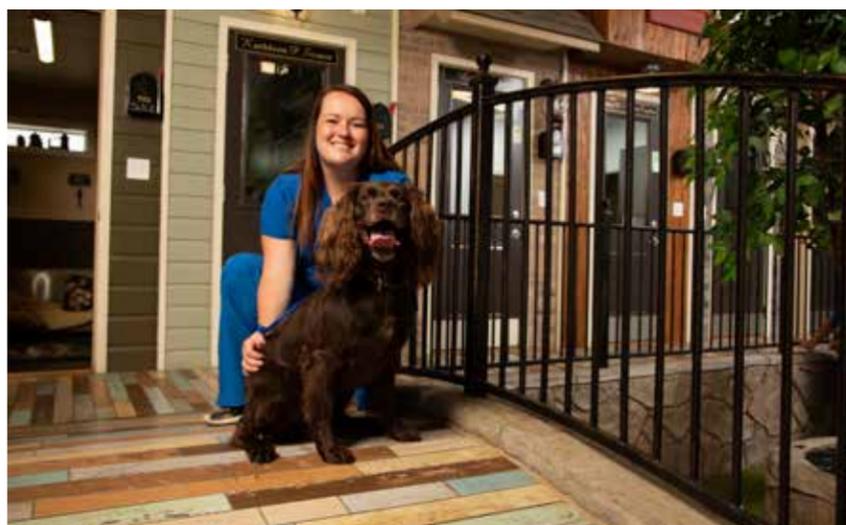


The homey practice decor includes staff family photos and a welcome sign above the front door.

AT A GLANCE: ARAB VETERINARY HOSPITAL

Arab, Ala.

- **TEAM:** 3.5 doctors, 26 FTE staff
- **SIZE:** 13,000 sq. ft., 7 exam rooms, underground Category 5 tornado shelter, plus a separate 10,000-sq.-ft. facility for large-animal treatment
- **PATIENTS:** 75% small animal, 20% large animal, 5% exotics
- **KEY PROFIT CENTERS:** wellness/preventive care, surgery, boarding/grooming, laser and stem-cell therapy, emergency care, end-of-life care



TOP-NOTCH SERVICE

Arab Veterinary Hospital has many protocols carefully designed to provide excellent customer service, including:

- **Treat customers like family.** “We tell people that we claim the position of their favorite uncle,” says Brown.
- **Know and use family names.** Before clients arrive for appointments, team members review their notes so they can greet everyone by name: first pets, then children, then adults.
- **Pay attention to children** and talk to them directly about the pet’s health and needs. “It’s part of the doctor’s responsibility to enhance the learning experience for the child,” says Brown.
- **Make greetings warm and uninterrupted.** When the phone rings while a receptionist is greeting a client, another staff member takes the call when possible.
- **Create a positive patient experience.** The clinic has adopted several Fear Free techniques to put pets at ease. Pets are offered a guided walk-through before appointments. Bandanas are sprayed with Adaptil or Feliway.
- **Offer drinks.** While a technician gets an exam underway, a doctor stops by and offers clients water, soda or specialty coffee.
- **Move medical discussions out of the exam room.** After an exam, the doctor brings clients out to sit by the fireplace or on the porch to discuss lab test results and medical findings.
- **Be frank.** Brown insists on open discussions with clients about treatment options. “You need to speak intentionally and allow the family of the pet to fully understand and appreciate what’s being considered and what’s ahead, and together with the family make a decision about how to go forward,” he says.
- **Monitor checkout timing.** While a doctor walks clients back to the front desk for checkout, technicians watch security cameras. As soon as the doctor leaves, they bring the pet out a side door to greet the clients on the front porch or at their car, smoothly reuniting them.

room lighting; state-of-the art equipment for in-house stem cell therapy, digital radiographs and ultrasound; and an underground safe house where community members and their pets (not just clients) can take shelter from threatening weather. The grounds even include a waterfall incorporated into the roadside signage. “We want our facility to be an experience,” says Brown. “Our goal is for folks to do a double-take.”

After almost a decade of research, planning and building renovation, the team moved into the space in late 2015 and put their new business approach into action. It revolves around building strong ties with customers and the community and providing exceptional, personalized service.



Above: Dr. Jonathan Zeiger (left) helped develop the “relational” approach. Below: Dr. Jarrod Harney will take over the practice one day.



Exam results are often discussed on the porch. The basement features a storm shelter and rainwater tank used for cleaning.



“It’s an alternative to commercialized corporate medicine,” says Brown. “We call it relational medicine. We look at veterinary care for pets as a door through which we interact with families—people and their children and their pets. It’s relationships that matter in life.”

New Heights

The remodeled practice and relational approach have brought business to new heights. Before, revenue grew 12% to 15% a year. A consultant told Brown that he could expect business to increase an additional 10% to 20% over 5 years once he put his new strategies into place. Instead, revenue jumped 100% in the first year and is on track to triple by the end of 2019, with new client numbers up by about 35 per month. “People drive long distances, more than an hour, going past wonderful veterinary practices, in order to come here,” says Brown.

In renovating the building, the Browns set a goal of using at least 65% recycled or repurposed materials, which they exceeded by 10%. This eco-friendly approach brought construction costs down to \$125 per square foot, estimates Brown, well

**KEY TAKEAWAY:
CREATE EXCEPTIONAL CLIENT EXPERIENCES**

Dr. Brown models the customer experience he’s aiming for on that of a Caribbean cruise. “People go on cruises not because they like the water, but because they get treated like a prince or princess,” he says. “It creates the feeling of ‘I can’t wait until I come back.’ That’s what we’re trying to do.”

below typical new-construction costs of \$325 to \$500 per square foot.

Price adjustments have been minimal, Brown adds. “We’re not known for outrageous prices, but rather for significant advances in services,” he says. “People understand that advances come with a price, and they appreciate our reasonable pricing structure.”

A Different Vantage Point

The idea to design a new facility for Arab Veterinary Hospital was sparked when Brown heard a talk by Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science and a prominent speaker on autism and animal behavior. “She explained how animals see things differently—they see comfort from a different vantage point,” remembers Brown.

Inspired, he decided to draw on his family background in building

construction to design a completely unique facility that would be soothing and comfortable to both animals and people.

The building is decorated in soft shades of warm chocolatey browns, creams, dull blacks and soft reds. Corners are softened a bit, openings are wider in treatment areas. Flooring is textured concrete. “We have a facility that is predominately the colors that dogs enjoy, nothing that scares them—no shiny chrome or bright white or neon blue, no highly polished slick surfaces to intimidate pets,” says Brown.

An adjacent boarding and grooming facility offers traditional kennels, larger (450 cubic feet) “townhouses” for dogs with windows and couches, 2-level “cat condos” and outdoor patios, a play area and an outdoor splash ▶

Relational Medicine

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Dr. Brown's brand of "relational medicine" includes creating strong ties with the community. The practice actively supports local activities, events and community causes, such as sponsoring the high school fishing team, helping children adopt service dogs, speaking at career days and making a float for the Christmas parade.

When its parade float won a prize, the practice donated the money to a struggling band program at a neighboring high school. "If we win something, we're going to donate it to another avenue of contact," says Brown. "That's relationship-building."

Brown also approached a veterinary supplier and asked for donated product to free up funds to support community causes. "Our supply closet usually has a variety of donated products, allowing us to divert and invest in our community," he explains.

The practice offers daily guided tours. Brown has tracked data and found that new clients who received a tour have between 50% and 100% more visits, gross expenditures and compliance. "If you're building a place, build it with a tour in mind," he says. "A tour provides an opening to forge relationships."

pad. A centrally located baffled, foam-filled wall provides a sound barrier throughout. "It needs to be comfortable and quiet, in order to provide a 'welcome home' environment," says Brown.

Fully Energized

In 2017, Brown brought on Associate Veterinarian Jarrod Harney, DVM, whom he is grooming to take over the practice one day. But for the moment, Brown has no desire to retire. "I'm fully energized. I love coming to work," he says. "It is an amazing experience to have all of your senses positively impacted daily and to know that you're making a difference in peoples' lives by being a neighbor, a friend and a problem-solver for them."

In fact, Brown is busy planning his next few additions, which include adding a dog park, play field and covered pick-up/drop-off areas. As he says: "I'm just getting started." ■

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