



Give Clients an Experience, Not Just an Appointment

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Working in a veterinary practice can be all-consuming, and team members can get so caught up in day-to-day operations that they forget about the experience created for clients and patients. What clients want has changed: 1 study showed that instead of going to traditional practices, pet owners are using internet information, specialty practices, mobile clinics, and animal shelters.¹ Price and service offerings greatly influence purchasing behavior, but client experience can separate thriving, successful practices from competitors. The following suggestions can make every experience exceptional.

Be Connected

One of the biggest reasons clients leave a company or service provider is because they do not feel valued.² Focusing on tasks during an appointment is critical, but the clients' emotions and the strong feelings they have for their beloved pets are often overlooked.

Show clients how much they are valued during the appointment by getting acquainted on a personal level. At Hometown Animal Hospital in Weston, Florida, the veterinary team is trained to spend the first 2 minutes of an appointment speaking with the client about anything *except* the reason for the patient's visit. Team members ask the client about work, family, whether he or she is new to the area, and whether he or she has other pets. The goal is to know the client in a way that goes beyond simply providing his or her pet's medical care.

Be Communicative

Clients often are not given enough information to see the value in the services recommended for their pets. Although today's owners are more educated about their pets' needs, the average client typically does not have the same knowledge base as veterinarians and other team members and can be easily overwhelmed with technical information. Team members should be attentive to a client's body language and adjust the communication style if a client looks lost or uncomfortable.

The most important aspect of creating an exceptional experience for clients is the interaction between the veterinary team and each client.

A Case of Exceptional Service

Jane Smith, a client care team member, takes the initiative to connect on a personal level with clients at her practice and has been so successful that clients often hug her, chat about their lives and what's new and exciting, and share a genuine sense of friendship.

Clients likely will return when they know they have a friend, not just a team member who makes little extra effort, at the practice.

—Tracy Dowdy

Each client is different. Some clients want only bottom-line information, whereas others want to understand every detail about their pet's recommended care. Actively listen to understand how to provide each client with the value he or she specifically seeks. Active listening means concentrating on listening and responding to another person to improve mutual understanding, rather than being distracted, half-listening, and thinking of other things. Also, communicate in terms that are simple to understand, and explain the value of the treatment plan.

Be Collaborative

The veterinary profession is 1 of the most trusted, but many clients still are concerned about being taken advantage of financially. Creating trust through collaborative communication is essential for improving the client experience.

The FRANK Workshop³ at Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital discussed different styles of client communication. Veterinarians often use the Shot-put approach that involves 1-sided communication. For example:

- *I know best, and I will tell you what to do.*

The Frisbee approach, which involves back-and-forth communication that leads to shared decision making, is more successful. Open-ended questions allow clients to tell

To Create an Exceptional Client Experience:

- Be Connected
- Be Communicative
- Be Collaborative
- Be Consistent

their story, and broad conversation can efficiently gather client information and data. For example:

- *Tell me how Maggie has been doing since we saw her last. Start from the beginning, and then walk me through what recently happened.*

A collaborative partnership between the client and veterinary team makes the client feel involved with the problems and treatment recommendations and value the practice experience more.

Be Consistent

Nothing frustrates a client more than confusing or contradictory information. When a practice has standardized medical protocols for routine services, the veterinary team members likely will deliver clients consistent, concise messages.

Standard protocols act as guidelines to help clients understand why routine services are essential for improving their pet's health, and empower each team member to take

personal responsibility for educating clients about patient needs. When clients accept and value the care they receive from the practice, they will regularly use the practice's services and products.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, common sense is not necessarily common practice. The above suggestions may seem basic, but they are not always followed.

A beautiful facility and up-to-date equipment will make a good impression, but the most important aspect of creating an exceptional experience for clients is the interaction between the veterinary team and each client. ■■■

References

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TEAM TAKEAWAYS:

Veterinarians: Increase client satisfaction and compliance with clear communication—in lay terms—about the specific value of each service and product recommended for the patient.

Management Team: Instructing team members to create trust through collaborative communication is essential for improving the client experience.

Nursing Team: Veterinary nurses are among the first to converse with the client; start by asking the client questions that are not about the patient's visit to establish a strong relationship and gain trust.

Client Care Team: Client care team members can play a part in making client visits exceptional with friendly, caring interactions when the client and patient first arrive at the practice and a lasting positive impression when they depart.

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