

# The Experience that Makes the Difference







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## In the new economy, client experience is key.

by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD

“HOW WAS YOUR VET VISIT YESTERDAY?” Margaret asked.

“Terrible! I couldn’t get Fluffy out of there fast enough!” Sharon responded. “And how was your vet visit?”

Margaret replied, “Great! It was a good experience!”

Why are the experiences of these two visits so different? There can be many factors at work here, but let’s start by thinking about positive experiences you have had with service providers.

One that comes to my mind is how much my friend John looks forward to taking his car to be serviced. Why? Because he knows he’ll be met by a friendly greeter, who will park his car and give it a complimentary car wash. Then he will be surrounded by showcase cars and several TV sets, each tuned to a different channel, allowing him to choose sports, news, or travel shows while he waits. Or he can enjoy the lounge for reading. No matter that he rushed off without breakfast, because there is a magnificent brewing machine providing multiple beverage choices as well as complimentary, hot, freshly baked chocolate chip cookies and a popcorn machine.

My friend Pat had been frequenting Larry’s Diner for years to meet her friends for coffee; here, she found good coffee plus a setting that was clean and comfortable. But once Starbucks opened across the street, Pat found that Starbucks had discovered that successful coffee shops are about more than a commodity like coffee. With delicious food and beverage choices, Wi-Fi, comfortable couches, and the feeling of community, Starbucks created an experience that drew her in. She found that she wanted to join her friends there more often and could stay for longer periods.

Walt Disney, too, discovered how to create an experience for his visitors. He took a common activity, like the enjoyment of amusement park rides, often encountered in a dirty and noisy town fair, and turned it into a visit that



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results in a memorable experience—one that draws visitors to return. Disney knew that visitors want a safe and clean environment. He understood the anxiety of waiting in line and added a neon counter indicating the waiting time countdown. He knew people want to be happy, so he surrounded the visitors with friendly, cheerful characters and a daily parade. A visit to a Disney park is indeed a memorable experience.

After Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore published *The Experience Economy*, all sorts of businesses began to understand the difference between selling a commodity or a service and selling an experience. Commodities are fungible, goods tangible, and services intangible, but experiences are memorable.

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### What brings your clients back?

Whether it's a car dealership, a coffee shop, an amusement park, or a hospital, each business thrives on repeat customers. The challenge is to create an experience that motivates your clients to return.

Fred Lee was a hospital executive who became a Disney cast member in order to understand the Disney experience and how it might apply to hospital care. His insights, which are relevant to veterinary medicine, are recorded in his book, *If Disney Ran Your Hospital: 9½ Things You Would Do Differently*.

He speaks of competition, which is always a major concern for every business. He cautions you, however, not to consider the hospital nearby as your competition. Rather, your competition is anyone your client compares you to. It might be the service received at the local hair salon; it might be the courtesy enjoyed at the local retailer; or it might be the experience at the car dealership. Other vendors shape your clients' expectations.

So, start by understanding what your clients need and want, and then build experiences—memorable ones—that will cause them to return.

One of the realities we live with is that clients form impressions on their first visit based on what they see, hear, and smell. It's an old adage that you never get a second chance to make a good first impression.

Sheri Berger, DVM, DACVO, of PetsVetSpace in New York City, noted her eye-opening experience when she became aware of the “visceral” response she had upon visiting one exceptional hospital. At this hospital, her visit began with a greeting of “May I take your coat?” and continued on with open communication with staff members every step of the way.

Her story underscores the fact that what influences a client's return is not the competency of the medical practitioner or the equipment available, but rather a perception, a feeling, about the experience.



A Harris health care poll in 2004 found that 85 percent of respondents regard as extremely important the doctor who “listens,” “treats you with dignity and respect,” and “takes your concern seriously.” Only 58% regarded the doctor’s medical knowledge as most important.

Berger felt that the communication she experienced—communicating what will happen, what is happening, and what has happened—demonstrated respect for her. When staff passed her on to another staff member, they let her know, and the next staff member underscored what she’d learned from the previous staff member. What teamwork! The staff really listened to her and to each other.

The driver that results in client returns is not medical competency. It is being heard and the perception of acceptance. Courtesy and customer relations are more important than outcomes and efficiency. We recognize Nordstrom and the Ritz-Carlton for this. They understand that the enemy of courtesy is not rudeness; it is avoidance. Clients want to be heard.

### **Build loyalty**

Courtesy lets your clients know they are respected and appreciated. But satisfied clients become loyal clients when they have experienced something unexpected. In fact, you’ll find that for every loyal customer, there is a story.

Lee tells of the parking valet at Disney who washed visitors’ car windows—unexpectedly. Those surprised customers told all their friends, just as my friend John tells everyone about the free car wash at his dealership.

Lenore Ringler of San Diego, Calif., tells her friends about her safari trip to South Africa, which she took when her cat was sick and had to be left with her veterinarian. What was unusual was that her veterinarian called her twice, halfway around the world, while she was traveling. He called once to let her know that her cat was doing better and a second time to ask when she was due home, since the cat’s health had deteriorated. Grateful for the two phone calls, she became even more grateful when she learned that he had kept her cat alive until she returned to say good-bye.

Natasha Josefowitz of La Jolla, Calif., also describes what she considered an unexpected level of veterinary care. It seems that she and her husband adopted a puppy named

Tilly that had many fears, including being left alone. When they had to leave town for the weekend, they left Tilly at their veterinarian’s boarding facilities, explaining Tilly’s fear of abandonment. “No problem,” said the veterinarian, “She can stay with me all day in my office.” And so it is that Tilly became the official greeter. Josefowitz said, “We never worried again about having to leave town because we knew that Tilly had a job waiting for her at the vet’s.”

Danny Meyer, author of *Setting the Table*, has taken restaurant hospitality to a new level by hiring and training staff members who are prepared to make dining at his restaurants a personal and memorable experience. This is accomplished by focusing on how his services make his recipients feel. It means being “on the guest’s side,” and



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that requires listening and responding with a thoughtful, gracious, and appropriate response.

Meyer also says that it means “writing the last chapter” when there has been a mistake. He tells the story of paying the dry cleaner bill when soup was accidentally spilled on a guest. He also “wrote the last chapter” when it was the guest that made the mistake; he provided a free round of drinks for the entire family when a child spilled a glass of Sprite.

Since people love to share stories of adversity, you can use this force to your advantage. One pet owner told us about her veterinarian, who erroneously prescribed the wrong dosage for her cat, based on a careless entry in the computer. When it was discovered, the veterinarian quickly drove to the client’s home with the proper meds. Relieved to have the proper medication in time, this pet owner never stopped telling the story of such care.

### Show compassion

Lee suggests that health care facilities must go beyond medical competency, customer satisfaction, and unexpected courtesies. Only the experience of compassion will build loyalty. Compassion is the personal bond.

Disney employees are taught to follow the “LAST” formula in dealing with their customers:

- Listen
- Apologize
- Solve the problem
- Thank the client

Lee points out that it is impossible to follow the LAST formula without a show of compassion or empathy.

Your clients’ perceptions are their realities. Your business is a stage where actors are creating memorable experiences. If you have outlined your values to include advocacy for your patients and empathy for your clients, you will want to train the actors on your stage to create theater experiences that demonstrate compassion—experiences that are personal, bonding, and memorable.

That bonding begins with the first visit, when your staff members learn about the pet and pet owner and begin to establish a long-term relationship. Wendy Hauser, DVM, of Peak Veterinary Consulting in Parker, Colo., and an AAHA



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board member, recalls a first visit from a new client whose husband was out of town. The client was very pregnant and quite distraught because her dog was sick—probably something he ate, she thought. But Hauser had to explain to her that the dog had a bleeding tumor and that euthanasia was the best option.

It was a horrible first meeting, Hauser said. Knowing how distraught the new client was, Hauser offered to drive her home. Her compassion for this woman resulted in the client telling all her friends and returning some time later with her new dog for a long-term relationship. Hauser’s motto: Pay attention to the person at the other end of the leash.

Robin Downing, DVM, of The Downing Center for Animal Pain Management in Denver, Colo., offers a series of training programs applying Lee’s finding at the Disney parks to the veterinary world and encourages experiences

that build loyalty through what she calls “magical moments.” Many of those moments happen during events related to pain or death.

A 2011 Harris poll found that 91 percent of pet owners consider their pet to be a member of their family, which explains the importance of experiences related to sickness and death.

To remember clients and pets is to say, “We care.” Some clinics send greeting cards to clients when their pets are ill and even when they know that the client is ill or hospitalized. Maureen Casey, client care coordinator at Metzger Animal Hospital in State College, Pa., often sends text messages and photos of patients to family members.

Nan Boss, DVM, owner of Best Friends Veterinary Center in Grafton, Wis., has created a “comfort room.” It is an exam room configured with a carpet, couch, music, and soft lighting. It is used for euthanasia, so the family can gather and be comfortable. It’s also used for acupuncture appointments or for a dog that may be unsteady after surgery because he can walk better on the carpet.

Metzger Animal Hospital also has a comfort room. Casey explains that her hospital has been fortunate to be able to situate this room in a secluded part of the hospital near an outside door, where clients who may be upset can leave unseen. Like the room at Best Friends Veterinary Center, it’s a comfortable place with a leather couch, music, and soft lighting. The addition of a coffee maker, refrigerator, microwave, snacks, reading material, and TV make it ideal for clients who travel from some distance or those who have a long wait during surgery or CT scans.

Metzger Animal Hospital has also started a program for chemotherapy patients. It’s a way to “celebrate” their fights against cancer. At the end of every treatment, the animals get a new bandana (appropriate for the season). After completing the entire protocol, a group of employees delivers a gift bag with toys, treats, and a card signed by the technicians and doctors to wish the patients well before they leave.

Some practices offer memorial services, such as those Hauser offered on a semi-annual basis. At that time, pet owners are invited to bring a photo of their deceased pet and tell a story. It’s an experience that combines

memories of the challenges as well as the joys they remember with their pet.

Another take on that is the memorial garden, in which clients can place a brick or rock showing their pet’s name—a symbol that the memory lives on.

### Stage experiences

Building a culture of compassion means creating a theater performance that provides memorable experiences for your clients that are personal and emotional. Pine and Gilmore outline steps to make that happen:

#### 1. Create an engaging theme that will alter a sense of reality.

Recall how Disney developed theme areas, such as Fantasyland and Frontierland, with the overarching theme of happiness. Chicago developer Arthur Rubloff coined the term “Magnificent Mile” to provide a theme for walkers along the North Michigan Avenue retail district.

As you shift from providing services to staging experiences, consider what you want your practice to stand for. As you define your mission, vision, and values, know that building loyalty means putting the theme of empathy or compassion up front.

Downing suggests that you incorporate the acronym SHARE into your vision:

**Sense people’s needs before they ask.** That’s being proactive, anticipating what your clients need.

**Help each other out.** That requires teamwork. Everyone must be on the same page, equally committed to bonding with clients.

**Acknowledge people’s feelings.** That’s what empathy is all about.

**Respect the dignity and privacy of everyone.** This is where common courtesy comes in.

**Explain what’s happening.** This is the communication that clients seek.

Whatever words you choose to express your vision and values, be sure they are emblazoned in team members’ consciousness through your employee handbook, in a



plaque on the wall, and by continuous discussion at staff meetings. These values create the culture you want.

## 2. Create scripts for your actors.

This requires your entire team to impact your medical competency outcomes, but the individuals on your team are the ones who affect clients' perceptions.

Your individual team members are all actors on a stage. Actors don't forget their lines, and actors don't step out of their role to vent frustrations or grumble during their "performance." As you build a culture of compassion, you will want team members who will translate your vision and values into emotional messages. This means hiring team members who bring a sense of compassion, and then providing skills and protocol to enable team members to demonstrate compassion without thinking about it.

Studies have found that in more than 90 percent of incidents in which customers claim that employees are rude, it is because the employees are embarrassed that they don't know how to respond to a reasonable customer request.

Wendy Myers, of Communication Solutions for Veterinarians, Inc., Castle Pines, Colo., provides training for frontline employees, including scripts that you might adapt and teach to the entire team. Both Myers and Casey note that the choice of words can change client perception. Casey speaks of "focused" clients rather than "difficult" clients. Clients with "aggressive" animals prefer to hear their pet described as "active" or "energetic."

Helping your entire team to speak with "one voice" will arm individuals on your team with the skills needed to enable clients to consistently experience the kind of hospital you claim to be.

Boss creates a checklist for new frontline employees to use when greeting clients. In addition to serving as a reminder to provide a warm welcome and get certain information, she adds an item called "What will you teach them?" It changes from time to time, but might include information about a new wellness plan or a new app.

Just as a theater performance requires training and practice, so you will want to incorporate communication training into your practice. Beyond scripts, you want to

empower your employees to use "active listening" skills to connect emotionally with clients and to respond so that the clients know that they have been heard.

Lee suggests the use of "imagining" as a strategy to teach employees what showing empathy is like. He says, imagine that your favorite aunt has entered the clinic. How would you welcome her?

## 3. Create a stage. As in theater, you must design your set. Add props that underscore your theme.

This means having a lobby that is clean and appealing, with a receptionist not distracted by the phones. Boss has placed the receptionist with the phones in a room apart from the lobby.

It means having spare leashes available, in the event that a dog needs to be restrained, and an umbrella to accompany your client to the car, if it rains.

The Best Friends Veterinary Center has "staged" its theater production with a welcoming lobby containing lemonade, a hot beverage machine, homemade snacks, and a popcorn machine. Boss said that the wonderful aroma is not only welcoming to hungry clients, but it also masks any urine or medicinal odor. Going to the vet is like going to a great car dealer!



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#### 4. Create a structure to enable memorable experiences.

Boss has revised her appointment schedule to allow for 30 minutes per client (or even 40 minutes for some, such as senior pets or sick pets), because she finds that the typical 15- to 20-minute appointment does not allow enough time to discuss nutrition, preventive wellness care, or optional interventions, nor does it allow time for good eye contact and the small talk necessary for bonding.

The Metzger Animal Hospital has enabled its clients to better experience its care by increasing the ratio of technicians to doctors and empowering the technicians to take on more responsibility. It has also become a full 24-hour practice, with doctors and technicians on location around the clock. Also, it is widely known that the hospital does not charge an additional exam fee for emergency visits outside the regular hours. Its tag line is “Same great care. Same great price.” If a pet has an emergency, the hospital wants its clients to know that there is no reason to wait to bring the pet in.

Computers in the exam room are also additions that demonstrate how eager the hospital is to provide information to its clients. The doctor can show videos or review notes while the client is there. Just as Newleaf Vet provides free tutorials for its software clients, so many veterinary hospitals provide videos online for their clients’ ongoing education.

#### Ask for client feedback

Health care is accustomed to measuring clinical outcomes. Values and perceptions, on the other hand, cannot be measured. You can, however, ask your clients, “What is a memorable moment of doing business with us?” You can provide surveys with invoices or in online mailings.

Boss reported that their revised wellness plan is based on feedback from clients. Such a response shows she is listening. Let your clients know you welcome their feedback.

Hauser shared this card she received:

“I am sorry to say, Shelby passed away on Thursday. We got her ashes back and her paw print and her last blood sample. She will be missed. I just wanted you to know what’s going on and how I appreciate everything you have done for Shelby and her health. Thank you a lot. You were always an angel to her. I don’t know if you have a Facebook page, but here is a video of her memories.” ✱



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#### Client Services Gone Wild!

This month, in addition to this article, we are featuring two more Client Centric articles on client services. Be sure to check them out, starting on page 35.