As a veterinary technician, I feel so incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to turn my lifelong love of animals into a career that provides countless opportunities to learn and grow. While my goal, like many other veterinary professionals, is to help as many pets as possible, that isn’t possible without also making meaningful connections with clients.
CLIENT ENGAGEMENT AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

With the passion so many of us have for the wellbeing of pets, it can be easy to overlook the benefits that can come from building connections with clients.

Working long days in a busy hospital, I quickly learned that having a deeper connection with our clients meant the difference between feeling completely wiped out and exhausted at the end of the day or fulfilled and satisfied. Instead of focusing on the number of clients and pets, I was able to focus instead on the individual people and their pets that I was able to help.

Positive feelings about assisting pets and pet owners are a central component of compassion satisfaction—the opposite of compassion fatigue! Therefore, nurturing strong client relationships can have a real impact on your emotional health and wellbeing.

MAKING THE UNEXPECTED EASIER

Tough conversations with clients are not just the responsibility of the veterinarian. As credentialed veterinary technicians, we sometimes must give, or assist in the communication of, difficult news or advice to a pet owner.

These conversations are never easy. They are even tougher if there isn’t an existing relationship or foundation of trust with the client. When pet owners feel heard, seen, and valued, I have seen firsthand how it can help set a strong foundation for the unexpected and inevitable tough situations that happen.

I’ll never forget one of the saddest cases of my career. It started with a visit for lameness. “Jolly” was a gentle giant of a dog that would gladly sing to you when he was happy. He totally fit his name! He had been coming to our veterinary hospital his entire life. He and his owners were like extended family. They had noticed swelling on his front leg in addition to the limp and were really concerned.

Radiographs confirmed the veterinarian’s suspected diagnosis: osteosarcoma. Treatment did not look like an option, given the advanced arthritis in his other limbs. As our team delivered the news, I remember that we cried right along with Jolly’s family. I also remember their complete faith and trust that we had their pet’s best interest at heart as we discussed options for his care.

A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY

Not every interaction will require tears! As people who are intensely dedicated to pets, we can sometimes lose sight of how our words impact our clients. A little extra effort on the communication side can go a long way with clients. Here are 4 strategies you can try implementing during client interactions to help build more meaningful and lasting bonds with pet owners.

1. Small Talk, Big Impact

Small talk has the potential to be much more than just casual niceties. Too often, I go immediately to the presenting complaint. It took getting some negative feedback about my lack of bedside manner to open my eyes to the necessity of the personal connection. I started taking the first few minutes of every conversation to make it personal, and the result was better than I even expected. I not only learned so much about my clients but could also feel the difference in how my clients engaged with me; having clients make special requests to see you and seeing their face light up when you come in the room is an amazing feeling!

2. When Talking to Clients, Ask Questions

This notion might seem simple, but the right question can lead to a conversation that makes a big difference in how clients feel. I like to start with “How are things at home?” It is simple and vague but gives me insight into the client’s state of mind. If they respond with only patient information, I know to focus on the patient. If, on the other hand, there are more personal details and information, I know to spend a little extra time covering what is top-of-mind for them. This question is your gauge for how much small talk is needed, as the right amount is key to the client feeling heard and understood.
3. Pets Are Our Focus, but Don’t Forget to Be Human
To me, the most important aspect of building strong client relationships is to remember that we are all people. You don’t have to leave your heart or emotions out of the treatment you provide. This might feel a little uncomfortable at first, and it requires vulnerability on your part. Let down that mask of being the “perfect,” emotionless veterinary professional and share yourself with clients. The honesty and empathy you share with your clients are a connection beyond what is on their pet’s treatment plan. Extend that same consideration to your clients—they are people too, and sometimes they run late, have bad days, or just need to talk to someone.

4. Elevate the Veterinary Technician Role
While some of the challenges we face in elevating our role in the profession may be out of our immediate control, there are things we can do to educate pet owners regarding what a credentialed veterinary technician does. Additionally, we can take steps to strengthen the technician-client relationship. Taking the time to educate the client about the role of the veterinary technician and ensuring the understanding of the veterinarian’s recommendation goes a long way to ensuring compliance and what is in the best interest of the pet.

Great strides have been made in the profession to acknowledge the incredible value veterinary technicians bring to the hospital environment, in addition to allowing us to practice at the top of our license—whether it’s through the efforts of the Veterinary Nurse Initiative or commitments from practices like Banfield Pet Hospital, which launched credentialed veterinary technician appointments at hundreds of its hospitals across the U.S. late last year. But there is still work to be done, particularly in helping to educate pet owners on our skills and capabilities.

When we strengthen relationships with pet owners, we can better focus on what matters most—keeping pets as happy and healthy as possible. As a credentialed veterinary technician, it can be extremely rewarding to know that you and the client share a mutual care and respect for one another, as well as a genuine love for pets. TVN