

# Effective Client Communication

## THE VETERINARY TEAM APPROACH



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Veterinary teams strive to provide good medical care to their patients. How frustrating is it when the pet owner doesn't follow their instructions? Poor communication can equal poor medical care so it is important to stress proper communication with team members. Good client communication significantly improves compliance and strengthens the relationship between the pet owner and entire veterinary practice. But good communication is more than just telling clients what to do and sending them home. Communication is an exchange of information in writing, verbally, and often nonverbally between the entire veterinary team and the pet owner. Clients want communication to be respectful, clear, and consistent at every clinic visit.

The foundation of good communication and increased compliance is listening to clients' concerns. Allow them to express all the reasons why they have brought their pet to the clinic without interrupting. Avoid taking over the conversation as clients may then stop talking and important diagnostic clues will not be divulged. Use open-ended questions (questions with more than just a yes or no answer) to acquire a broad overview of the problem peppered with close-ended (yes or no) questions to provide specific details. While listening to the owner, observe the interaction between the owner and the pet to ascertain the intensity of the bond between them. In some situations, the client may seem unusually anxious about a minor problem. Address this disconnect in emotion by asking the simple question "What else is bothering you? You seem very concerned;" this may direct the discussion in a different direction. For example, a primary complaint of a subcutaneous mass in a senior pet may lead into a quality of life discussion.

Use reflective listening—seek to understand your clients' concern, then repeat the concern back to

them to be sure that you've understood it correctly. This lets clients know you have heard the concern and you can then address it. For example, if the client is concerned about their dog's recurring skin rash, explain that recurrent bacterial skin infection is often secondary to another underlying disease. Without investigating for this primary disease, the pyoderma will probably continue to recur, cause the dog to be uncomfortable, and increase the cost of the pet's veterinary care. Clients truly do want what is best for their pets' well-being, but cannot make good decisions without knowing how a health issue can impact a pet's life.

The role of the veterinarian is to recommend the most appropriate care for a patient without being influenced by the perception of financial status or what she or he thinks the owner will do. However, the client's ability and willingness to provide the recommended care does need to be assessed. Using words the client understands, provide diagnostic and treatment options, explain what is involved with each option, and the anticipated results of each option. Collaborate with the client in the decision making process to develop a plan that the client can and will implement once they leave the clinic. Clients who feel they have direct involvement in their pet's care are more likely to comply with recommendations for diagnostic procedures and treatment. Remember to keep it simple. Providing too many diagnostic and therapeutic options without explaining the benefits of each can lead to a confused, frustrated client who might leave the practice to seek a second opinion. At the end of an appointment, ask clients if they have any questions or concerns and try to determine how

## Effective Client Communication (continued)

much they truly understand about their pet's current problem. Quietly stand facing the clients and allow them a few uninterrupted moments to ask questions. This simple act of focusing your entire attention on the client and pet shows respect and caring.

People learn and remember information differently. The veterinary team needs to be flexible in the way they communicate. A client's understanding is often enhanced with the addition of nonverbal tools. Incorporating visual learning aids such as handouts, picture charts, brochures, and models during discussions with owners increases their retention of the information. For example, while conducting the physical examination, show owners the pet's dental

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tartar and gingivitis or have them feel the soft tissue mass. Discuss the benefits of a dental cleaning to the pet's overall health or the diagnostic value of a fine-needle biopsy of the mass in early detection of cancer. Have your staff show pet owners how to clean their pet's ear. Provide links to how-to videos on the clinic's website and attach this information to discharge instructions. E-mailing home care instructions means the client sees these recommendations again. Repetition of information enhances client understanding and subsequently compliance.

The Internet is here to stay and clients want to be directed to reliable online information sources. The clinic website is an important avenue of client communication. A well maintained site creates awareness about general pet health care and how the clinic provides these services to potential and existing clients. Change the information content of the website regularly and mix it up with client handouts and small 'bites' of information about a particular topic.

Trust is created between the veterinary team and the pet owner when communication remains consistent. The same message about the value and benefit of diagnostic procedures and treatment protocols must be delivered by all members of the veterinary team. Message consistency requires standards of care be established by the practice. Team members must know these standards and understand how they benefit a pet's well-being so they can communicate this information to clients with conviction. Ongoing training and reinforcement of practice standards should be part of every staff meeting.

The front desk team is the first and often the last contact the client has with the practice. Clients often ask the front desk team questions so it is important that these individuals reinforce the instructions given to the pet owner. Educate the receptionists to reach out to a veterinary technician or a veterinarian when clients' questions require a detailed explanation. How veterinary team members communicate with clients makes a strong and lasting impression.

Encourage clients to contact the clinic should they have further questions or discover they cannot adhere to the recommendations made during the appointment. Follow-up calls or e-mails two or three days after the appointment has multiple benefits. The team member can answer further questions and ensure that the client is following all the veterinarian's recommendations, resulting in the pet receiving the best at-home care possible. Applaud clients who are adhering to treatment protocols and provide encouragement and direction to clients who are not. Medical progress examinations can be scheduled during this telephone call if not made when the client left the clinic.

Not everyone is born to be a good communicator. However, most people can improve their skills with practice, additional training, and support. The result will be loyal long-term clients who trust their veterinary team and agree to diagnostic procedures, treatments and preventive care because they understand the benefits to their pet's longevity.

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