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The Business of Management

by Charlene Tyler Cooper*

What makes a veterinarian a success? Is it the style of dress? The way hair is combed? The size of the veterinarian's clinic or the location? All of these are important; however, the most important factor influencing the client's choice of a veterinary hospital is the client's perception of high quality medical services given their animal. You must be able to communicate on their level and let them know that you care. According to a survey *DVM Magazine* conducted, courtesy and cheerfulness of *staff* received the highest overall rating with *staff* display of love for animals coming in second. This suggests that perhaps the most important thing you will do for your practice is the selection of the staff which will be representing you.

Clients' feelings have a lot to do with their coming back for additional services, and although the staff has little control over the quality of health care you provide, they have a lot of control over the personal care of the client. Clients judge the kind of person you are by your staff. If your staff is rude they will assume that you are rude as well. This can also work the other way around—if you are rude to clients or make them feel that they are a “bother” to you and no one else goes out of their way to make them feel any differently, they will go away feeling that everyone in the office is rude and unfriendly and just doesn't care. Clients perceive a caring attitude by the words you use when talking with their animal or with them, the way you handle the animal as well as your expressions—if you smile, for example.

Because you are a professional, clients expect a neat, clean appearance; they also expect your professional staff to look professional. You will never have a chance to make another first

impression on a client. How does your clinic look as they drive in? Is the yard area well-kept? Are there shrubs and flowers present or has the yard been overgrown by weeds? Are the windows clean or is there an accumulation of miscellaneous markings on them? Is the waiting room tidy and well-kept or is there a puddle of urine spreading across the floor? Does your staff appear friendly and willing to help or do they act like it's a bother to have to look up and see who might be standing in front of them? Is your staff neat and clean or do they have animal hair and other unknown spots all over them? The client could care less about your \$8,000 x-ray machine which may be in the next room—they want to be associated with a clean, attractive, caring establishment.

Each time you see clients, pretend they have a sign on them which says, “Make me feel important”. They want to know that they are more than just a number to you. If you have the ability to do that, or if someone on your staff has that ability, you will have happy clients.

When hiring your staff, look at it as a long-term investment. Treat them well; let them know you care about them. Sincerity and integrity cannot be bought or measured. When hiring make sure the individual has the qualities and qualifications your clinic needs. For example, if you lack the ability to show care and concern, make sure someone on your staff has that ability. If you cannot tell a client what the fee will be for an animal's medical needs without reducing the fee because of pressure from the client, then hire someone who is able to handle that for you. If you have a happy, friendly staff, work to keep it that way. It will make going to work a lot easier every day.

Collecting for services which you have provided is a necessary part of providing food on your table and gas in your car. This is espe-

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cially important for the large animal practitioner who does not have a receptionist waiting in the next room to collect from the client. Some regular, good clients are, of course, going to be exceptions and pay bills on time. You will quickly recognize who they are and they will be your bread and butter. There are those, however, who are not routine clients for which you will be providing services. As an example, let's say you have just provided \$30.00 worth of veterinary services and you do not collect for those services. You take the charge back to the office, the bookkeeper puts it on the books, at the end of the month a copy of the account card is made by using a copy machine (which uses paper, fluids and someone's time), a billing envelope is used to put the photocopy in and then a stamp is affixed to the outside and it is mailed. If that account has not been paid within 30 days the whole procedure is repeated. You have not made *anything* on that call; as a matter of fact you have lost money. If that continues to happen with regularity your practice will be in serious financial trouble. Many practices are in financial trouble today simply because they are unwilling to present a bill at the time of service and ask, "Will that be cash or check". A small question to ask for such a large stake, don't you think? Professional practices of all types are having to ask for payment at the time services are provided. It enables them to not only pay the bills, but it decreases their overhead and allows them to keep fees in line, and thus, the savings can be passed onto the clients. The days of "charge it, Doc" are over.

The influence of the economy on our practice has dictated that we collect deposits on any treatments other than routine ones which come into our office. That deposit may be all we ever see! Too often we hear, "Doctor, do whatever has to be done to save Fido". Then when you have surgery costs, medications, etc., plus your time wrapped up in Fido's recovery, they either never show up for him or have \$20.00 to pay you. How can we avoid this happening? Nothing will be 100% effective, but hopefully the following will help you collect a greater percentage.

When Fido first comes in as an emergency, he is examined with the owner present and it is explained that you need to run some additional tests, x-rays or whatever is necessary to determine the extent of Fido's problem. At that

point, say that you require a deposit be left when an animal is hospitalized and "Jane" will take care of that for you at the front desk. Notice a few things that have just happened. First of all, you have not had to hinder the doctor-client relationship by discussing finances. Secondly, you have called your receptionist by name, thus, giving her credibility to the client. "Jane" knows how much you expect her to collect as a deposit because everyone in the office is aware of your "office philosophy".

After you have assessed Fido's health problems you have the owner come back to the office for a consultation. Before he arrives you complete a treatment quote form which has detailed the necessary treatment. After he arrives you explain the medical services necessary for Fido, and if he *elects* to have Fido's treatment provided, a 50% deposit will be required. If the owner agrees to the treatment you have recommended, have him sign the treatment quote form. This is the time to deal with the finances! The balance then is to be paid at the time the animal goes home. Never say, "Don't worry about it", because no one will! It's a good idea to be able to offer your clients the advantage of Master Card or Visa credit cards. If you allow the holding of a post-dated check, make sure it is dated with the current date and then attach a card to the check to make sure it is deposited on the correct date. That way, if unforeseen circumstances result in a client's death, the check given you will still be honored by the bank.

When you encourage clients to pay their accounts in full rather than offer them the "charge" alternative, you are doing them a favor. By paying for services at the time they are provided, it avoids the office having to send a statement to them, which keeps costs down, which in turn helps keep fees down. If they do not owe you money and Fido needs additional veterinarian services, they are more likely not to hesitate to return to your office for those needed services.

It has been proven over and over that it is harder for the patient to pay later than at the time services are provided. If Fido should die, to a great percentage of your clients, the bill dies too—after all, they may think, they shouldn't have to pay anything because Fido didn't make it!

When the costs of a hospitalized animal are discussed prior to the dismissal of an animal,

you are eliminating a problem before it has a chance to become one. It will avoid them saying that they had no idea it was going to be that much and that they don't have enough money with them to pay you. You will still have people tell you they don't have money to pay the entire bill for an animal, but they won't be telling you that in front of a room full of clients.

If you do have to send a few statements, make sure the envelope is marked *Address Correction Requested*. The Post Office will charge you 25¢ if there is an address change, but you will be sent the new address. Colored statement envelopes have shown to be most effective in encouraging people to pay their bills. Blue works best, with goldenrod second. Rotate colors of envelopes each time you order.

When clients are in your office make sure their history forms are up to date with correct names, addresses, employment, phone numbers, social security numbers, etc. Never put your files in children's names. Adults are the only ones legally responsible for debts incurred.

You want to encourage responsible, friendly, concerned people for clients. Clients who may be problems are among those who give you a difficult time when filling out your client information form or refuse to do it altogether,

who give you a post office box number or who are self-employed. Other possible problems include those that cannot furnish you with any identification when paying by check, those with small check numbers and those with no phone numbers. When someone gives you a check with a small number and it is for a large amount, slip into another room and give the bank a quick call to make sure it will clear before you release the animal. Of course, people who are professionals at passing insufficient-funds checks will come into your office after the bank is closed. Then all you can do is get identification and make sure the client information is current.

If a client dies and still has an open account with your office, immediately retitle it "The Estate of_____". If you cannot contact the family, you can usually find out from the funeral home who set up the funeral arrangements or the name of the executor of the estate. If not, bill the Probate Court (call the Clerk of Court for the address) and bill it immediately and you will usually get paid when the estate is settled.

Nothing will work 100% of the time with 100% of the people you will be dealing with, but hopefully some of these suggestions will be of help to you. Good luck!!



Photograph by Lynn Erdman.