

Journey to “Yes” – Gaining Client Acceptance of Recommendations

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This is an exciting time for veterinary medicine, since the opportunities have never been so great, but also a little scary, because it means that we need to use appropriate business principles and metrics if we are to successfully fend off unwanted competition and reach our true potential.

Interestingly, it appears that it is not pet owners that are setting limits on practice profitability, but veterinarians themselves. Fortunately, this is something that can be remedied, and veterinarians are now starting to heed the call to action.

It might seem that clients are looking for high-quality medicine, and this is certainly a common enough sentiment in practice mission statements, but clients rarely know how to assess this in a practice. So, they make decisions based on the information that is available to them. Accordingly, to keep clients satisfied and coming back for all their pet health care, it is important to give them what they want most.

The value of a client is much more than the sum of any individual invoice. Their true value comes in the relationships that develop that might span years, and the lives of several pets. A loyal client base is the most valuable asset that a veterinary practice possesses. Without it, the level of medicine practiced in the facility is almost irrelevant. Therefore, veterinary practices must endeavor to keep their clients satisfied, and that means giving them what they want most.

It is important to understand why clients accept some recommendations yet reject others. In general, clients take recommendations when they realize they need the service, they understand the service offering, they trust the service being delivered, and they see the value in the offering. On the other hand, clients often reject services when one or more of these features is lacking. That is, they may reject the service if they don't believe it is needed, they don't fully understand the reason for the service, they don't trust the manner in which it is being offered, or they don't see the value in the offering.

It should be no surprise that clients do not remember everything said to them in the examination room. In fact, their recall by the time they reach the reception area is sometimes suspect. Clients hear and process only a small portion of what they are told, and so this information must be repeatedly validated and education must be considered an ongoing endeavor. If people do not receive an appropriate rationale from their veterinarian, they are just as likely to create their own rationalization or seek other opinions elsewhere.

When speaking with clients, it is advisable to use “message points” rather than rambling conversation styles. Expect that clients will only retain a few points of the discussion, and so deliver those message points as “sound bites” just as is done in news reporting. It not only saves time in the exam room, but it actually increases client retention of facts.

It might seem somewhat artificial, but there are ways of making it more likely for clients to say “yes” to recommend services, and to improve the experience for them as well. To do this, it is necessary to acknowledge that veterinary medicine is a business, that pet owners are clients or customers, and that they do have choices relative to their purchasing experience.

Clients want to do business with practices and doctors that they trust, and sometimes this involves somewhat artificial trust-building exercises. This is especially true for new clients, and for new practices or doctors. While somewhat contrived, it is otherwise difficult to build trust in the short term, when a pet is only seen once or twice a year.

Education is key for client interactions. It may take seven messages on the same topic before clients understand the reason for a recommendation. Do not assume that one discussion during a 20-minute office visit is sufficient to make the point in their minds.

Clients don’t really buy veterinary services. They buy wellness for their pets. For any recommended service, it is important to convey the benefits, as well as any downside if the recommendation is not followed. It is not necessary to be an alarmist for clients to appreciate why something should be done.

In the retail marketplace, salespeople are very familiar with the need to “close” a deal. While veterinarians are uncomfortable with these concepts, clients are left with vague recommendations unless a very specific recommendation is made. Otherwise, you may not see that client again for 6-12 months at which time you’ll like have the same discussion as before.

Retail behavioral science has determined that while clients enjoy a good first encounter, they actually place more value in the last encounter they experience. Accordingly, it is important to finish strong. This is the time to truly impress the client with service, and it is this final experience that will carry them through to their next visit.

If you’ve ever wondered whether to deliver good news or bad news first, from a client service point of view, there is no doubt – deliver the bad news first. The last message the client hears from you should be positive.

There is also an interesting consumer behavior related to good and bad events. When something good is happening, clients would rather segment this happy time into multiple occurrences. On the other hand, when bad things are happening, clients would rather them happen all at once and be done with them.

Clients are much more likely to take recommendations, as well as pay the costs of services, when they have been an active part of the decision-making process. Interestingly, those decisions needn't even be a major part of the medical care issues. When clients play a role, even selecting things such as the time of discharge or the leg in which a catheter is to be placed, they accept a stake in the process. Such clients not only are more accepting if there are problems with the procedure but are more likely to accept financial responsibility for the case management.

Clients often feel that they have so little control in the medical process, that they are even more accepting of standards of care and protocols, since they take comfort in the standardization. Accordingly, it is valuable to clients if the hospital standardizes most care pathways, including the order in which a physical examination is conducted, recommendations for managing periodontal disease, protocols for monitoring a variety of drug therapies, etc.

Veterinarians may assume that their clients have good reason for realizing they are competent, but in reality, it is very difficult for clients to appreciate the level of skill of any physician. They make judgments based on what they know and feel, and most of this is a subconscious decision.

Clients have so little information on which to judge competence that they are excited whenever clues are available to them. Use opportunities to highlight the accomplishments of all professionals and paraprofessionals, such as practice promotional materials, the web site, and newsletters. Prominently display licenses, certificates and diplomas and make sure they are professionally framed.

Finally, it is important for owners to see the value in the services they purchase. This does not mean that discounts are indicated or that the services need to be priced less than competitors. People make value judgments all the time for their purchases, from selecting a brand of milk, to the type of car that they own. However, nobody wants to pay the price of a Mercedes, and receive a Pinto. Fortunately, there is abundant evidence that clients are willing to pay for the value delivered by veterinarians, if only it can be presented appropriately.

Veterinarians are comfortable charging a mark-up on "things" but traditionally have had a difficult time pricing their own services and services performed by paraprofessional staff. In fact, in the classic veterinary scenario, practices discount their professional services and make up the difference by inflating the cost of products that are dispensed. In a time when consumers are finding other outlets for the buying of products, this is putting increased pressure on the existing veterinary model.

Selling goods, including diets, shampoos, pharmaceuticals and parasite-control products from a veterinary practice should be a matter of convenience for owners, not a measure of practice loyalty. It is important to be an advocate for clients and for practices to understand what they can sell at a premium – professional services.

Recommended Reading

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