



MEET THE AUTHOR

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Jade Velasquez is a practice manager at a general practice in Gig Harbor, Wash. She uses her writing and speaking to reach veterinary professionals with her unique view on veterinary medicine. In 2014, she created a Facebook group, Veterinary Support Staff Unleashed, to boost positivity and create dialogue in order to inspire open communication in the field. Jade is also a regular contributor to the *NAVTA Journal*. At *DrAndyRoark.com*, her writing has generated some of the most viewed and well-received articles on the website.

Andrew Lyons

Engage the Modern Client

In 2019, it was estimated that pet owners spent \$29.3 billion in veterinary care and product sales.¹ Our clients no longer view their pets as “just an animal,” but have now begun to consider their pets as family members. Through education and advocacy, pets are now getting more veterinary care than in previous generations. What has created this shift in pet ownership attitudes?



The human-animal bond has evolved over generations. Pets that were once relegated to work animal status are now family members, emotional support animals, and service animals. Dogs are no longer outside pets that guard the family farm. Cats are no longer “barn cats” that are tolerated because they eliminate mice, rats, and other pests. Animals aren’t valued for the job they can do but rather for the connection that owners feel to them. Our pets are sleeping in our beds as opposed to being outdoor animals. The 2019-2020 Pet Owners Survey shows 67% of U.S. households have at least one pet.² This is up 17% from when this survey was first conducted in 1988.² Pet owners are now pet parents. Owners plan birthday parties and adoption day celebrations. Today’s pets are receiving veterinary care that may have been overlooked by owners decades ago.

How can veterinary professionals provide for the physical needs of the patient while simultaneously considering the emotional needs of clients? Our clients have many options when choosing an animal health care provider for their family member. How do we stand out among other clinics? What can we do to ensure our clients feel welcomed and respected? Perhaps most importantly, how can we ensure they trust the care we provide?

CONNECTION IS KEY

Trust is built on a foundation that begins with creating and maintaining a connection with both the client and the pet. Front-office team members should greet clients and their pets when they walk in the front door. This can be easily overlooked in a busy waiting room, but it only takes a moment to acknowledge each client and patient who come in for an appointment. Remember key details about clients and their pets such as names, the reason for the appointment, or maybe something more personal, such as recognizing them because your children go to the same elementary school as their children. Taking an extra minute to not just acknowledge a client as a customer but as a fellow human being can create bonds that are absolutely necessary in maintaining lasting relationships. This starts in the front and should resonate through the entire visit.

START IN THE WAITING ROOM

We have all seen clients who struggle to keep their big dog under control when a small dog walks into the clinic. We have seen cats in carriers become stressed by

dogs getting too curious or just by being in a chaotic waiting room. Excitement such as this is stressful to our patients as well as their owners. Think of your team as a traffic director: try to minimize chaotic and stressful situations. Acknowledge and communicate with owners who seem stressed. Maintain separate waiting areas for cats and dogs to reduce your patients’ anxiety. Direct patients into private exam rooms as quickly as possible. Clients should feel as if their pets’ comfort and safety are a priority for your team.

COMMUNICATE IN THE EXAM ROOM

One of the biggest mistakes we make as veterinary professionals is to assume that others have the knowledge we have. The average pet owner wants to become better informed. We need to be their source of information, not Dr. Google. We must learn to educate in a manner that is understandable. Droning on about gold standard recommendations or glossing over lab work as “within normal limits” doesn’t help owners understand the medicine or the recommendations we are making. We don’t have to “dumb it down” for our clients, but we need to use language that is easily understood. Take the time to explain procedures, lab work and results, medications, and at-home care guidelines. You may need to tailor your communication to each individual client for their pet.

A FINAL WORD

Our patients are valued family members of our clients. As veterinary professionals, we can acknowledge that special relationship by connecting. That connection can happen in many ways, but it begins the moment the client and pet walks into your clinic. When you do these things well, you build trust and strengthen the bond between the client and the veterinary team. This generation of pet owners will go above and beyond for their pets. We must do the same and share our true purpose—to help them and their pets be the best they can be. **TVN**

References

1. American Pet Products Association. Americans’ Pet Spending Reaches Record-Breaking High: \$95.7 Billion. americanpetproducts.org/press_releasedetail.asp?id=205. Accessed April 2020.
2. American Pet Products Association. 2019-2020 APPA National Pet Owners Survey. americanpetproducts.org/pubs_survey.asp. Accessed April 2020.