

## **Trust: Where Did it Go and How Do We Get it Back?**

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Client needs and wants have changed as the economy has changed. Thinking we can provide services and products like we did 10 years ago will lead to lost clients, transaction and future business. We need to understand client loyalty is wavering and it is our job to realize the client wants to feel like they are in control of how and where they spend their money. Not always an easy feat. We certainly don't want clients to feel they are put on the spot and being upsold every time they walk in our doors. We had a financial down turn in 2000-2001. This was relatively short-lived compared to what we say in 2009. With this said, we have seen consumer behavior shift. In 2001, we saw a similar shift but because the effects of the financial hit was so short lived, most returned to their previous buying patterns of services and products. 2009 hit the country much harder and in addition lasted much longer. With that said, we did not see the same trend of customers and clients returning back to their normal buying patterns. The shift has occurred and will remain.

The US consumer sentiment is continuing on the upward swing of how Americans feel about the economy and spending money. But the change would be they are being more guarded on how they spending it, where and when. As I said, they are spending, but they want to feel in control. Businesses that are embracing these changes are seeing positive results. I can say I am no different. Recently I needed to have a couple of gates re-built at my personal residence. Normally I might have just called a company and scheduled it. With me being more diligent about the value I was looking for, I met face to face with the fence company, looked at the materials they were going to use and looked at all of my options. From there, we were able to create a personalized plan for my needs and I gladly spend the \$750 feeling in complete control of the project. This is a very simplistic example, but it goes to show how we might evaluate the spending of funds a little differently today.

With the new economy in place, trust is needing to be reestablished as consumers question each of their expenses and who it is they choose to do business with. It also hasn't helped that we the veterinary industry has made headlines around the country over the last 5 years giving clients reason to believe deceptive or sales techniques are being used for financial gains. In addition, we have made headlines for unethical business or moral practices of animals. Each of these headlines represents less than a tenth of 1% of all our veterinary providers but it gives way for clients to think and rethink if their own veterinarian is practicing in the same way? Why is it they are charging me \$X for a prescription and I can go online and purchase apparently the same drug for ½ the price.

This year some 65 billion dollars will be spent on pet care and pet products. We have more threats in way of competition than ever. We are seeing human healthcare and technology companies entering our industry as a branch out. We need to work on creating and monitoring systems that will keep our clients put. While we do this we want to make the client feel in control giving them additional trust in us and all of our team in the care we provide for their pets.

Let's take a page out of the dental industry and see a few examples of how they demonstrate to their patients that they are in control of their visit. It starts first by a visual queue of handing over the remote to the individual TV installed in the operatory. They tell the patient they can watch any show they want. In continues with handing the patient the controls to the massage chair they are sitting in. Inter-oral cameras are used to show patients what the dentist is seeing and comparing the current pictures with ones that show what their teeth could look like. It's up to them if they want to hear more information. These are just a few examples of how dentist offices put their patients in control of their visit rather than dictating to the patient how it is going to be.

We know for clients to feel in control with a service provider they must be able to trust the business. Words and phrases such as integrity, character, exceptional talent, drive to personal excellence, internal moral compass, honesty, and leadership round out descriptors for establishing that trust. Cookie cutter approaches to providing care to the patients will leave the client feeling taken advantage of. They will feel in control as they drive their records out of your facility.

Clients will congregate to easy as it further makes them feel in control knowing the business is there to take care of their needs. A recent Harvard Business Review published a study indicating 56% of consumers complained of having to re-explain issues. We see this in our clinics when we make clients repeat histories or call back to check on medications and explain again what they are looking for.

57% complained of having to switch from Web to phone. I agree, we can further put the client in charge when we give them tools to use at their convenience (i.e. online scheduling). But if we are going to offer these tools, we better make sure they work and that we are responding. And lastly 59% of the survey respondents indicated they expended moderate to high level of effort to resolve their issues. If clients are going to feel in charge than they are going to have to have resolution in a timely and effective manner. It is hard to trust a business that isn't willing to find a quick solution to an issue.

As the issues arise, make sure to work on concrete and well communicated plans to the staff to resolve the issues from repeating themselves. You can offer further confidence to the clients by further communicating the changes you and the staff have taken to prevent the issues from arising again.

Euthanasia can be a vulnerable and difficult time for clients. This is an emotional circumstance where the client can feel out of control and not in the driver's seat. Communicate a consistent, empathetic and compassionate system for dealing with the difficult appointment. Consider unique ideas to convey condolences and ways to remember their beloved pet. Personalized cards, flowers, donations to veterinarian schools, clay paws or other memorable symbols of caring. Handling vulnerable and difficult times with clients will further encourage loyalty and trust for visits and business in the future.

As we discussed in beginning, understanding the new needs and wants of our clients is paramount. I recently produced a DVD titled "Listen up! How to profit from client feedback". The video demonstrates the importance to gathering pertinent and real-time data from your clientele to make sure they match up with your offerings. I find many clinics do not take the time to gather this in my opinion, critical information. The clients will tell you sometimes in very colorful language what it is they want or more importantly what it is they aren't getting or how their needs are not being met. "Listen up!"

In 2012, VCA Antech spent time and financial resources on understanding what it is their clients and potential clients wanted for an optimal experience at the veterinary clinic. It is further a testimonial to how important it is that we continue to research what it is the clients want and then give it to them time and time again.

At some point during a visit, clients will have to make a decision on how and if they can financially afford the care needed for their pets. Prepare for these difficult conversations. Offering multiple options for the client will leave them feeling in charge in a time they can feel helpless and out of control. I am not advocating we become banks and allow client's to start up accounts with us but with some proper preparation, we can have several opportunities for the client to use to gain the care they want for their pet. Using guilt tactics or making the client feel like they are being judged will only further push them out of your clinic. The discussion of fees and payment can be one of the harder tasks the staff has to do. Training and role playing are essential in these areas. Clients are much more apt to feeling in control if the person that is helping them is knowledgeable and confident. So often, I see clinics throw a new or untrained person at the front desk or in the exam rooms and they flounder. The client is certainly going to question things when the alleged "expert" cannot answer client questions or are not sure how a procedure will be performed etc. Take the time to work with your staff.

Mistakes will happen from time to time by your most senior doctor down to your freshly hired kennel assistant. It is vital for clients hear apologies but more importantly, options on how the clinic is going to make it “right”. Anytime a client thinks (key word thinks) something has been unjust to them or their pet, they are going to go on the defensive. When any of us are on the defensive, we generally have feeling of fear of the unknown. It is our job as the healthcare team to alleviate that fear and anxiety from the client and put them back in control. This does not mean we let clients walk all over us. Far from it. But it does mean we need to own up to our mistakes and make things right to the best of our abilities.

Placing the client in charge will not happen by accident. Take some time to work with your staff and creating systems and communication styles that give the client a sense of control. Reach out to them by survey and make sure the connection is being made to establish future success for years to come. When the client feels in control, they will have a better sense of trust among those providing the care.