

Attracting and Maintaining Clients—Efficiently

5 ways to draw in and keep clients

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This article is the third in a series of four to help build efficiency in your practice. Watch for the final article next month, dealing with efficient processes for maintaining inventory and financial records.

“This would be a great place to work, if it weren’t for the clients!” I heard a veterinary staff person utter just those words. She was kidding, of course, but when I responded, “Oh?” she went on to say, “I love the animals, but the clients can sometimes be trying—and they take my time away from caring for their pets.”

Clients—getting them and keeping them—are time-consuming.

A plethora of words have been written on marketing your hospital to gain market share, but it is usually believed that it is more efficient to focus on maintaining the clients that you have. For over 20 years, a statement made by Ron Zemke¹ that “it costs five times more to attract a new customer than it does to keep one” has been quoted and requoted. There isn’t any hard research to justify this statement, but you probably know that it is your loyal clients who spend more and who refer additional clients.

Here are five strategies to build and maintain loyal clients—efficiently.



It’s not unlike what draws people to the Ritz-Carlton or Nordstrom or Virgin Airlines—all businesses known for their customer service.

1. Think customer relations.

This means making friends with your clients and their pets. Pat Crane of Easton, Md., when asked what drew her to her veterinary clinic, said, “I chose my vet because she loves my cat.” Her view, no doubt, represents that of many of your clients.

It’s not unlike what draws people to the Ritz-Carlton or Nordstrom or Virgin Airlines—all businesses known for their customer service. In fact, Debbie Boone, veterinary practice management consultant,² uses the book *Delivering Knock Their Socks Off Service*³ as a training tool with veterinary clinics. An update of Zemke’s work, it helps staff members think about how to delight their clients and exceed expectations. It suggests that you evaluate five principles of service:

- 1. Reliability.** Are you able to provide what you have promised dependably and accurately?
- 2. Assurance.** Do you have the medical knowledge and skills, as well as the personal skills, to convey competence and build trust?
- 3. Tangibles.** Is the physical appearance of your facilities, equipment, reports, website, and staff members meeting—or exceeding—expectations?
- 4. Empathy.** How do you demonstrate to your clients that you care about them and their animals?
- 5. Responsiveness.** Are you willing and able to respond to the needs of your clients promptly?

When you discuss the notion of customer service with your colleagues, be sure to discuss how you handle mistakes. As you know, when people receive good service, they tell a friend or two. When they receive bad



Physicians interrupt 69% of patient interviews within 18 seconds of the patient’s speaking.

—J. LEE, MD

service, they tell everyone they know. But the story need not end there. You have the opportunity to do something memorable to repair the damage, and that is the story that will spread.

What can you do? Did someone fail to read and fill the proper prescription? Once discovered, drive to the client’s home with the right one—and an apology. Rebekah Brown, a veterinary educator in Melbourne, Australia, generously shares the story of the time a client brought her a white kitten bleeding from around a tooth, which she attributed to the fact that it was losing its deciduous teeth. Only an hour later, when it hit her that the bleeding was due to eating Ratsac (a Vitamin K antagonist), she called the owners, who brought the kitten back for treatment. The veterinarian’s confession and apology were genuine, and the kitten’s recovery was memorable.⁴

2. Move to a lifelong care model.

When you purchase an appliance, you talk to your neighbors, comparison shop on the Internet, and maybe consult Angie’s List. You’re usually looking for the best buy. Since it’s a one-time purchase, you don’t need

to establish a relationship with the sales person. If you buy an extra warranty, you’ll have all the protection you need.

You’ve probably found that some of your clients are going to the Internet to find their pet prescriptions, or they search out local low-cost retailers and frequent public clinics for their pets’ vaccinations. Can you blame them for wanting to save money? They’ve been trained to comparison shop and look for bargains.

The problem is, when it comes to health, there is so much to know in order to maintain good health, that only a veterinarian who sees the pet and its owner over time can accurately know what is needed. Many health issues are sub-clinical and will only be revealed through veterinary exams or through discussions with the owner about the pet’s behavior at home. When a diagnosis is made that calls for the purchase of a specific product, the safest action for the pet owner is to acquire what is needed through a trusted source—usually the veterinary hospital.

A lifelong care model is one based on relationships instead of transactions.

As an efficiency strategy, it may seem counterintuitive to commit to spending more time building relationships as opposed to closing sales. But, taking the long-term view, it is true that interactive and sustained bonds between your staff and your clients will build loyalty, resulting in less cost to acquire each client visit.

3. Talk less and listen more.

Being a good listener is consistent with the lifelong care model, but it does take precious time. Ironically, time spent listening usually results in time saved by not having to repeat the information or not making a misjudgment that can have negative consequences.

The clinic staff can learn a lot from pet owners. Since pet owners are with

their pets every day, they observe what their pets are eating, their elimination patterns, and unusual sounds or behaviors that could signal a problem. This information is important in helping the doctor make a diagnosis or intervention.

Studies show that when the doctor does 80–90% of the talking, the client has little chance to share what he or she knows. Researching listening and health care, J. Lee, MD, found that physicians interrupt 69% of patient interviews within 18 seconds of the patient's speaking. As a result, in 77% of the interviews, the patient's true reason for visiting was never elicited.⁵

Until clients know that they have been understood, they are simply not able to take in all of the important

information that the doctor has to offer. This means that devoting more time to listening to the client will actually save time in the long run.

Research has shown that the relationship model is more likely to build client satisfaction and retention.⁶ This translates into long-term savings when marketing to and attracting new customers, increased revenue from repeat visits, and expanded services selected by each client.

When you are committed to building long-term relationships with your clients, you may find that the communication skills you need to converse with your clients change slightly.

A communication model that has proven effective in this type of



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veterinary practice is the FRANK Communication Series, developed by Zoetis and professional veterinarians.⁷ It is offered in conjunction with Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Science. It helps veterinary staff to build collaborative relationships with their clients, to be *frank* about the pet's health, even when it's not easy, and to take a shared approach to decision-making.

Several essential skills are highlighted to develop rapport with the client:

Appropriate nonverbal behavior.

Staff members learn that non-voluntary action can, in mixed-message situations, more accurately reflect a person's feelings than do words. With that awareness, staff

members are able to check their own nonverbal behavior as well as pay attention to the body language of their clients. For example, when your client appears with tears in her eyes but says she's fine, you might want to consider the nonverbal message and listen for a deeper meaning.

Open-ended questions

Questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no don't lead anywhere. To build relationships with your clients and learn from them, you want to develop the habit of using "door openers," or open-ended questions, such as "Tell me more about Mittens," or "How did Mittens get that cut over her eye?"

Empathy

Expressing empathy requires listening. For clients to be willing to share their observations and perspective fully, they must be able to trust the veterinary staff to hear them and accept what they say. Listening with empathy means hearing both the words and the feeling behind the words and, for a moment, feeling the clients' feelings—being in their shoes.

The FRANK course includes training in reflective listening, whereby veterinarian staff members learn to listen for feelings and then to reflect back the feelings as they perceive them. This enables the staff person to double check for accurate perception, and it also lets the client know that you are listening to both words and feelings. For example, when your client asks whether her sick dog can be saved, in addition to answering if and how, you acknowledge the concern of the pet owner. "Rover is important in your life, and I hear the concern in your voice. This is what I think..."

4. Provide a veterinary experience.

Have you ever wondered why you would spend \$4 on a cup of coffee at Starbucks when you could make the same cup at home for \$0.50? Or why you would spend \$100 to take the kids for rides at Disneyland when they can enjoy the local Ferris wheel and roller coaster for a fraction of the cost?

Starbucks and Disney have both introduced us to the "experience economy." This is a term coined by Joseph Pinehurst II and James H. Gilmore, who authored *The Experience Economy*⁸. In their book, they describe how businesses orchestrate memorable experiences. You can do that, too. In fact, to build long-term relationships you want to create experiences that result in your clients loving bringing their pets to the clinic because they and their pets are appreciated and understood and their needs are met. You can provide expert medical information and treatment, consultation about a wide range of animal behavior and health issues, and convenient access to products and auxiliary services—all with tender loving care in a warm, accepting environment.

5. Reach out with the latest in technology.

In trying to engage clients efficiently, the use of the latest technology is a wonderful asset. It enables you to communicate through whichever channel your client prefers—email, snail mail, postcard, phone, text message, or website. And it allows you to organize patient records digitally.

It's true that when your printer jams or something goes wrong with your computer and you have to call an expert, you'll wonder if you saved any time



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through your use of technology. But clinics that have made the change to electronic medical records or that use technology in other ways to reach and maintain contact with clients believe that they have saved time and money in the long run.

Think about the myriad ways you can be in touch with your clients through technology—informing them, serving them, reminding them—letting them know that you care and are there for them.

Practice management software

At the East Lake Hospital for Animals, Ltd., in Danville, Ill., Brad Cooper, DVM, has added software from ImproMed and DemandForce. The former enables his staff to more efficiently communicate internally via “well-documented”

information about clients and patients, and the latter automatically sends reminders about appointments, using the client’s chosen channel—email, text, or phone. “This has resulted in a decrease in no-shows,” says Cooper.⁹

Email

According to Mark Opperman, CVPM, “You can increase your reminder effectiveness by 17% using email.”¹⁰ It will also save you money and can be used to remind clients about prescription refills or grooming appointments as well as health care appointments. Some, however, find that clients still prefer the traditional post cards. You need to ask your clients.

Smartphone

It is said that people check their mobile phone 100–150 times a day!

You want them to find you there. And with the smartphone you can reach them when you’re on the go—in an exam room, with a boarding pup, or at a client’s home.

Website

To give your business legitimacy and to provide easy access to information about your services, you have to have a website. Consider all that it can do, easily and efficiently:

- make appointments
- refill prescriptions
- access information about pets on your pet portal
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Mobile app

When your clients are on the go, they may not have easy access to your website through their computer. They can, however, reach you quickly on their mobile device if you create an app for them to download. Then, with the touch of a button, your clients can see your familiar logo and be in touch with the information and services also posted to your website. Clients are increasingly looking for this kind of efficient form of communication. Mary Shields of In-touch Mobile says that "78% of Facebook usage comes from mobile app users."¹⁰

Pet portal

Some software that integrates with your website provides a pet portal through which your clients can access information about their pet—the date of their next appointment, when the rabies shot is due, their pets' medical history, or their billing history. They might also be able to use this software to make online appointments. What a time-saver! This provides more information to your clients and you spend less time accessing that information for them.

Social media

Make yourself available through Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram as well as other sites. The Facebook page should have daily postings that keep people coming back. Include photos and YouTube videos. Posting and monitoring take time. In fact, the Rau Animal Hospital in Glenside, Penn., has a

staff member who devotes 20 hours per week to keeping the social media sites fresh and up-to-date. But you will also find that soon the site gets a life of its own, and your clients are providing enriching content. Encourage interaction. Invite your clients to tell you about their pet and post photos, news, and information. That's part of relationship-building. Also, by including an educational article or video from time to time, you will be getting vital information out efficiently to all of your clients at the same time.

Push notifications

Some software enables you to set up a notification at an appropriate time for each of your clients as a reminder of the service needed, a coupon, or important news, such as a pet food recall. How's that for efficient? According to Mary Shields, the industry finds a 97% open rate on push notifications.¹¹

Video capability on tablets and smart phones

Making videos to display on your website or Facebook or in the waiting area can help clients understand the importance of what you do. An added bonus is to video your patient; it might be a dental snap before and after, a photo of Nessa when she is recovering from surgery, or one of Brother when he is having fun during a boarding stay. This can be accompanied by a note that says, "Brother is having a wonderful time with his new friends, but misses you!"

Remember, your clients are your friends, and you want to reach out and stay in touch.

It takes time, but the cost is less than that required to acquire a new

client. And the rewards? A loyal client whose pet is getting the lifelong care it deserves. ✨

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