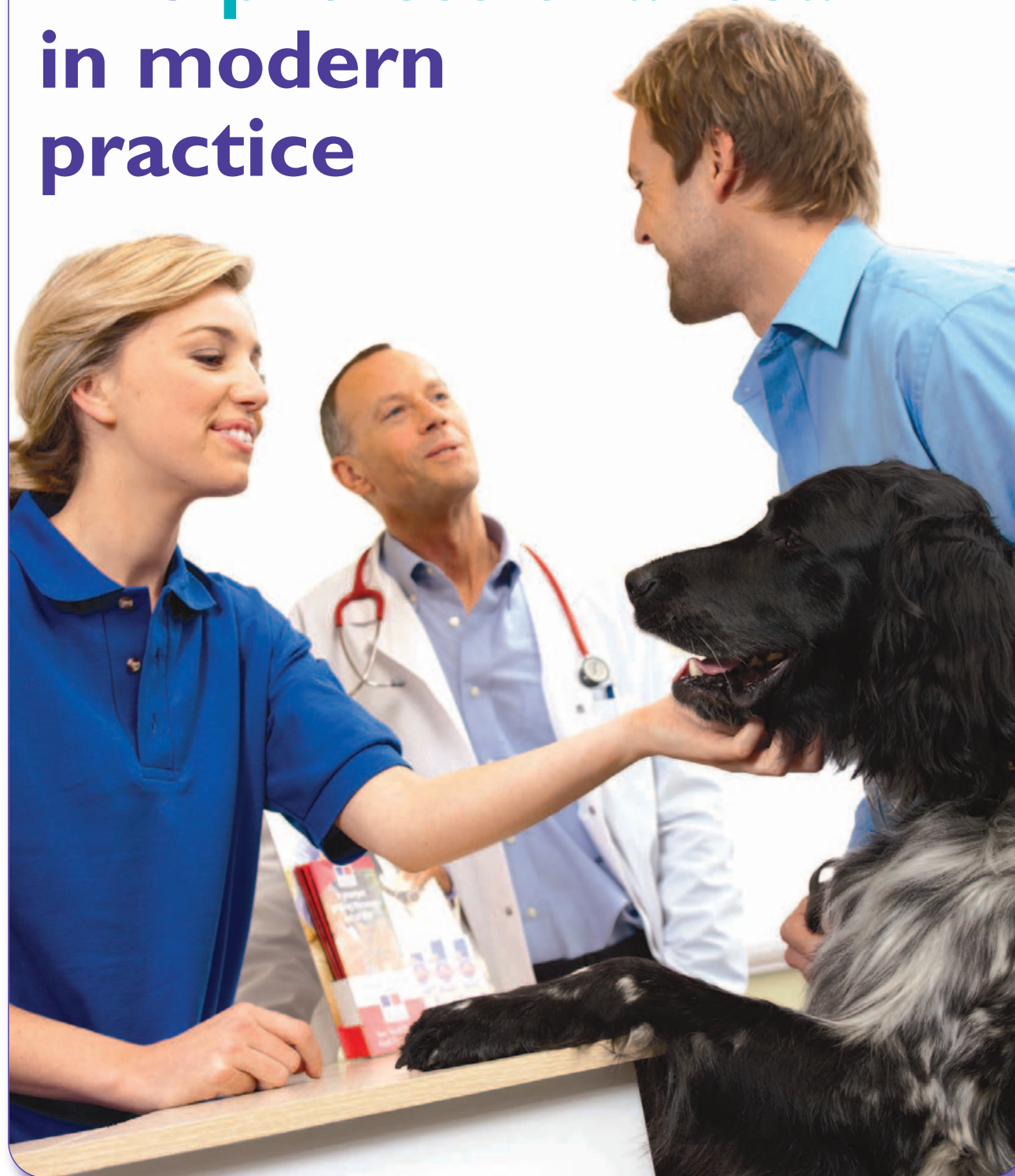


THE PROFESSIONAL TEAM IN MODERN PRACTICE



**Working together in
a changing market**

The professional team in modern practice



Hill's symposium on
Practice Management
CCIB – Barcelona
October 16, 2008

Speakers and topics



Janet Brandin The role of the Care Nurse in practice

Janet is a qualified and highly experienced veterinary nurse with commercial experience. She is currently working as a Veterinary Nutritional Consultant for Hill's Pet Nutrition, Nordic, with responsibility for setting up and running the very successful Care Nurse Project in selected clinics and hospitals. She contributes actively to many of the Hill's education programmes for vets and nurses in the Nordic region and is increasing demand as a speaker across Europe.



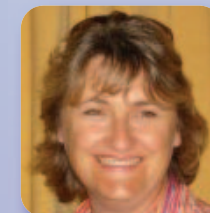
Jeremy Johnson Puppy parties and 'bonding' clients

A veterinary surgeon who graduated in 1986 from Liverpool, Jeremy started his career in practice in the UK and New Zealand and then joined the pharmaceutical industry in 1991. With postgraduate qualifications in marketing, accountancy, project management and NLP, Jeremy has spent most of his career helping veterinary practices to sell more to their clients in a way that is both ethical and responsible. He and his wife, Caroline, run Prescription Marketing Ltd, offering a wide range of business consultancy services to veterinary practices and associated companies. They believe that progress in a business comes from developing the people within it.



Karina Dillon Wonderful ways of working with cats

Karina is a veterinary nurse working in a small animal practice north of Copenhagen, Denmark. As a cat lover, she has always had an interest in feline behaviour and, in 2005, completed a course for Danish veterinary nurses in canine and feline behaviour. Besides the regular work of a veterinary nurse at the clinic, she also conducts behaviour consultations, runs kitten classes, and give talks on feline behaviour at client evenings at vet clinics and has also given talks to veterinary nurses in Denmark, Sweden and Norway on behalf of Hill's Pet Nutrition.



Alison Lambert The role of the nurse in professional retailing

Alison is a Liverpool Veterinary School graduate and worked in small animal practice for several years before pursuing a business career with leading veterinary nutrition companies, including Hill's. Now managing director of Onswitch Insight, part of Onstream Communications, she is provoking new thoughts and ideas for the profession in their relationships with consumers. Central to her work is the evidence that consumers with pets are behaving less like 'clients' and more like 'shoppers' driven by convenience factors.



Pere Mercader Communication breakdown: a day-to-day problem in our practices

Pere has held marketing management and marketing research responsibilities in a global pet care corporation for 10 years. He is a university professor and currently coordinates the Marketing and Strategy modules of the Veterinary MBA course organised by AVEPA and the University of Barcelona (UAB). He provides professional advice to a number of veterinary hospitals in Spain and Portugal, and is founder and managing partner at Veterinary Management Studies (www.estudiosveterinarios.com), a market research firm specialising in the small animal veterinary practice channel.



Caroline Jevring-Bäck The importance of providing excellent client service

Caroline qualified as a veterinarian from the Royal Veterinary College, London, in 1983, and has since worked in practice, research and industry in the UK, Kenya and the Nordic region. Through her own veterinary business management consultancy firm, Nordic Connection Consulting, and now, in her current role as Nordic Veterinary Affairs Manager with Hill's Pet Nutrition, she has lectured and held popular workshops on veterinary business management throughout Europe, USA, and Australia both on individual practice level and at many major veterinary congresses. She has also been the Managing Director for two of Sweden's largest companion animal hospitals in Stockholm, employing around

120 personnel and with an annual turnover of over €7 million. Caroline has published widely on veterinary management topics including articles in the journals *Veterinary Economics* (USA), and *Veterinary Business Journal* (UK), of which she is on the Advisory Board; and has written several management-related books including: 'Managing a veterinary practice', 2nd edn (Elsevier 2006); 'Healthcare for the well pet' (Saunders, 1997) (with Tom Catanzaro); and the forthcoming 'Providing quality care through improved compliance in veterinary practice' (working title) (Elsevier) due out in late 2008.



Janet Brandin

‘The role requires a willingness to “work outside the box” – that is to find new ways to motivate clients to care for their pet appropriately, and to build their loyalty to the practice.’

The role of the Care Nurse in practice

The Care Nurse plays a central role in improving compliance in modern day practice. Compliance is the degree to which a client follows a vet’s recommendation for the treatment and care of their pet. The Care Nurse acts as the communication channel between vets and clients, reinforcing the vet’s recommendation to the client and supporting the client in following the recommendation. The role requires not only sound knowledge of the products and services offered by the practice but also excellence in communication skills and a willingness to ‘work outside the box’ – that is, to find new ways to motivate clients to care for their pet appropriately, and to build their loyalty to the practice. The success of the Care Nurse’s role is measured in a number of ways including levels of client satisfaction, number of patients seen, and amount of products sold.

UNDERSTANDING COMPLIANCE

Compliance is about the pets you see receiving the best possible care, not only to manage and help recovery from sickness, but also to maintain wellness. Unfortunately studies show that many pets do not receive the care they need and deserve. The American Animal Hospital Association (2003) and the Spanish Veterinary Association (AVEPA/IVVE)(2007), both supported by generous grants from Hill’s Pet Nutrition, published studies that showed that vets consistently overestimate compliance in their practices. In fact, millions of pets are suffering unnecessarily because their owners have not understood or are not able to follow the recommendation they have got from their vet. Poor compliance may also lead to higher treatment costs, unhappy pet owners dissatisfied with the prolonged recovery of their pet, and poor practice economy.

Compliance is a complex issue, usefully captured and simplified in the formula:

$$C = R \times A \times FT$$

C = Compliance
R = Recommendation by vet, Reinforcement by the healthcare team, and Routines and protocols to ensure optimal pet management
A = Acceptance by the client
FT = Follow-through by the healthcare team



Compliance starts with a clear veterinary recommendation but needs endorsement by the healthcare team and the routines or processes in place to make sure the patient and pet owner are cared for in a streamlined manner. Pet owners’ acceptance of the vet’s recommendation is dependent on many factors including their understanding of the problem and their ability to manage it. For example, a pet owner may not understand the need to give a medicine three times a day at 8-hour intervals to maintain therapeutic blood levels of the drug, and believe they are doing the right thing by giving the pill at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Follow-through of a patient, especially in the home environment, contributes to success of patient care both for short term and long term problems. For example, many pet owners find it difficult to change onto a new diet, such as a diet for managing kidney disease, which may be critical to their pet’s recovery and wellbeing. It is very helpful for them to have someone who can advise and help them through the transition period.

COMPLIANCE AND THE ROLE OF THE CARE NURSE

The Care Nurse is essential to improving compliance in practice. She provides the immediate communication channel between the vet and client to ensure understanding, as well as the long-term and home support link to gain compliance to long term care. So what does a Care Nurse actually do?

She has five key activities (see right), which we’ll look at in more detail.

Seeing own patients

A Care Nurse should have her own patients – that is patients which have already seen a vet and which need follow up and further support. For this, she requires access to her own room which is equipped with weighing scales, examples of the products she talks about, and relevant information brochures and handouts. There also needs to be a centralised way to book appointments with her which anyone in the practice can access, so that a vet who has performed surgery, for example, can book a Care Nurse revisit for stitch removal. The sort of cases she will be seeing include:

- Vaccinations
- Stitch/drain removal
- Bandage change
- Weight management
- Senior programme
- Operation intake
- EU-pass
- Claw clipping

Key activities of a Care Nurse

- ✓ Seeing own patients
- ✓ Telephone follow-through of patients
- ✓ Nutritional adviser
- ✓ Planning and executing external activities
- ✓ Managing and running in-clinic programmes

- Blood tests; eg, for diabetic or kidney failure patients
- ID marking
- Hip X-rays
- Diabetes patients
- Parasite treatments
- Allergy management
- Injections (ex. B12, Cartrophen)
- Health control

The Care Nurse's time should be charged for – either as part of the main veterinary fee (eg, stitch removal included in a surgery fee) or as a separate fee. In Sweden, this is at the base level of a veterinary fee.

Success is measured as number of patients seen per month or per year, and in income generated for the practice.

2 Telephone follow-through of patients

Telephone follow-through of patients who have been in the practice is a simple and highly effective way to improve compliance and increase pet owner satisfaction. There are several different categories of call the Care Nurse needs to make:

- Answering the 'silly little questions' many pet owners have when they come home with their pet, which they don't really want to bother the vet with, but would like an answer to.
- Reinforcing the vet's recommendations and encouraging the pet owner in their home environment.
- Giving nutritional advice and helping owners transition onto a new diet.
- Giving out laboratory results (in collaboration with the consulting vet).
- Maintaining contact with and advising chronic care patients such as GI, and skin/food allergy
- Answering general questions

Again, it is best to be able to book telephone times so that calls can be planned in advance and to ensure that they actually happen in a busy practice environment.

Success is measured in terms of the number of phone calls per month or year and in client satisfaction.

3 Nutritional adviser

A critical function of the Care Nurse is as nutritional

adviser not only to clients but also to the rest of the healthcare team. As nutritional expert, she can help the vet make the correct dietary recommendation for the pet, and then provide support for the pet owner in changing onto the new diet. This includes being able to explain why the new diet is necessary, what its most important benefits are, how to calculate the amount to feed, and how to get the pet to accept it. The Care Nurse also helps keep the healthcare team up to date about nutritional developments.

In this area, the Care Nurse's success can be measured in terms of sales of diets.

4 Planning and executing external activities

Attracting and retaining clients through organising and running external activities is an important and fun part of the Care Nurse's job. This includes talking to breeder and specialist groups of pet owners, running puppy and kitten classes, and presenting lectures for the general public about different aspects of pet care.

Success is measured in terms of client satisfaction and new clients registered.

5 Managing and running in-clinic programmes

As mentioned earlier, compliance includes not only caring for the sick pet but also helping keep the healthy pet healthy. To do this most efficiently requires organised programmes such as weight management, arthritis or dental care programmes. These require the full support of all practice members, as clients in the programmes must have a recommendation from a vet, and other staff members must be able to talk knowledgeably about the programmes with clients.

Success in this area is measured by the number of patients in each programme.

WHO CAN BE A CARE NURSE?

Ideally, a Care Nurse is a more senior nurse with a sound practical knowledge of the services and products available in the clinic and excellent communication skills. She needs to be self-motivated, always interested in learning more, and able to work on her own as well as part of the healthcare team. She needs to be organised and be able to plan her own time and keep her own records of all patient contact up to date. Above all, the Care Nurse needs to love the challenges her job brings and look always for ways to expand and develop her role to the greater benefit of the practice, and the pets and clients she serves.



Puppy parties and ‘bonding’ clients

Everyone loves to see a new puppy in a veterinary practice and often relationships between clients and veterinary practices start right there. And what better way to celebrate the relationship than to throw a party! Sometimes clients leave the puppy party with a nice warm, fuzzy feeling and the memory of friendly chatty people . . . but then don’t come back. And sometimes that bond that is established with the practice is so strong it lasts for the life of the pet and beyond. The difference is a lot of hard work and planning, but it’s work that pays off: not just in terms of professional satisfaction, but also economic success through increased sales, with clients who are happy to buy veterinary services and products in preference from your practice, and staff who feel comfortable discussing these with clients.

FROM BENCHMARKING TO ‘BONDING’

In recent years a number of benchmarking systems have become established in the UK as veterinary practices have analysed which products and services they manage to sell to certain groups of customers. Benchmarking is useful because it allows you to give any sales projections you may have a ‘reality check’ and see whether the investments you may be planning to achieve these results are risky. Also if you are a member of a small group of benchmarking practices you can get involved in the group discussions about what they do that allows them to demonstrate results that may be better than yours. Over the years of analysing customers in this way the term ‘bonded clients’ has come into common usage, describing clients who come back time and again for a variety of services at least some of which could be purchased elsewhere.

But if, for example, the garage staff where you normally service your car said to you, ‘We see you as one of our “bonded” clients...’, how would you feel about that? And how many of your clients would feel *completely* comfortable telling you where else they purchase, how much and how often? At the same time, given that the results of benchmarking surveys show you *can* build loyalty with your client base, how do we produce a relationship that lasts, works for both parties and results in more than seeing the animal for just an annual visit and check-up?

What’s the difference between a client and a customer?

Treat them all as clients . . . respect them as customers . . . they should *choose* you.



Jeremy Johnson

‘Practices that establish strong relationships with clients manage to do so at many different levels, with all members of staff valuing the relationship and acting as ambassadors.’

Before we move on, it's worth remembering that one of the key things with any relationship is not to take it for granted. You need to start building that relationship somewhere and a puppy party is a great place to start. But then you need to keep working on the relationship and be seen to be doing it.

KEEP IT PASSIONATE!

As we've said, puppy and kitten parties are a good place to start with a relationship. It would be hard to think of a better place to convince clients that you and your staff do really love animals other than at an event where you can genuinely share in the excitement of a new puppy. Veterinary nurses in particular are passionate about puppies. If you've planned your puppy party well you and your staff will enjoy it. There may be technical reasons why you are in favour of puppy parties, such as early socialisation of puppies, or education about disease prevention. These aspects are important, but at the end of the day it's the clients' perspective that is most valuable so check on who showed up and why, in order that you may target the right people next time.

Below is a checklist to help you get started. The first point is in bold for a reason: as with many things in practice, the event benefits from standard operating procedures ensuring that new clients are dealt with professionally. There is a fundamental difference between standard operating procedures that work and ones that don't. The ones that work are the ones that

the staff have ownership of and use as checklists that they consult regularly to help them do their job. The ones that don't work are the ones they weren't involved in writing and sit on the shelf gathering dust. So at an early stage in planning consult your staff and get them involved.

KEEP IT PROFESSIONAL . . .

Fundamentally all private businesses including veterinary practices have a choice: go out of business, or keep selling the products and services they provide. And selling for many professionals, not just vets, is a dirty word. But you are *different*, because whether you are a vet, veterinary nurse or veterinary practice manager *you are a professional*. You provide a service that is about giving good professional advice. You should feel comfortable about that and confident enough in your own self-worth to be able to charge a professional fee for providing this service, *and* to enable your staff turn their passion into that same confidence. So:

- You should expect to be able to charge for everything that you do; you may *choose* not to for good commercial reasons . . . but the clients should then leave the practice knowing that you have done them a favour *this time* and *you* need to know what this favour is *costing* you.
- In every contact the client has with the surgery, clients should feel sure that you put them and their pet's needs first, *before* you decide what to recommend and sell them.

That's the difference between you and all those 'un-professionals' out there and if every client leaves your surgery knowing that you have their interests at heart you will feel confident in selling to them. So the next question is, 'I know I'm mainly at this puppy party to promote my services . . . but should I also "sell" products at puppy parties?'

Do you know a sinner?

Which of these is a cardinal sin for a professional?

- 1 To sell a person something he or she does not need?
- 2 Through not conducting a thorough examination, or perhaps listening carefully, fail to identify and recommend a service or product that would help your client?

You can sell things at puppy parties if you want to, although you may not know what your clients need until they get there and you have a chance to listen to them. So the best thing is to keep things simple. Make sure a range of products that clients are likely to need are made available to them and ensure that your staff believe in them. If your staff don't believe in a particular product, or at least are open minded enough to believe that there are some clients who may benefit from it, then either deal with this before the event or drop that product from the event. Even professionally trained and experienced sales people are rarely any good at trying to sell products they don't believe in. So how can you expect it from your staff?

If clients can see and handle the merchandise, where permissible, and you make yourself available to answer questions or make recommendations, then selling will be easy. You will also be able to demonstrate the range and depth of your services in a relaxed environment where clients do not feel under pressure. And your clients should not feel under pressure . . . they should leave wanting to come back and with the confidence to recommend that their friends enter your portals.

I have not mentioned the relationship between price and bonding yet, but we will do that at the end.

MORE THAN ONE FACE

Practices that establish strong relationships with clients manage to do so at many different levels, with all members of staff valuing the relationship and acting as ambassadors. Guided tours of the practice are good and this may be possible at a puppy party; they give you a chance to make introductions to other members of staff, and demonstrate their knowledge and enthusiasm and the other services you offer for their puppy later in life. A question to have in mind is, 'How will you encourage them back to the practice to help them at their pet's different life stages and give them other opportunities to ask you questions and buy things from you?'

'DIDN'T WE HAVE A LOVELY TIME . . .'

So you ran a puppy party – now you need to follow up. If it was a good event it may help you to write to people reminding them what a great time they had and asking them to recommend you to others. Or perhaps it's an opportunity to let them know about the next thing their puppy needs. And to do any of that you will need to collect data on your clients and their pets, including feedback and testimonials.

From puppy parties onwards . . . all data on a need to know basis

For the relationship that you have now started to be successful, you need to manage it. Some time in your life you may be able to think of an occasion in a relationship when you have offended somebody by forgetting something that you really should have known. Or perhaps somebody with whom you thought you had a good relationship got your name wrong . . . or maybe a friend of yours told somebody else something about you that was confidential. Anybody here had an anniversary recently . . . how does it make you feel if it's forgotten? These are examples of relationships where information is not well managed. The outcome is hurt, upset, and perhaps even the end of the relationship.

The closer a relationship becomes, the more you need to know about the person or people involved – and the more careful you have to be with what you learn. Collecting data is essential to managing relationships with large numbers of people, which brings me to a brief word on data protection law.

Relax! Collecting data is something that you have to do anyway, is something that you *are* doing, have spent your life doing . . . and are good at; all you need is a checklist that allows you to 'extend simple good manners to your database' and a process to ensure that you don't forget something critical or get wrong information.

Basic principles of data use and protection are:

- Which bits of information must I know?
- Don't collect too much; it will only make your database harder to manage and give your server a headache. Be

The puppy party checklist

- 1 **Have the staff been consulted, do they understand their role and also how they benefit from putting in their time and effort?**
- 2 Did you check your notes, including client feedback to see what happened last time . . . who showed up, what for, and which products were purchased?
- 3 How will you promote the puppy party?
 - a Receptionist or nurse to tell them directly?
 - b In practice posters?
 - c Newsletter?
 - d E-mail?
 - e Website?
 - f Telephone call?
 - g Get clients to invite a friend?
- 4 Are the clients likely to understand from the information you give or send out to them what's in it for them and their pet?
- 5 Do the clients know where to go, when, what to bring and who to ask for further information?
- 6 What information will you gather and how?
- 7 How will you follow up after the party?
- 8 How will you assess the party after the event to ensure that each time you run one it is better than last time, as follows:
 - a What will you run the same way?
 - b What things will you repeat but do better next time, and how?
 - c What other ongoing activities in the practice might stop you putting effort into a and b?



A little young 'to party' at the moment. But, in time, if run well, a puppy or kitten party will help build a lasting relationship between their future owners and their respective veterinary practices



careful too: your client has a right to request to see what *personal* data you hold on them.

■ How will you collect information on client feedback from, eg, puppy parties? Does it need to be personal or will anonymous data from a survey form suffice for a given event or activity?

■ Has the client been advised about why you need the data?

■ Does the client know how you will process and use any personal data and has the client explicitly given permission for this to happen?

■ How will you protect the client's personal data and how will you demonstrate that you are doing this if asked?

■ At what frequency is it OK to ask the client to update their details?

■ Do you know what information the client is happy to receive from you and in what form?

■ By what system do your clients prefer to receive communications and send them back, eg, e-mail, letter, or personal telephone call?

■ How will your system make it easy for you to allow the client to opt out or change their preferences?

■ Who is responsible for data management in your practice and do they understand their responsibilities?

'System' may not mean 'computer' but unless you have very small numbers of extremely wealthy clients, a good computerised practice management system is probably inevitable.

So you had a great puppy party, and in your follow-up afterwards your clients were delighted

But if not . . .

Don't forget the hardest word: SORRY

If something goes wrong tell us . . . if something goes right tell everyone else.

If you do get things wrong, don't forget to say, 'We're sorry, how can we put things right?' A genuine apology and a desire to do better takes you a long way in most relationships. Much of the time it will resolve any tensions so that you can go back to building the relationship.

DON'T JUST TRANSMIT . . . COMMUNICATE

For much of these notes I have been in 'tell mode' . . . sorry for that, but it's the nature of this event. In a client relationship, if you are in 'tell mode' all the time it's actually harder to produce that 'bonded client' who keeps on coming back and buys more than one service, because the client wants to be heard too. You need to work on creating a dialogue. When you do have to be in 'tell mode', eg, because you have been consulted about a specific problem, rather than just giving a generic answer it's more effective if you can involve your client by asking them confirming questions to show them you are listening to their issues.

Where you want client feedback, make it easy to give in a way that is manageable for you (eg, if you want to give me feedback you can find my e-mail address on our website at www.pmark.co.uk. Thanks in advance!)

BONDING CLIENTS OR 'BUNDLING' PRODUCTS?

Now we get to the bit about pricing. I have deliberately left it to the end because if you have *not* first established the relationship, pricing at the right level is more difficult.

How would you feel?

A. Your local garage services your car. As you are paying, they tell you that you have been charged a 30% surcharge because you didn't buy your car from them – news to you. You do know that had they sold you the car in the first place it would have cost you an extra €3,000.

B. Your local garage advises you *before* you purchase your car that if you buy it from them you get preferential terms on servicing; it's your choice and the wording of the offer clearly indicates that they respect your right to choose and will continue to value you as a customer whether you take the product or the service.

So how do you feel about the above scenarios? Choice A is better than, say, your chosen car manufacturer telling you where you *have* to buy your car and where you have to have it serviced. In fact, in terms of service offer, A is not significantly different to B, but the relationship that is created feels completely different according to when and how they tell you about the details of their service offer. It may even be that if you think they offer fabulous service and understand *why* one option may be more expensive, even if you can't afford it yourself you may still recommend A to people who can.

Purchasing cars is largely an *emotional* decision and customers may well have loyalty to a particular brand or dealership. Puppy parties aren't really any different except that you are starting with a huge cuddly, fluffy emotional advantage that you really do not want to lose, and which can be developed into an even stronger emotional tie than any car dealer could hope to have. The 'bond' will come from the *emotional* connection, not from the commercial tie. Clients just need to know what their options are in the early stages of a relationship, eg, at a puppy party, and that they have a right to choose. All the options do not necessarily have to be cheap. In fact, more expensive may be better if you are able to think of certain products that only you can sell, or products that many people can sell but only *you* really know how to use, and you are able to demonstrate this . . . perhaps at a puppy party.

With veterinary practice, if clients understand what you are doing for them the job is easier. But hard and fast rules are difficult. Depending upon where you are in Europe and how you do it, 'tying' products and services together, may or may not be permissible. Across Europe the regulations on medicines and the retailing of pet foods differ slightly, with some veterinary practices able to promote and supply and some only able to advise. In addition, pricing policies that have appeared to 'tie' customers in have not necessarily led to high take up of products or services: if customers feel they are being taken advantage of, many simply turn to the internet to offset perceived hikes in price.

So put the relationship first, even with pricing.

■ It should be acceptable to offer differing levels of service at different price levels, and you should be free to give more to customers that support you in return – the detail of what you are able to do is going to vary according to which European country you are in . . . but do consider how you will *find out what your customers most value*.

■ It also helps your relationship to be able to offer different *products* at different price levels and be prepared to refer as appropriate. If you can't stock the full range, make sure the customers know it's because you have a small dispensary rather than for any other reason. (If it's a large dispensary, be sure to make it easy for them to find out what you sell, including at the puppy party.)

■ Customers need to know how they will be charged and what for before they have to commit. They need to be given choices in a way that they can understand so that they can choose price or service.

The stronger the bond, the less price is an issue. If you need to sustain a price differential between you and somewhere else, the client has to perceive the difference and that passion for animals has to shine through in every contact.

That emotional bond can grow from puppy parties onwards . . .

You will perhaps be able to remember how it feels to lose a puppy that you have only had a few weeks. And then think of an old canine friend that has died, or was euthanased after many years, and remember just how upset you felt then.

Why do so many people buy pure-bred breeds of dogs?

Most purchases are emotional: the stronger the emotional connection between you and the clients, the greater your chance of repeat business. Should it just end at the puppy party? And what 'parties' do your clients need later in life? We started with a puppy party . . . but what then?

What other 'clubs' are your clients 'emotionally' involved in?

... THAT'S A LOT OF WORK ISN'T IT?

Well, yes it would be if you did the same thing for all clients. But you don't have to. You will certainly get more out of the relationship and have a stronger emotional 'bond' with your clients if you put more into it. But all customers are not the same, as benchmarking data show. What you can't see from benchmarking data is which of those people who attended your puppy party then recommended you to other pet owners. How will you find out who they were and why they recommended you?

So it is work, but if you pick the right customers they will do some of the work for you. What will your customers say about you when they leave the party, or leave the surgery at some other time? What will they say at the bus stop to fellow travellers? Or perhaps in the checkout queue in the supermarket? Will they recommend you to others because you . . .

■ Always demonstrate to them in every contact that you care both about them and their pet before you sell them anything?

■ Always resolve a problem and say sorry if there is one?

Most new customers come not from advertising but from personal recommendation. *So what will your bonded clients say about you?* And in your practice, which of them will recommend somebody else to come to your puppy party or provide you with a testimonial? Maybe you could ask them.



Karina Dillon

‘Cats prefer to be in control. When placed in a carrier and driven to the veterinary clinic, the cat loses all control of the situation.’

Wonderful ways of working with cats

A visit to the vet can be very challenging for cat owners, and handling cats at the clinic can be challenging for the vet and staff. Some understanding of the cat's behaviour can be helpful to all, so that the visit can be as stress-free as possible.

WHY DO CATS REACT SO?

Cats are very territorial, and very rarely leave their home territory. When the owner forces the cat to leave its territory, the experience is often stressful and negative for the cat, especially as the destination is frequently the veterinary clinic or a cattery. Bringing out the cat carrier is the first sign of something unpleasant happening: the cat's anxiety level starts to rise and the cat prepares for battle.

Cats prefer to be in control. When placed in a carrier and driven to the veterinary clinic, the cat loses all control of the situation. When at the veterinary clinic, handling the cat in a way that restricts it is often necessary for the examination. Again, the cat has no control of the situation. The cat's preferred response to such situations would be to run away. Of course, this is difficult as the cat is restrained either by the cat carrier or the staff, so instead it may choose to fight.

As cats are not social pack animals, they do not have the same range of submissive behaviour and appeasement signals as dogs, and therefore are unable to diffuse a conflict once it has occurred. Cats would much rather avoid a conflict, but at the veterinary clinic it is difficult to maintain a safe distance, so the cat reacts aggressively to the perceived threat.

TIPS FOR REDUCING STRESS ALL ROUND

There are many ways to try making the visit to the veterinary clinic less stressful for owners, staff and the cat. Here are a few tips:

- Giving kitten theory classes at the clinic can help the owner understand their cat's



behaviour, and reaction to visits to the veterinary clinic.

- Leaving the cat carrier on display in the house, and feeding the cat treats in and around the cat carrier, will habituate the cat to the carrier.
- When the cat is relaxed around the cat carrier, and may even sleep in it, you can start taking the cat on short rides in the car in the carrier.
- Examining the cat at home, eg, looking in its mouth and ears, and handling its paws, while feeding it treats, will to some degree desensitise the cat to restrictive handling.
- At the clinic, separating dogs from cats in the waiting area can reduce the stress in cat and owner. Some clinics even have days of cat-only consultations.
- Cats are very sensitive to auditory and olfactory stimuli, so reducing the smell and sounds from dogs, can help reduce the cat's anxiety level.
- When examining the cat, if at all possible, leave the cat in the bottom part of the cat carrier. This way the cat feels closer to home.
- When handling cats, less is more, so use minimal restraint and break the examination down into small stages, allowing the cat to calm down in between phases
- Pay attention to the cat's body language and body tension and release the cat before it feels the need to fight. If the cat becomes really fearful, it will take 30 minutes or more, after the cat has been removed from the perceived threat, for it to return to a calm emotional state.
- The use of Feliway and Felifriend can have a calming effect on cats.
- Have a separate, sound-proofed room for cats



Picture: Pet Doctors Guildford

Cat-friendly waiting rooms – with dedicated seating areas for cat owners and their pets



Picture: Okelord Veterinary Centre



Picture: Goddard Veterinary Group, Brixton Branch

hospitalised at the clinic. Do not have cages opposite each other, so the cats can stare at each other. The cages should be large enough for a fair sized litter box, and for the food and water bowls to be placed away from the litter box. If possible, leave the cat's carrier in the cage, so it has the familiar smell of home and somewhere to hide.

- If the owner has more than one cat, advise them to reintroduce the cats to each other, after a visit to the veterinary clinic.

CONCLUSION

Many owners only bring their cat to the veterinary clinic if it is absolutely necessary, and do not come in for annual health check-ups/vaccinations. If we can make the visit to the clinic less stressful for cat and owner alike, perhaps more owners will bring their cat in before it is too late.

Further reading

Bowen J, Heath S. Behaviour Problems in Small Animals, Practical Advice for the Veterinary Team. 2005. Elsevier Saunders
Creating a Cat Friendly Practice, and Cat Friendly Practice 2. Feline Advisory Bureau,
www.fabcats.org/catfriendlypractice/guides.html



New picture to come

Alison Lambert

The role of the nurse in professional retailing

Why think about professional retailing? The simple answer is that just carrying on doing what you've always done is no longer enough: the market is changing, along with consumers' behaviour patterns. During this session we will look at a simple set of rules to implement successful and professional retailing in your practice. To do this, we'll focus on a number of areas – What is 'professional retailing'? What do you need to have in place to do it well? How can you deliver gold-standard service that is at least as good as anything else your customers can already get in your area? And developing and maximising your key weapon – your nursing staff.

THE VETERINARY PROFESSION – TOP LINE FACTS

- 20% of pet owners use two vets or more.
- 11% of bonded clients use two vets or more.
- Consumers shop around for the best price or added value services for commodity items such as vaccines or neutering.
- 25% of pet owners never visit a vet.

'Developing retailing opportunities is an excellent way to bring new clients through your doors, and to keep existing clients visiting regularly.'

- Up to 50% of adult cats and dogs are not up to date with their vaccines.
- Lifestyle shifts mean that many people are choosing not to have a pet.

A quick look at these facts should convince you that just doing what you've always done is no longer enough. Some of your competitors have already realised the impact that facts like these will have on their business, and are growing their client base by offering new services and products. Professional retailing offers a new market segment for your practice to exploit, and by following some basic rules you can be very successful at it.

After the session, you will have a set of simple actions to implement in your practice. These will allow you to develop a retailing operation that is both successful and professional, regardless of its size.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL RETAILING?

It might seem odd to be talking about a profession, such as ours, operating in a retail environment. However, veterinary care is a mix of goods and services, and in addition to infrequent emergency care, pet owners will be regularly purchasing any number of foodstuffs, treats, bedding, leads, toys, routine treatments and cleaning products for their pets. The average consumer will be online daily, in some kind of retail store at least weekly, and probably visits you only once a year. At the moment, buying pet products at the vet's is not on the radar of many consumers, when they can pop into a pet shop on the high street or pick up what they need at the supermarket. Later on, we'll look at what you can do to bring some of these purchases to your practice.

Within the service industry, the optical market has many parallels with veterinary care. The most successful companies operating in the UK today are Specsavers and Vision Express, and yet neither of them existed 30 years ago. They brought about a fundamental shift in consumers' perceptions of eye care, and consequently achieved enormous financial rewards, in five key ways:

- Changing their locations from small houses and fringe shops to large high street premises.
- Increasing the choice available by holding more stock and displaying for the customers to choose themselves.
- Using ancillary staff to supplement the optometrist with shop-floor presence and advice, which also delivered labour efficiencies.
- Offering a one-hour convenient service (previously it took 14 days).
- Using offer-led promotions (free tinted lenses, buy one pair, get one free).

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO HAVE IN PLACE TO BE A SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL RETAILER?

Professional retailers in any field have some key parameters that they measure and review regularly in order for them to track success and plan for improvements:

- Footfall (or number of consumers coming into the store over a given period).
- Average weight of purchase.
- Return per square foot of retail space.

If your aim is to be a professional retailer, and not just to sell a few bags of dog food a couple of times a year, then these are all measures that you should know, and track, at your practice.

Successful retailers understand their consumers – they know what drives them and they know what products they need. They sell a range of products which is wide enough to give plenty of choice, but also streamlined enough to provide a good return on the square footage it takes up – no out of date dusty packs here, nothing is on the shelf that won't go out again quickly.

Professional retailers are quick to spot trends, and even to create them. If you're the only retailer in the area catering for the growing number of indoor rabbits, then you become a 'destination' shop – people will come out of their way to visit you because you provide a service better than they can get anywhere else. Take a look at your client database – which procedures are you doing more of? Which animals are you seeing more of? Are there any trends that you can take advantage of by selling specifically targeted products?

If you want to sell successfully, there are three key areas to understand:

Your customers:
What do they need/want/like?

Your own business:
Where are your strengths and weaknesses?
How can you capitalise on and promote the former, and how can you improve the latter?

Your competition:
Who are they? Where are they? What do they do well that you can copy and do better?

If you don't have the answers to these questions, then take some time to review each area, honestly and in depth. Send a friend to visit your competitors, or call



Merchandising checklist

- ✓ Make sure you have a clearly defined area to merchandise your stock – it should be placed so that customers can see it and easily get to it
- ✓ Prices should be clearly displayed, and should be consistent (eg, all varieties of the same brand cost the same, 100 g costs less than 200 g, etc)
- ✓ Stock a good choice of the most popular brands
- ✓ Keep cat and dog products separate, then split into dry and wet by brand
- ✓ Cater for impulse purchases with items such as snacks and treats, toys, leads and brushes
- ✓ Consider storing large bags of premium dry food, hay, etc, out of sight, with a picture and a price displayed instead. You can then offer a carry-to-car service for elderly clients.

them up with a query and see how they do. Talk to your customers about what your practice does well, and what they'd like to see more of – this can be as formal as a questionnaire, or as informal as a suggestion box or a quick chat at the end of each consultation. Try to get a good cross-section of your clients to give you the real picture. If you want a more comprehensive survey, companies like Onswitch Insight can audit your business and carry out consumer research to highlight areas for improvement.

Most practices are geared towards their existing client base, and do not have a policy in place to bring in new ones – there is an assumption that they will just come to you. Yet take a look at the statistics and the picture is rather gloomier:

- On average 25% of your client base will be lost this year.
- 10% of the pets on your database will die this year.
- Active clients will visit on average only once a year, and so to sustain one full time vet, you need at least 1200 of them.
- Insured pets will visit more frequently – three times a year on average – so promoting insurance to your clients is in everyone's interest.
- Leading accountancy benchmarks show a drop off in footfall over recent months for many successful practices.

All this data points to the fact that, doing what you've always done is not the key to running a successful business; and it's not going to be enough for the future success of your practice. Developing retailing opportunities is an excellent way to bring new clients through your doors, and to keep existing clients visiting regularly. So what do you need to do?

HOW CAN YOU DELIVER GOLD-STANDARD RETAILING?

With a good understanding of the market environment in your area, you are equipped to target the right people with the right products at the right time. Yet just piling up all the products that your customers may need does not make you a professional retailer – you need to consider merchandising your stock and then

look at offering a genuine service, ideally one that no one else locally can provide.

Merchandising is key for effective selling – simply put, if your customers can't find what they need, many of them won't ask, they'll just go elsewhere. There are a few key things to remember (see checklist above).

Once you've got your stock laid out clearly, you're starting to compete with pet shops and multiple retailers on their level. But there's one thing you can offer your clients that they can't, and that's clinical knowledge – this is where you can really add value to your clients.

DEVELOPING AND MAXIMISING YOUR KEY WEAPON – YOUR NURSING STAFF

Without good nurses, the customer care offered by your practice is flawed. When the vet is too busy to see clients for a general enquiry or recommendation, and the receptionist does not have the appropriate level of veterinary knowledge, the VNs are there to provide the service and advice that your clients expect. If they want to know about the scientific benefits of one dry food over another, the nurse can help, based on an understanding of the physiology of the individual pet in front of her, and knowledge of its medical history. The veterinary practice is the ideal place to buy specialist dry and wet pet food, based as it is on the scientific principles of nutrition and digestibility. Here, the nurse can ensure that any specific needs that the pet may have are reflected in the correct choice of food, and suggest appropriate prescription-style diets.

This is not a service that customers can receive in a pet shop, so make sure they know they can get it from you:

- Advertise the service via your newsletter and website.
- Brief the receptionists to introduce the new service to all the clients they see at the reception desk.
- Promote on all the practice signage, internal and external.
- Put up signs around the merchandising area, promoting the advisory role of your nurses.
- Give all the reception and nursing staff name badges, etc etc.



One large UK practice asked 1200 of its clients what they thought about the level of advice and care they received from the practice nurses, and nobody was particularly surprised when many of them said that they saw no real difference in the level of care received from a nurse as opposed to a vet. Only 30% of them said they specifically wanted the vet to carry out the annual vaccination and health check (Source: Onswitch Insight 2007). Overall, 63% were happy to discuss feeding only with the nurse, as were 75% for weight advice, 80% for flea treatment and 84% for worming.

In this same survey, many clients commented that as long as the person was appropriately qualified and put their pet at ease, they did not mind whether that person was a nurse or a vet. Interpersonal skills are key here, so make sure your nurses are able to communicate effectively with clients, as well as being friendly and approachable. You may well find that an enquiry about premium pet foods not only generates a sale of a specialist diet, but also unearths other areas of concern that you can also address.

So, by giving your nurses responsibility for retailing, you'll achieve a number of successes:

- Freeing up your consultation times of general feeding and weight-related queries.

- Giving your nursing staff an increased stature at the practice.
- Boosting your reputation locally for providing excellent care.
- Providing a real beneficial service that your consumers cannot get at local pet shops.
- Providing a focus to the retail area that with your clinical responsibilities, you simply cannot.

WHAT NEXT?

At the end of the session, you'll be fully equipped to implement successful professional retailing at your practice by utilising the medical and interpersonal skills of your nursing staff. You'll have the answers to the following questions and many more . . .

- What is 'professional retailing'?
- What do you need to have in place to do it well?
- How can you deliver gold-standard service that is at least as good as anything else your customers can already get in your area?

. . . and in the process, will be developing and maximising your key weapon – your nursing staff.



Pere Mercader

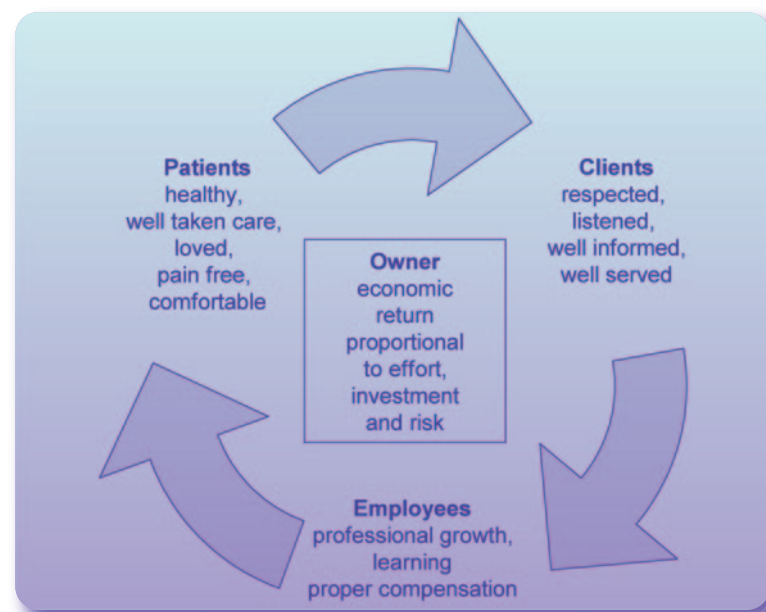
Communication breakdown: a day-to-day problem in our practices

Good communication – with our clients as well as among our practice team – is a critical ingredient for practice success. Why, then, is it so hard to achieve in most veterinary practices?

WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL VETERINARY PRACTICE?

Veterinary medicine is not only about veterinarian–patient interactions. A successful veterinary practice is one where:

- ✓ Patients are well taken care of (treated according to quality medical standards, with love and compassion).
- ✓ Clients are well served (feeling respected, listened to and well informed).
- ✓ Team members are properly remunerated for their qualifications, skills and attitude, and have a chance for personal and professional growth inside the practice.
- ✓ The practice owner/s is/are capable of providing all of the above while at the same time obtaining a proportionate economic return for their effort, investment and risk



As we can easily imagine, achieving all these objectives is not just a matter of scientific excellence.

‘Good communication is a complex set of skills. Some people are naturally gifted. For the rest of us, it takes a lot of effort, will and training.’



Good communication is key to good team relations – and ultimately practice success

WHY IS GOOD COMMUNICATION SO HARD TO ACHIEVE?

Good communication skills (with our clients and also among our practice team) are a critical ingredient for practice success. So, why is it so hard to achieve good communication in most veterinary practices?

- Because good communication is a complex set of skills. Some people are naturally gifted. For the rest of us, it takes a lot of effort, will and training.
- Because most of us in the veterinary profession have never been taught to do it well. In most of the academic curriculum of veterinary colleges around the world, communication courses are fairly new or still not in existence.
- Because for many years, the conventional wisdom was that the key (and only) relevant skill in a veterinarian was to be a good clinician. This has led to biased selection processes whereby communication skills were not part of the decision process when hiring new veterinarians for private practice.

INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS

Quite often, the different team members of a veterinary practice have different perceptions and views about such relevant issues as:

- What is the main purpose of this veterinary practice? Why are we in business?
- What are the values of this veterinary practice? What are the important things that we stand for?
- What do the owners and my team mates expect from me?
- What are our medical standards?
- What are our client service standards?

Many practice owners would be shocked in disbelief if they were able to have an honest, open discussion with their teams about these matters. Team members themselves would also find it surprising to discover how often our perceptions about what others think are totally wrong . . .

In order to improve internal communication in the

practice, and to allow a proper alignment of the whole team, it is very beneficial to TALK about these matters.

CASE STUDIES – A VALUABLE TOOL

Case studies (fictional situations that resemble real-life scenarios as the basis for discussion and analysis) can be very effective for this purpose. They offer a number of advantages over other alternative methodologies, in that they are:

- ✓ **Non-threatening.** By projecting the discussion to a fictional situation, we eliminate personal feelings and fears. We are not talking about a specific incident that affected one of our team members in our practice, but rather about a generic situation that could be happening every day in a normal practice.
- ✓ **Practical.** The beauty of case studies (if well designed) is their practical nature. They relate to specific situations and require a recommended course of action by the participants in the discussion. In this process, the conceptual or theoretical principles supporting these action courses can be better discussed and understood.
- ✓ **Enlightening.** One of the most striking experiences for practice teams participating in case discussions is that they end up understanding much better how other practice members think or feel about things.
- ✓ **A good starting point.** These case discussions can lay the ground for a team discussion about specific standards and courses of action in the practice. How should we behave in our practice if a similar situation occurred?

Case studies could be used to generate internal discussion (and hopefully reach consensus) about issues such as:

- Medical standards.
- Client service standards.
- Money and medicine: medical choices, economic estimates, client reactions.

Case study I

Can I help you?

You work as a client service nurse in one of the leading veterinary hospitals of the city. You are just arriving at the hospital to start your afternoon shift at 2.30 pm.

As you enter the reception area in a hurry, you notice that there is no one at the reception desk and that there is a client waiting to be helped. You smile at her, but she seems to be upset by something (she has a very serious expression on her face).

You move quickly into the dressing room area, put your uniform on, and look around for your morning shift colleague to find out more about the client waiting in the reception area. Unfortunately, you cannot find her.

You go back to the reception desk and look unsuccessfully for any handwritten note that your team mate may have left. As the last resort, you desperately look into the practice management software agenda to see if there was an appointment scheduled for 14:00 or 14:30, but you see none.

So, finally, you address yourself to the client and ask: 'Excuse me, can I help you?'

'That is precisely the problem in this hospital – *no one* helps me at all!' answers the client bitterly. 'I have been waiting for 20 minutes on my own, without any explanation at all! Someone called me in the office this morning leaving a confusing message about Lucy's (her pet) surgery, and about a problem with her treatment estimate or something like that. Since I received the message I've been trying to call you all morning, but I can only speak to a machine that tells me to dial 3 . . . In the end I decided to skip lunch and come to see what was going on, and, as usual, it was impossible to park near the hospital. I wouldn't be surprised if my car is towed away. And still you ask me if you can help me!'

Discussion guide (questions to prepare)

- 1 **How does this client feel? (please try to be precise)**
- 2 **What are her concerns (please try to rank in terms of priority order)**
- 3 **What should we say exactly to this client?**
- 4 **What should we do (and in which order)?**
- 5 **Which internal processes of this hospital have gone wrong? Any ideas/areas for improvement that need to be analysed?**

- Job descriptions and team coordination.
- Others.

As a means of illustrating the use of case discussions in a veterinary practice, the speaker will lead four short case discussions with the audience.

The text for the first case is provided above. The text corresponding to the three remaining cases will be provided during the session.

Special thanks

Pere Mercader wants to thank especially Dr Carin Smith (www.smithvet.com) for her generous contribution to this lecture, authorising the use of three case discussions during the lecture. Carin Smith is a consultant, speaker, trainer and author with a vast experience in human resource management issues. Her most recent book (*Team Satisfaction Pays*) includes a CD with a wide variety of exercises and case discussions that can be an extremely valuable resource for practice owners and team leaders.

The importance of providing excellent client service

In any business, results only exist on the outside, so the most important function of management is to create satisfied customers and thereby improve profitability. Veterinary practice is a business. In fact, it is a service industry committed to serving the needs of clients (pet owners and their pets) through selling veterinary services and products. To be successful, the management systems that exist within practices need to consistently produce satisfied and loyal clients who are willing to continue to buy these services.

However, increasing competition means that clients not only have more choice than ever before about where to take their pets, they are also less loyal, choosing perhaps one clinic for their cat and one for their dog. What are the factors you can work with that can help you create satisfied clients that keep coming back to you?

VETERINARY MEDICAL SERVICE VERSUS CUSTOMER SERVICE

Clients are not qualified to judge a practice on its level of medical or surgical care – in fact, they *trust* you to provide appropriate quality care. However, they can and do judge the level of service *they* receive. This means *client service* is often the crucial differentiating factor that clients use to select and stay with their practice. What is client service and how can you provide such excellent client service that clients not only choose you but want to keep coming back to you?

Simply put, client service is the ability to meet clients' needs. Client needs are identified by being attentive to what clients say and do. Client service is not about following slick formulas such as 'answer the telephone in three rings' or flashing a 'toothpaste smile for every client' or saying an automatic 'Have a nice day'. On the other hand, no one likes to be kept waiting for their phone call to be answered or to be put interminably on hold, especially if they are concerned or worried about their pet; staff who are happy and friendly are definitely more attractive to visit than sour grump-pusses; and feeling that practice members really care about you and your pet as unique individuals is very important. As we will see later, client service must be about a genuine commitment to caring for the pet owners who visit your practice, making each one feel special and appreciated.

Client service can only begin when the people who work in the practice understand and accept that it is a client-driven business – clients and their pets are essential not only to its survival but also its success and profitability. Not only do staff need to work to attract new clients to the practice, but, even more importantly, they need to work to retain and develop relations with the clients you already have. It can be useful to have a code of attitude towards clients that



Caroline Jevring-Bäck

'Achieving excellence in client service is not about doing one or two big things right, but doing lots of little things right.'

Code of attitude to clients

- Our clients are the most important people in this practice
- We depend on our clients; they do not necessarily depend on us
- Our clients are not an interruption of our work, but the purpose of it
- Our clients do us a favour by contacting us
- Our clients are part of our practice
- Our clients are not simply cold statistics, but flesh and blood human beings with feelings and emotions like our own
- Our clients are not for us to argue or match wits with
- Our clients bring us specific needs – it is our job to satisfy them
- Our clients deserve the most courteous and attentive treatment we can give
- Our clients are the lifeblood of this practice

can serve as a reminder of their essential role within the practice.

CLIENT SERVICE AND BUILDING LOYALTY

Loyalty is showing a repeat purchasing behaviour and a positive attitude towards a preferred service provider and is linked to (although not entirely dependent on) service satisfaction. Even very satisfied customers can be disloyal if it suits them. Consider the last time you tried out a new product or service because the offer was too attractive to resist, or bought your milk from a different outlet than your usual supermarket, or filled up the car with petrol at another garage because it was more convenient. These disloyal actions do not mean you were dissatisfied with the service you had received from your usual outlets or

that you won't go back to them again, but rather that, at least temporarily, it suited you better to go somewhere else. The same can – and does – happen with veterinary practices, but this does not mean that client satisfaction and loyalty should not still be goals to strive towards.

The reason is for this is twofold:

■ Loyal clients act as advocates for the practice, helping generate new clients. For example, when a client selects a practice, initial choice is often based on word-of-mouth recommendation from friends, neighbours and others the pet owner trusts. Convenience and accessibility (how near home the practice is, the parking facilities, and the ease with which they can book a visit) are also considered, but have a secondary importance.

■ Loyal clients not only repeatedly purchase services and products, they are also more willing to try out new services. For example, it is easier to get an established and trusting pet owner to enter a senior health programme, than to expect a new client who does not know you to do this.

On their first visit, new visitors are willing to 'give you a go' so you have the opportunity to turn this 'one time shopper' into a returning client – but you'll have to impress them with the service they receive or they may go elsewhere. Even established clients require work: they are now looking for consistency in the service they receive because they have established expectations of their visit to you.

SERVICE PROVISION AS AN EXPERIENCE

Nearly any interaction the client has with your clinic is a service – from visiting the clinic for their pet to

receive a vaccination or for surgery, to receiving the reminder sent out about their pet's next dental check. Services are experienced, and therefore can clearly be variously so good the client looks forward to returning and becomes an enthusiastic advocate for the practice; average, in which case they may or may not remain loyal if a new, seemingly more attractive clinic opens in the area; or so bad they become virulent haters of the clinic. Luckily, the last seldom happens but can be very unpleasant for all involved when it does.

Clearly it is the duty of all employees in the practice, who are the service providers, to make the experience of contact with the practice so pleasant for the client that they become strong advocates. This means it is as much their duty to manage the client's experience as to provide technical expertise.

The concept of client satisfaction is usefully summarised in the simple equation:

$$\text{Satisfaction} = \text{Perception} - \text{Expectation}$$

If the client perceives better than expected service then satisfaction is high: but if the level of service is lower than expected, then the client will not be satisfied. As we have already seen, satisfied clients are more likely to stay loyal to the practice and to recommend its services to their pet-owning friends. Therefore, the aim of the staff of a vet clinic is that every client who visits the practice comes away very satisfied with the service they have received. This is the way businesses are built.

UNDERSTANDING CLIENT SERVICE

Achieving excellence in client service is not about doing one or two big things right, but doing lots of little things

right. It means rethinking every communication and interaction with clients, no matter how mundane. It takes an attention to detail, an *attitude* that is essential if individuals are to find the self-discipline to handle all of their client-contact activities with empathy.

Clients assess service on factors such as how friendly and helpful the staff are, the level of quality they perceive in the practice (which may include apparently 'trivial' factors such as the health of the pot plants, the smell in the waiting room, the date of the calendar on the wall, or the appearance and choice of magazines in the waiting area), the fee they are asked to pay, how long they need to wait, and so on. Your aim is to provide such good service that your clients enjoy coming back to you: your service must be constantly better than they expected.

To evaluate the current level of client satisfaction with the service you give – ask them. Simple questionnaires focused around one area (eg, telephone service, admission/release of pets, staff attitude) provide valuable information as well as providing the basis for further improvements. As the Japanese manufacturers say, 'A defect is a treasure.' By seeking out your 'defects' and studying them carefully to identify why and how that performance breakdown occurred, you get the chance to improve. If you avoid feedback from those you serve, you never get the chance to be a more effective competitor.

PROVIDING EXCELLENT CLIENT SERVICE

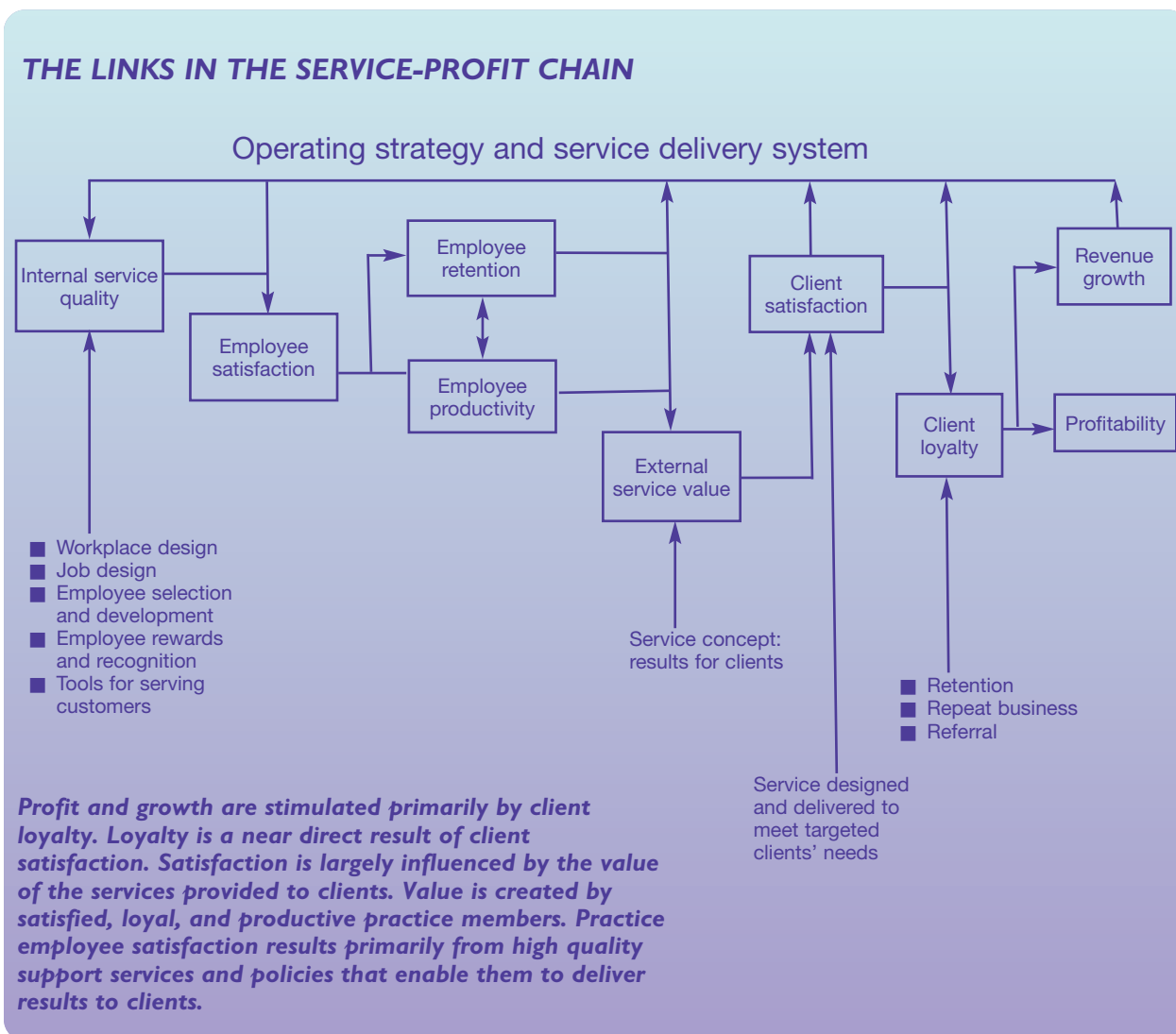
A key factor in providing client service is consistency: that the client's experience is largely the same as, or ideally, even better, than last time. To achieve consistency requires written, agreed protocols or routines for 'how we do things around here'. This



Clients expect you to stay up to date and provide quality veterinary care . . .



. . . It's clients' perception of the service they receive that determines whether they keep coming back



includes how everyone answers the telephone, conducts a client interview, handles a pet, discharges a pet after surgery, and so on. These routines need to be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure everyone in the practice is familiar with, understands and uses them.

An excellent example of client service in action is the complex and comprehensive training programme developed by veterinarian Steve Garner at the Safari Animal Hospital in Texas. Dr Garner shuts his two-vet, 30-support staff member practice for two hours every Wednesday morning for staff training, and all employees have to go through the graded programme. Rewards in terms of increased salary and other perks are given accordingly. His complete commitment to service excellence has made Safari Vets one of the most profitable practices in the USA.

CLIENT SERVICE, PRACTICE PROFITS AND THE SERVICE-PROFIT CHAIN

The lifetime value of a loyal client is enormous, especially when referrals are added to the economics of client retention and repeat purchase of related services and products. The link between service and profit is captured in the *service-profit chain* which establishes relationships between profitability and client loyalty, and employee satisfaction, loyalty and productivity. The links in the chain are illustrated and described in the diagram above.

Simply put, what this diagram shows is that 'happy staff make happy customers'. In a vet practice where staff are selected, trained and rewarded for their commitment to client service, results are clearly measurable in terms of increased profitability and client satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Achieving excellence in a client service is an ongoing and challenging managerial process. It requires commitment to service excellence, systems and methods to enable staff to deliver excellence, and, of course, staff who are willing and motivated to strive for excellence. However, highly satisfied clients are the ultimate measure of practice success – surely this is worth aiming for!

We are living in a society that is still rapidly evolving regarding the human–animal bond. This relationship has changed rapidly to the point that the emotional attachment to pets is deeper and broader than ever before. We've gone from having animals, to pets, to family members, to the point that many of us call our pets our children (calling ourselves our pet's moms and dads). More people are bringing more pets into their personal lives, and the understanding, appreciation, protection and celebration of this affection–connection or the human–animal bond we share, is essential to thriving and not just surviving in the greatest profession on earth, veterinary medicine.