

## Getting More Pets the Care They Deserve

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The human-pet bond is stronger than ever and pet spending continues to go up every year. And yet veterinary visits have declined in the past 10 years. In part, this is because people have many choices for pet care and have become more cautious consumers. Unfortunately, another major factor is that pet owners still don't fully understand the value of regular veterinary visits.

Veterinary practices that maximize the opportunity during every client interaction to create an exceptional experience will help pets get the care they deserve. Team members should learn how to be seen as a trusted advisor in today's marketplace and build client loyalty before, during and after visits. Trusted advisors focus on client engagement and client education to improve client retention and increase word of mouth referrals. Moreover, they use specific communication skills and implement actions that create lasting impressions with pet owners, increase client visits, and improve compliance with wellness and treatment plan recommendations.

### Client Engagement: Build Relationships And Connect With Clients

In their book *Human Sigma*, two Principals of Gallup, Joe Fleming and Jim Asplund define customer engagement as making an emotional connection with people such that they become emotionally satisfied customers. Their research shows that customers who are emotionally vs. rationally satisfied will spend more with a business, be loyal customers and refer more people to the business. This concept applies in veterinary medicine as in other businesses. Client engagement is about making authentic connections with pet owners. Clients routinely develop strong relationships with veterinarians and team members. Clients may say to a friend or co-worker "I wouldn't dream of going anywhere else with my little Sophie." However, due to a variety of factors within the marketplace (such as Internet pharmacies, low-cost providers, effects of the recession and increased ease of gathering information on the Internet just to name a few) clients are not as easily bonded to their veterinary hospital as they used to be 10 years ago. Concerted efforts are necessary by all team members to enhance levels of client engagement.

### Creating Positive First Impressions

Studies have shown people form first impressions in 7 seconds. This isn't much time to impress clients but the good news is there are specific actions you can take to create positive lasting impressions with pet owners. Clients quickly form first impressions when they walk into the reception area.

Here are 4 actions you can take to create a positive impression and be seen as likable:

- Make eye contact. Don't just glance up at the client and then look back at your computer screen. Instead hold the eye contact until you complete the next 2 steps.
- Smile and convey a positive attitude that says "I'm glad you're here"
- Tailor your greeting to the client. You can say "Hi Mrs. Jones, how are you and Sophie doing today?" This greeting helps to determine how the client is feeling and shows interest. If you don't know who the client is, you can say "Hello. Are you Mrs. Jones with Sophie?" Don't worry if you don't correctly identify the owner. Just move to a positive statement about their pet or how you can help them.
- Have an open body posture and lean forward. Your body language needs to match your verbal welcome. If possible stand to greet clients or even come from behind the desk. This shows you're happy to see the client and often makes it easier to see and greet their pet.

### Using Client And Pet Names

A very simple, yet often overlooked way to make service more personalized is to use the name of the client and the name of the pet when speaking with pet owners. People like to hear their name. Using someone's name shows respect but it also conveys that you know who they are-they aren't just a number in your day.

Be sure to use the client's last name and an appropriate title unless you know the client well. For example, you would say "Hi Mr. Taylor, we're ready for Jake now" or "Mrs. Smith; here is your medication for Josie." If the client says, "Please call me Sally", then you can use their given name. Try to use the client's name at least 2-3 times over the time of your interactions. Two very appropriate times to use a client's name are when greeting a client and when saying goodbye.

People also love to hear their pet's name rather than hearing "your pet, he or she". Using the pet's name helps you avoid having to worry as much about getting the pet's gender correct because you'll be saying Scooter rather than "he" or "she". Moreover, referring to the pet by name tends to result in you saying the correct gender because it wouldn't make any sense to talk about "Sophie" and then say "how is he doing?" Remember that the use of client and pet names applies to the phone also. Ask callers their name and their pet's name so you can then use the names throughout the conversation.

### **Engage Clients with Compliments**

Everyone likes to receive compliments so look for opportunities to say something nice to clients. Always praise clients about how well they take care of their pet because this will reinforce your position on patient advocacy and show you care about keeping pets healthy and happy. For example, you may be able to comment on what a great job a client did with getting their pet to lose weight. Or you could compliment clients for being consistent with heartworm and flea control products.

Don't forget to compliment pets since owners love to hear team members show interest in their pets. You may be able to comment on how attractive the pet is, tell the owner you like their collar, or compliment the pet for being so cooperative and friendly. Don't limit your compliments to praise or comments about the pet. If you like something about the client let them know. You may compliment people about their clothes, jewelry, hairstyle, community involvement, quality of their work, or their sense of humor.

### **Converting Phone Calls To Appointments: What To Say And Not Say**

Developing outstanding phone skills is extremely important since it is often the first impression clients have regarding the practice. Clients begin to make assessments about a business based on their phone interactions with staff and the conversation can easily influence decisions to book an appointment.

Communicating effectively with clients on the phone presents challenges since neither person on the phone can rely on visual cues to enhance communication efforts. In many instances, it's less about what you say and more about how you say it. Here are examples of phone skills and best practices for the phone that will create positive impressions:

- Always answer the phone by the 3rd ring. When the phone rings longer than 3 rings, clients become irritated and feel the practice does not value the importance of providing exceptional client service
- Don't quickly rattle off a greeting the client can't easily understand. Identify the name of the practice, your name and ask how you can help the client. This greeting should be articulated clearly and concisely.
- Use a friendly, relaxed and upbeat tone of voice when answering and speaking on the phone. The person on the other end of the line should immediately feel like they are talking to someone who is warm and interested in helping them. Verbalize the same enthusiasm to clients you don't know as you do with pet owners who are your favorite clients.

### **Responding To "Phone Shoppers"**

It's a rare client service representative that gets excited about handling phone shopper calls. So, begin by thinking of these as "Potential Client" calls instead of "Phone Shopper" calls which carries a negative connotation. Bear in mind that many pet owners are cost conscious in light of the slow economy and it may be your existing clients who are calling about fees. Use the following communication skills increase the number of calls to booked appointments

### **Engage Clients Before Quoting Fees**

Start the conversation with a positive comment such as *“I’d be happy to help you. Let me get some more information so I can be sure to give you accurate information.”* Next, ask the caller’s name and their pet’s name so you can deliver personalized service. Then ask *“Have we seen your pet (dog, cat) before?”* to determine if the caller is an existing client or has never been in before.

After asking the caller for their name, their pet’s name and whether they are a client of the practice, strive to quickly engage the client before just quoting fees. There are two basic ways to engage telephone callers; by asking engaging questions and by making engaging comments. Both work very well but remember they must be authentic and sincere.

Engaging questions to ask a caller about their pet or their situation include questions such as:

- *“How did you find out about our practice?”*
- *“Has it been awhile since you had a puppy?”*
- *“Do you have her medical records?”*

Engaging comments are authentic compliments or friendly comments that demonstrate warmth and enthusiasm such as:

- *“Oh, I love Papillons, they are so cute”*
- *“What a pretty name.”*
- *“Yorkie puppies are so adorable. I bet you’re having fun with her.”*

### **Communicate The Value Of Services**

Remember to always, explain the value of specific services before quoting fees. The goal is to engage clients and convey the value of services without having callers feel like you’re never going to get to the point and tell them the fees. Rather than only giving the caller fees for the service they asked about or rattling off all possible fees, begin by asking a few questions to best determine what services are necessary for the callers pet. Then give a few details and describe the benefits of services. For example if a potential client calls to ask about the cost to bring in their new puppy for vaccinations, you would ask the age of the puppy and inquire about the medical history. Once you know this information you would say:

*“Mrs. Jones, Gidget is now due for her second set of puppy vaccines. When she comes in for her vaccinations, one of our doctors will complete a comprehensive physical exam to evaluate her health and discuss any concerns you may have. Her vaccines include protection for distemper and parvo which are viral diseases that can be life threatening as well as protection against 2 upper respiratory diseases. In addition, our doctors recommend testing a stool sample to check her for any intestinal parasites and we routinely deworm all puppies for worms that can be transmitted to people. The cost for these services is \$00.00. It’s important to get Gidget started on heartworm and flea prevention as well. For puppies, we provide complimentary doses on their first visit which is a value of \$00.00”*

### **Handling Cost Inquiries For Sick Pets**

Don’t make the mistake of simply telling pet owners, *“We can’t diagnose over the phone. We have to see your pet and that will cost \$45.”* What the caller really wants is meaningful information and empathy. Ask questions about the pet and their symptoms which demonstrate your concern for the pet. Then follow up with empathy phrases.

Your end of the dialogue might sound something like this: *“Mrs. Humphrey, how long has Chloe been vomiting and how has her appetite been this week? I am so sorry to hear she isn’t feeling well and like you, I know I’d be concerned, too. You know it’s impossible to say for certain what’s causing her illness. I wish I could tell you something over the phone but really the best option is to have Dr. Taylor check her out. After examining Chloe, she can tell you what she thinks is going on with her and we can certainly let you know any costs involved before proceeding with tests or treatment. Our examination and consultation fee is \$45.”*

At this point, pause to let Mrs. Humphrey speak. If she doesn't indicate a desire to schedule an appointment, further express that she will have peace of mind once she and Chloe see Dr. Taylor and let her know what time she can bring Chloe in or drop her off to be seen.

### **Give Clients Accurate Information With Confidence**

When veterinary team members are well trained to appropriately educate pet owners they can help attract new clients to the practice and build loyalty with existing clients. Therefore, it's important to always convey accurate information to clients. When clients hear different recommendations from team members they can become confused and trust starts to break down. Take for example educating new puppy owners about heartworm preventive medication. The American Heartworm Society has established guidelines stating that puppies should be started on preventives by 8 weeks of age. Yet in my mystery shopper calls, I've found that 20% of client service representatives recommend an older age. Consider how a client might feel if you give them erroneous information and they later find out they were misinformed. To be a trusted advisor for pet owners requires specific training to become knowledgeable about many topics including the hospital's appointment and scheduling protocols, recommended preventative care guidelines for pets, medication refill policies, answers to common medical questions, and other common healthcare topics such as nutrition, microchipping and dentistry.

### **Always Ask For The Appointment**

Asking to schedule an appointment increases the likelihood of actually booking an appointment. After communicating the value of services and quoting fees, always ask the caller to schedule an appointment and offer specific times. This strategy conveys to the potential client an interest in having them come in.

### **End Calls With A Positive Statement**

Close by letting the caller know the practice is very interested in seeing their pet. If it is an existing client, use phrases such as *"We'd love to see Chloe again. Please call me back when you are ready to schedule an appointment."* If it is a potential new client that doesn't schedule an appointment, leave them with a reason to call back to schedule an appointment at your hospital. This closing statement is essentially a call to action and should convey pride in your hospital and services. You could say *"We welcome the opportunity to care for Chloe and would love to have you as a new client. We're proud of the quality of medical care and service we offer. And I know you will like Dr. Smith-she is so compassionate and knowledgeable."*

### **Communication Skills That Enhance Client Loyalty And Compliance**

Research in both human medicine and veterinary medicine has shown communication is a core clinical skill and better communication by doctors leads to better relationships and patient outcomes. Enhanced communication by the veterinary healthcare team builds client loyalty and at the same time leads to better patient outcomes for pets due to improved dialogue and decision-making about what is best for the pet. The following communication skills can be used by any team member to build rapport with clients and help increase compliance with treatment recommendations.

### **Ask Questions To Connect With Clients**

Look for opportunities to gather more information, gain insight, and create stronger connections with pet owners by asking questions. It often only takes a few minutes longer and this communication skill helps to develop a more meaningful client relationship which leads to greater client loyalty.

One of the best ways to engage clients is to ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions can demonstrate genuine interest in the client and their pet. Examples of open-ended questions include:

- "What do you have planned for the holidays?"
- "You seem uneasy Mrs. Taylor. Can you tell me more about your concerns?"
- "I think Welsh Corgis are so adorable. How did you decide to get one?"
- "Tell me how your daughter is doing in soccer."

- “What toys does Sadie like to play with?”

### **Non-Verbal Communication**

Non-verbal communication is just as important if not more powerful than verbal communication. Regardless of what we say, our body language also tells a story. It's imperative that team members be mindful of the message received by clients as a result of non-verbal communication. For example, folded arms, a frustrated sigh, or frowning may indicate impatience and frustration with the client or pet. On the other hand, smiling, nodding of the head, and leaning in toward the client demonstrate interest and patience when the client is talking.

Eye-contact is one of the most significant non-verbal communications. Communications can seem impersonal and clients may perceive you're not very interested if you don't make eye-contact with them. At a minimum, be sure to establish eye-contact with clients when they arrive at the practice, when asking them to follow you to exam rooms, when greeting them in exam rooms, and when saying good-bye.

Try to sit down next to clients during important discussions. This helps make clients feel like they're a partner in the care of their pets and facilitates easier dialogue without distractions. When you stand while clients sit, clients may feel intimidated and be less likely to ask questions. In addition, it is easier for team members to focus on the client when sitting down to talk.

In addition to your own non-verbal communication, observe the non-verbal communication of clients which will give you clues about their feelings and what actions you may need to take to improve communication. For example, glancing at a cell-phone or watch, pacing, folded-arms, hands on the hip, standing instead of sitting in the exam room, standing near the door, and frowning can all indicate the client is in a hurry or unhappy about the wait time. Clients who are afraid or uncomfortable for some reason may display nervous behaviors such as clutching their pet, looking down, reluctance to talk, or fidgeting in their chair. Once you become more observant of client's non-verbal communication, you can take action to respond to their body language.

### **Practice Reflective Listening**

Some people are naturally good listeners and some people have considerable difficulty with this communication skill. If you know you tend to always think about your response while someone is talking or you tend to interrupt others when they talk, you may need to practice developing better listening skills. Listening to clients is important for two primary reasons. First, it is often critical to ensuring you have gathered all the relevant medical history and information about the pet and client. In addition, attentive listening demonstrates interest and compassion towards the client.

Reflective listening helps to make sure that we have listened to clients, that we are processing the correct information and that we are cognizant of what pet owners are feeling and thinking. Examples of reflective listening statements include:

- “I'm hearing that you think maybe Scooter's quality of life isn't good, is that correct?”
- “I understand you have some limits on what you can spend today.”
- “If I am hearing you correctly, it sounds like you're unsure which treatment option is best for Sophie?”

Reflective listening statements invite clients to affirm that you have understood them correctly. If you have made erroneous assumptions, clients have the opportunity to clarify their thoughts and feelings. In addition, reflective listening invites client to give you more information. This can be critical particularly when you engage in dialogue about serious medical conditions and need to ascertain the level of understanding by the pet owner and/or their willingness to care for the pet.

### **Empathy Statements**

Veterinary teams generally do an excellent job of showing compassion to grieving clients and are routinely

praised for being kind, yet many team members miss out on opportunities every day to convey empathy to pet owners. It isn't that doctors and staff don't want to let clients know they are empathetic; rather it is that teams often don't know what to say and when to use empathy statements.

Empathy statements are used to convey to clients that you understand their perspective and feelings. They are an acknowledgement of the client's emotions or their position. Here are some examples of empathy statements:

- "I can appreciate that this is a difficult time for you."
- "I understand you weren't expecting these expenses for Hannah's care today."
- "That must have been very upsetting to see Chloe have a seizure. I know I would be scared too."

Empathy statements don't have to be confined to discussions about the pet. You can express empathy about anything a client may tell you including family illness, job situations, personal problems, minor frustrations, etc. People appreciate affirmations and concern about what they are going through.

### **Handling Angry Clients**

In veterinary practices, the team interacts with pet owners who experience many emotions. One of the most difficult emotions for employees to deal with is anger. While no one likes to be confronted by a livid client, team members who are trained to respond with compassion will find these encounters less stressful and be better able to reach a positive outcome. Here are steps all team members can use when responding to a disgruntled client.

#### **Stay calm**

Sometimes clients take their anger out on team members even though no one in the practice did anything wrong. It's human nature to feel unjustly accused or insulted and to respond with argumentative or defensive comments. Unfortunately, this doesn't help the situation. Avoid escalating tensions by responding to angry clients with a calm demeanor. Focus on taking deep breaths and controlling your own emotions.

#### **Seek to Understand**

Allow clients to vent their frustrations or to thoroughly explain what they are angry about. If you interrupt them too quickly, you may exacerbate their anger. The goal is to clearly determine the underlying reason for the client's anger. Are any of their complaints legitimate? Are they under stress? Are they afraid their pet may die? Do they seek attention or reassurance? When you correctly identify the motivators for behavior you'll be more likely to respond appropriately. Ask open-ended questions to discover all the reasons why the client is upset.

#### **Apologize when appropriate**

Be sure to apologize when mistakes are made. Quick apologies usually serve to defuse anger. An apology should be offered if someone on the team failed to provide excellent service or deliver on their promise. Examples of times when an apology is warranted include forgetting to send a toy or leash home with the pet, failing to prepare a prescription on time and not making return calls as promised.

There are many times when it is appropriate to say "I'm sorry" but the expression is used to convey sympathy. For example, you may say "I'm sorry for the communication breakdown." In these instances, the practice team did not/may not have done anything wrong but you want to let the client know you're sorry they have been inconvenienced.

#### **Seek to connect**

People want to be heard. Clients appreciate team members who listen and express empathy. Listening is an active process. Body posture and facial expressions are important if you want to convey interest and a genuine desire to help. Lean forward slightly, nod, and maintain eye contact. Convey empathy with statements such as, "I know this was an unexpected illness and how much Sophie means to you." Always attempt to validate clients' emotions. You can do this by saying, "I understand that you are angry" or "I realize this is a difficult time for you".

### **Problem-solve**

When people are unhappy about service, they want someone to take action to resolve the problem. Clients don't want to hear excuses or details about your policies. Even if you're unsure how you can solve a client's problem, start by responding with a phrase such as, "Let me see what I can do," which confirms a desire to help. Even if you cannot give all clients what they want, thank them for their feedback and offer reassurance that you will do your best to provide assistance. For example, if a client is upset that the doctor has not called them back, you may be able to offer an explanation and assure them that you will do everything you can to facilitate the return phone call.

If the client's anger escalates, even with your best efforts to help them, confront them politely about their behavior. It's appropriate to say, "Mr. Smith, I'd like to help you but the level of your anger is making it difficult for us to work together to resolve this issue." You can also ask the client what they want or what will make them happy. You can say, "Mrs. Clark, we value you as a client. What can I do to help you?"

Remember that everyone has a bad day occasionally and you may just be in the line of fire on that day. And people love their pets so they may be under considerable stress in a veterinary hospital. Teams that can defuse clients' anger help raise the level of service and can even help pets get the care they deserve.

### **Team Training To Improve Compliance**

Veterinary teams trained to focus on client engagement and education can successfully build trust and rapport with clients which helps to bond them to the practice. Through the use of specific communication skills and strategies, these teams can increase patient visits and compliance with treatment recommendations. To begin the training process, start by making sure everyone on the team understands the benefits of enhancing their client communication skills.

### **Relevant Statistics**

It can be helpful to share compliance data with the team so they understand the need to communicate better with pet owners about the value of veterinary services. The 2011 Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study showed a number of factors responsible for declining patient visits including that pet owners don't fully understand the need for routine examinations. In 2014, there was an update to the 2011 study which showed that pet owners were willing to accept longer intervals between veterinary visits and they had an increase in reliance on the Internet to find information about their pets' medical care. In addition, there was an 11% increase in clients saying the cost of care was higher than they expected.

### **Define Team Member Roles Before, During and After Appointments**

The best way to improve client compliance with treatment recommendations is to work as a team. If you're organized and work as a team, clients are more likely to receive consistent client education messages and to understand the value of your services which will result in greater compliance.

The first step to developing an organized, team approach is to make sure everyone knows how to fulfill their specific role as a trusted advisor to pet owners. For pets to get the care they deserve, everyone on the veterinary healthcare team needs to build trust with clients by providing accurate and thorough information about pets' medical care. They also need to build trust by focusing on client engagement. Remember trusted advisors focus on client engagement and client education *before* making recommendations.

### **Reassess Your Protocols**

Think about your hospital protocols and staff roles for routine wellness visits. Who makes recommendations to clients about their pets' needs? Do staff members quickly state what services are due or do they first ask questions about how the pet is doing? Are team members trained to talk about the benefits of services and products that are being recommended? Is your team focused on increasing the number of services performed each month or on patient advocacy? As you reflect on your communication protocols consider what messages you are conveying to

clients. Most practice teams feel like they're focused on the welfare of pets by making appropriate recommendations but what do clients think?

### **Train Teams to Enhance Client Engagement**

Client engagement is about making authentic connections with pet owners. One of the best ways to connect emotionally with clients is to recognize their unique needs while endeavoring to exceed their expectations. For example, a new puppy owner may need reassurance and praise for their socialization efforts as well as thorough information about preventative healthcare. Pet owners with sick pets often need someone to explain complex medical conditions in a manner that they can understand, payment plan options, realistic information regarding patient outcomes, someone to validate their emotions and someone to convey empathy. Busy doctors and staff members sometimes forget to see the client's perspective when communicating with clients. Don't make this mistake. Instead, remember to focus on what clients may be feeling and what they need from the healthcare team as well as what their pet needs. When you do this, clients will understand and remember your team as their "trusted advisors".

### **Train Teams to Enhance Client Education**

Clients are more skeptical today and have many choices for pet healthcare. They may think someone is trying to "sell" services if team members immediately provide recommendations for their pet before even asking questions, taking a thorough history or performing a physical exam. Clients may feel like their pet is just a number to the practice and receives the same recommendations as every other pet that walks through the door. Here are some skills and strategies to use to better educate pet owners and inform them about the value and benefits of services. These skills help build trust.

- Don't assume clients are knowledgeable about basic services. Ask if they have questions about heartworm disease and let them know which common parasites are being looked for when they bring in a stool sample.
- Ask open-ended questions about pets and engage clients in a dialogue before immediately launching into what services you recommend. Ask questions such as "What problems are you seeing with Sophie?" or "Tell me what concerns you have today about Max?"
- When team members do make recommendations for wellness care prior to the veterinarian doing a physical exam and consultation, be sure to let client's know the doctor will do a full evaluation of their pet's health and answer any questions they may have.
- Make sure all aspects of the physical exam and procedures are thoroughly explained. While conversing with the client is desirable and necessary, don't make the mistake of having the pet owner completely miss out on the value of the exam because they didn't even realize the pet was being examined. The client should be informed of normal and abnormal findings and the reason for each part of the exam.
- Even if you take the pet to the treatment room for procedures, take the opportunity to show clients some of the equipment used. For example, show clients the snap test when it is completed and the tonopen or Doppler. Use visual aids or models to reinforce verbal messages when possible. For example, use the body conditioning score chart to let clients see why you want to talk about weight loss for their pet. If you don't have client education brochures with pictures or anatomical drawings, look into obtaining these visual aids.
- Give clients sufficient information. For example, after recommending wellness care such as diagnostic testing, give the client more detailed information about what tests are included and what they will reveal about the pet's health.
- Don't just make recommendations-focus on need recognition and the value of the services. Tell the client why the pet needs the tests. Use phrases such as "the senior testing will determine if Benji is healthy or if he has any early indications of illness." And finally, tell the client the value of the services by using phrases such as "We want to catch any abnormalities early so that we can help Benji live a long life"
- To effectively communicate the value of a veterinary service or product to clients, make sure everyone on

the team understands and agrees with the value of the hospital's services and products. When gaps in knowledge are identified or employees demonstrate discomfort associated with certain client interactions, focus training in these areas.

### **Talk With Confidence About Money**

Often, staff members receive the brunt of client complaints about fees since they collect deposits, receive payments and may present treatment plans. Untrained employees may not know what to say when faced with an angry client and suffer in silence. To avoid this situation, train team members so they're comfortable talking about money. Empathetic employees who can confidently communicate the value of services and present payment options help build trust with pet owners.

Make sure team members don't think they need to apologize for the cost of services but instead should remain committed to providing the best care possible to pets and focus on communicating the value of this care to pet owners. Inevitably pet owners express concern or complaints about fees when presented with treatment plan recommendations. When this occurs, convey empathy, identify possible other underlying causes for an owner's reluctance to agree to services and focus on how to overcome objections.

The following schematic outlines the process of effectively communicating with clients to build client loyalty and improve compliance. Following the diagram are suggested actions for staff training for each part of the cycle.

### **Making It Stick: Setting Service Standards To Differentiate Your Practice**

Setting standards helps ensure consistency in the execution of service to your clients. When standards exist, there is a greater chance that pet owners will experience the same service and client education from all team members even on different visits to the practice. Client service standards can also differentiate your business from other veterinary practices in your area especially if the level of service provided is superior to that offered by competitors.

### **Creating Service Standards**

The first step to creating standards is for the leadership team to decide what level of service to provide to clients. You may think that this seems like an unnecessary step. Doesn't everyone want to provide the highest quality service possible? Maybe. Maybe not. The fact remains that different practices have different business models and strategies which may guide the quality of service that is offered. For example, a high volume, low-cost clinic in a middle-income community may purposely choose to offer a different level of service than a 24-hour, full-service hospital in an upper-income major metropolitan area.

Be sure to include the team in the process of creating standards as this will help to achieve team buy-in for the standards. This discussion time also affords the team an opportunity to give feedback about whether they feel the standards are reasonable and attainable.

### **Implementing Service Standards**

When implementing service standards, it is helpful to develop standards for specific client interactions as well as general standards for the entire team. The following are examples of client service standards:

#### **Service standards for all personnel**

- Arrive for your shift 5 minutes before you are scheduled to ensure that you have time to clock in and be "on the floor" ready to work at the beginning of your shift.
- Always make eye contact with clients when you say hello and when you say goodbye. Look at their eye color to make sure you have made a connection.
- Make at least one positive statement or compliment about the pet during every visit.

### **Standards for phone communications**

- Answer calls by the 3<sup>rd</sup> ring; this means staff members must be trained to work together and personnel in the treatment area need to answer the phone if the client service representatives cannot answer a phone by the 3<sup>rd</sup> ring.
- Hold times should be no longer than 1 minute
- Apologize for putting clients on hold and thank them for their patience when returning to the call
- Use a standard greeting and do not rush the greeting

### **Standards for greeting clients**

- Immediately acknowledge clients that enter the reception area
- Greet clients enthusiastically with a smile. Greetings such as “Welcome to (hospital name). Is this Jake?” are appropriate.
- Use the client’s name when speaking to them. For example, use phrases such as “Mrs. Smith, we’re ready to see Chloe now. Can you follow me to the exam room?”
- Interact with pets using the pet’s name and the correct sex of the pet

### **Standards for exam room interactions**

- Explain every action to the client so they know what is being done
- Use at least one visual aid to better educate pet owners

When establishing standards, be as specific as possible to avoid any ambiguity about the delivery of service that is desired. Having a standard that states “Be nice to all clients” is too vague and subject to interpretation by individual employees.

I recommend veterinary teams develop client service standards by starting with 3-5 standards for various categories of client interactions as described above. It’s helpful to have different teams in the practice brainstorm on the standards and reach consensus. For example, the client service representatives can work on standards involving phone interactions and the technical team can work on standards for exam room interactions. Once the standards are agreed upon, they need to be written and distributed to the entire team.

### **Train To The Standards**

Client service standards will only ensure consistency in the delivery of service to pet owners and raise the quality of service you provide if the entire team adheres to the standards. It is not enough to create standards. You must train to your standards! All existing employees and new hires must go through a formal training process. Supervisors, middle managers, team leaders and doctors can assist with training and should be role models for the rest of the team. Remember to start with a small number of standards first. It is difficult to remember a long list of standards and change behavior patterns. Assess your progress every few weeks or monthly after you initiate standards. Once the staff is trained and shows consistency in adhering to a few standards, you can incorporate more standards if desired.