

Client Relations

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Client relations is an extremely important aspect of veterinary hospital management. As a topic by itself, client relations is classified as a subcategory of professional internal marketing. In today's practice it should be used with the same skill and progressive techniques as medical, diagnostic, or surgical procedures. This paper will outline the goal of client relations, show the importance of the clients' perception, incorporate ways to demonstrate quality care and enhance a positive image, and ultimately show how client relations has a crucial role in the success of today's veterinary practice.

To begin discussing client relations, the veterinarian must understand the goal of client relations. Simply put, the goal of client relations is to keep your client base by catering to your client's needs. However, before understanding what your client wants, needs, and expects, it is imperative to put yourself in the clients' shoes and think in the clients' perception.^{2,3} The practitioner must realize that clients look at the "little" unimportant things to judge the medical care of their pet. The majority of clients cannot judge the quality of medical care their pets receive.⁴ They can, however, judge the quality of service they receive from your practice. The reality is that your client's perception of your pet care (based on the service they receive) is what really counts.⁴ Thus, it is the responsibility of the veterinary practice to demonstrate quality care and enhance a positive image of the practice, especially when trying to capture new clients and retain the already existing client base. Once this is accomplished, you can begin to further understand what your clients' needs are, and enhance your attempts to meet these needs. There are several ways to effectively

demonstrate quality care and enhance a positive image of the veterinary practice. The four broad categories which have proven to be effective are hospital appearance, support staff, client comfort, and exam room client relations.

When a client enters the parking lot of a clinic or hospital, the unconscious, mental examination of the practice begins.^{1,3} Is the parking lot clean? Is the landscape well maintained and neat in appearance? Dead or dying plants inside or outside the building send a negative message to the client, as do multiple fecal piles. The exterior of the building should be attractive, in good repair, and there should be a well displayed sign of the animal hospital, with the entrance plainly marked. These small, seemingly unimportant exterior points collectively add up in the client's mind as a positive or negative impression, even before the client actually enters the building.

Upon entering the building it is hoped that clients will enter a quiet, clean, odor-free environment, and be greeted with a pleasant smile from a helpful and caring receptionist.^{1,3} The receptionist is of extreme importance with respect to client relations. The client's initial contact usually starts directly with the receptionist. It is the receptionist's responsibility to be courteous and friendly, greeting the client immediately with a warm smile while showing genuine concern for the client and pet. Thus, it is the receptionist who begins to create the internal image of the practice.^{1,4} Several marketing strategies show that new clients must be handled with some extra attention to ensure that they will return to become established clients.^{1,3,4,5,6,7} New clients will make some preliminary conclusions about the staff and practice within the first four minutes of contact.¹ The established client has returned to the practice presumably due to acceptable previous services.⁵ The first four minutes are not as critical with returning clients as with new clients.¹ However, returning clients cannot be ignored and should be given special attention by frequently using the client's name, the pet's name, and recalling specific information about

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the client.^{1,4} This technique will allow the client to feel important and show that you genuinely care about them.

To further show that you genuinely care about clients, you have to take into account client comfort. Client comfort is a client relation strategy which removes client anxiety and allows the client to be as comfortable as possible during the waiting time. Appropriate scheduling should help to avoid conflicts and avoid excess waiting time.^{5,6} Separate dog and cat waiting rooms help to decrease cat owner's anxiety. Offering coffee, hot chocolate, tea, and updated current magazines helps to relax clients and reduce tension while in the reception area. According to the American Animal Hospital Association, two-thirds of the visits to small animal practices are from women, thus, offering children's books is also appropriate.⁵ Educational material, video tapes, behavior articles, nutritional pamphlets, and pet food displays all aid in educating clients, stimulating ideas in the clients mind, and ultimately fulfilling the client's needs.^{1,2,6,7}

While in the reception area clients may interact or observe other support staff, technicians, assistants, groomers, or hospital managers. Therefore, it is important to realize that the support staff is regarded as an extension of the veterinarian and should carry out a professional approach to clients. As a practitioner you are in the action seat. When you show constant commitment to client service, your attitude will be contagious to the staff.⁴ As the hospital manager or practitioner, your leadership is what counts to get the momentum going toward improving client service. You can set the example of a positive image for the support staff by demonstrating a professional appearance and showing genuine concern for client service.

The personal appearance and hygiene of each staff member are reflections of the quality of the practice and produces a message that says "we care".¹ Thus, it is easy to realize that hospital appearance, the receptionist, the reception area, client comfort, and personal appearance help to demonstrate an outward sign of the internal quality. These little, seemingly unimportant factors all are evaluated by the client to form a total impression of the practice.⁷ The total impression should be a positive image of the hospital and should exhibit a strong marketing message of a "we care" attitude. The caring attitude should provide an image of quality service in a profes-

sional and friendly manner.

To further extend client relations, you can enhance the exam room interaction. Exam room interaction is a very strong aspect of client relations and according to a previous study, most clients only expect the following five things during an exam room consultation: (1) examination of the patient, (2) diagnosis, (3) prognosis, (4) treatment, and (5) fee estimate.¹ There are two additional factors, client bonding and pet bonding, which can be utilized in the exam room to enhance and strengthen client relations. Client bonding is taking the time to develop a bond between the client and the veterinarian.⁵ This is easily developed by taking an extra step to use the client's name, look directly into the client's eye when communicating, use common language and visual aids to help the client understand the disease process, take the time to explain potential problems, and be genuinely concerned about the client.¹ Listen carefully about their explanations and ask them questions about themselves. Pet bonding is taking a moment to establish a bond between the pet and the veterinarian. Showing affection to the pet, touching and complimenting the pet, accomplishes the initial bond almost immediately. Therefore, this aspect of client relations, the exam room interaction, is an extension of the previous strategies to help obtain and maintain an energetic and happy client; one who has a positive image of the practice and one who believes they are receiving quality service.

Unsatisfied clients may be the result of poor client relations. Surveys show that clients most often leave practices due to poor human relations, not because of inadequate medical care.¹ As a result, the displeased client will usually switch veterinarians rather than complain about poor client relationships.¹

To avoid poor client relations and unsatisfied clients, each person in the practice should make an enthusiastic effort to go above and beyond the call of duty to provide a caring attitude. In order to demonstrate a caring attitude, the previous strategies of hospital appearance, support staff professionalism, professional appearance, client comfort, and exam room client relations are a must. In addition, there are other small gestures and services the practice can offer. To determine which services are in need and therefore which services to offer, the practice can hand out client satisfaction surveys.^{3,4,5} This is an excellent way

to determine what the clients needs are. You may notice that working families find it difficult to meet office hours between 9:00 am and 5:00 pm. Opening the office from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm a few days per week or having evening hours two nights per week and opening a half day on Saturday might meet the needs of many of your clients.^{1,7} In addition, you may find that clients would like you to offer other services such as boarding, grooming, and advanced dental care so that they may get all their pet services accomplished at one location.⁷

There are many small gestures the practice can offer which will be guaranteed to demonstrate a caring attitude. Mailing a monthly or quarterly newsletter including updates about the hospital, special grooming and boarding coupons, and articles on preventive medicine topics will surely show that the practice cares about their clients.⁶ Thank you cards for referrals and sympathy cards mailed to those families who just lost their dearly loved pet will also show that extra step of compassion and that you really do care about your clients.^{1,3} Two other techniques which show a tremendous caring attitude towards the client are daily telephone updates and for inpatient pets, follow-up phone calls.⁷ Clients become very much involved and are very appreciative of your concern when you keep them updated on a daily basis. Additionally, follow-up phone calls regarding the progress and condition of the patient since dismissal from the hospital demonstrates that you are genuinely concerned about the progress and well-being of their pet.

A caring atmosphere with quality service should without a doubt be reflected in an increase in new clients and an overall increase in return visits from the already existing client base. Additionally, the clients who are energetic and happily satisfied will be more likely to refer their friends to your practice. In fact, according to a recent study, 60% of the acquisition of new clients comes from a word of mouth referral.² The client who is referring other potential clients must have a positive image of the practice and be very happy with the staff and the overall quality of services offered. Offering exceptional client service will be the factor which differentiates your practice from other practices in the community.⁴

As discussed earlier, the client will be judging the practice, staff, and veterinarian during the entire visit. The client consciously and subconsciously analyzes the whole picture of the

hospital appearance, support staff professionalism, client comfort, exam room interaction, and the overall plethora of small gestures and services offered. There should be an image of professional quality service from each person of the practice and that the practice as a whole demonstrates a "we care" attitude.

Effective client relations involves attention to detail and personal service. Everyone in the practice must be enthusiastic about their team role and the quality of care delivered to both patient and client. Poor human relations results in client loss. Without clients there are no patients, and without patients there is no business. We must remember that veterinary medicine is a people business and that the success of a practice will be dependent on the services offered and the quality of care given to both the patient and client.¹

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