

Career Challenges



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Currently, Heather provides consulting services for veterinary hospitals and is an instructor for Patterson Veterinary University and VetMedTeam. She serves on several advisory committees and is the Program Chair of the Technician Program at the North American Veterinary Conference. Heather was named the 2014 Veterinary Technician of the Year and Continuing Educator of the Year for 2016 at the Western Veterinary Conference.

Tips and Tricks to Rev Up Your Client Service Game

Often, veterinary technicians and assistants miss opportunities with clients that could enhance the client relationship and bond, ultimately leading to better patient care. It is up to each individual to capture the moment and create a positive experience for every client and patient every time they visit the practice. For many, these opportunities could lead to an improved practice culture and job satisfaction.

EDUCATE; DON'T SELL!

Veterinary technicians and assistants often feel they are salespeople in the examination room. Flip this attitude and put a positive spin on it! Become a teacher and educate clients how to care for their pets in the best way possible. In veterinary medicine, recommendations are made because they are in the best interest of the pet. If the goal is to provide the best medicine possible for every patient that walks in the door, we must make recommendations that the owner understands and is willing to accept. Therefore, educating every client on the importance of *what, why, and how* is crucial. When every message delivered incorporates



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BECOME A TEACHER AND EDUCATE CLIENTS how to care for their pet in the best way possible. An educated client perceives the value of the services being delivered and is willing to pay for it.

Tying together education, communication, and stress reduction enhances clients' experience in the practice.

what, why, and how, the client begins to trust the practice and is more willing to accept the recommendation(s) being made. An educated client perceives the value of the services being delivered and is willing to pay for it.

DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH CLIENTS

Developing relationships with today's veterinary consumers is crucial. Gone are the days of rushing the client in and out of the examination room. In addition, many clients are no longer loyal to one veterinarian in the practice, but rather to an entire team that builds a solid brand. Veterinary practice brands are established when consistent medical and customer services are delivered *repeatedly*. Therefore, time must be given to create relationships, starting with the initial phone call to create the appointment.

In the examination room, let clients tell their story. If they don't start out with a story, ask them a question to get it started, *before* you make any recommendations. Make a connection. For example, compliment the owner on something they have done for their pet. Clients are proud of their pets, yet team members rarely compliment them on the pet's excellent body condition, haircoat, or spectacular grooming job. These connection moments only take seconds, yet build a year of trust. Add education into the formula, and relationship building gets on the fast track.

COMMUNICATE

Many people think they are phenomenal at communication; yet "lack of communication" is a common grievance to veterinary state medical boards. Every veterinary technician can rev up their game in communication for the sake of their patients.

Messages have three critical components. Verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal communication each play a significant role in how the message is interpreted by the client.

Verbal Communication

Historically, veterinary team members rely on the verbal component of communication, or the word choice. Sadly,

the words used only account for 7% of the message the client receives.¹ Granted, word choice is important, and team members do need to use professional words that clients can understand. For example, clients often use the term "shots" in place of "vaccines"; however, they understand what vaccines are. Therefore, team members are encouraged to use the term "vaccines" to enhance their professional image.

However, consider the word "um." How many times do you use "um" in a sentence when speaking with clients? Words such as "um", "like," or "uh" are fillers used while the speaker is gathering his or her thoughts, and are often used unconsciously. Filler words distract the listener, keeping him or her from absorbing the entire message, and decrease his or her confidence in the speaker. To overcome the use of filler words, ask colleagues to become aware of how often they use them. One way of doing this is to have team members count the fillers they hear each other use, then role play with each other to demonstrate the hurdle these fillers present and help overcome it.

Paraverbal Communication

Paraverbal communication refers to the tone of voice used to relay a message, as well as the enunciation and emphasis of words, and accounts for 38% of the message received.¹ The tone of voice that a person uses when speaking can have a positive or negative effect on the conversation. For example, when team members are busy and trying to handle multiple clients at one time, their tone of voice may be short and abrupt, which may be perceived as rude. Rudeness—even if only perceived—ruins the client service experience.

Paraverbal communication is particularly important in telephone conversations because the listener cannot see the body language of the speaker. Words must be enunciated clearly; words that are jumbled together or "mumbled" decrease the confidence the client has in the team member. Placing emphasis on particular words is also important. A monotone message does not educate clients; the listener easily becomes bored, disengaged, and distracted by something more interesting.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication includes body posture, facial expressions, eye contact, and professional appearance, and accounts for 55% of the message received.¹ Team members who keep their hands in their pockets appear unmotivated, shy, or unconvinced of what they are saying. Folded arms may signal rejection of information, while lack of eye contact may be seen as having something to hide

or lacking confidence. Slouching and moving slowly can project lack of motivation and caring in the eyes of the client. When clients perceive these nonverbal messages, their satisfaction can drop significantly. Overcome negative nonverbal messages by dressing professionally (matching, unwrinkled, unstained scrubs), standing tall and proud, and maintaining eye contact while educating clients.

Communicating Diagnostic Plans

If veterinary technicians want to drive patient care, then learning how to communicate diagnostic plans to clients is the number-one area in which to rev up the game. Be a teacher when delivering these plans; integrate *what, why, and how* with exceptional communication skills, focusing on the paraverbal and nonverbal components. Role-play with other team members if needed to gain confidence in delivery and education. If you need to recommend a procedure or service that you don't have confidence in, obtain more information from the veterinarian as to *why* it



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TECHPOINT

Veterinary practice brands are established when consistent medical and customer services are delivered repeatedly.

is being recommended. The nonverbal messages clients receive when a team member does not understand the *why* of what they are saying are exceptionally clear (to the client), and will most likely cause the client to decline the recommended service.

Clients should ask questions when you present a diagnostic plan. If they don't, they likely do not understand what you are saying. Clients who do not understand do not accept recommendations and have a poor perception of service value. One study found that most clients who do not accept recommendations decline because they lack understanding, not finances.²

DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH PATIENTS

Did you think that client service was only about the client? Not any more! Today, pets must also have an exceptional experience in the hospital for clients to feel they received exceptional customer service. When pets love coming to the vet, clients love bringing them to the vet. So, what are you doing to promote low-stress patient handling in your clinic? If you need some ideas on where to start, check out the Fear FreeSM initiative at fearfreepets.com.

CONCLUSION

Tying together education, communication, and stress reduction will enhance the experience clients have in the practice. When clients feel they have received 5-star service, they post reviews on social media and brag to their family, friends, and colleagues. The practice retains and gains exceptional clients, and the pets receive the best care possible because the clients believe in the practice culture. Last, but not least, veterinary technicians can excel at their duties and enjoy their job, because they get to care for animals the best way possible, every time. ■

References

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