

Client Communications: Using Your Team to Communicate Value



Mary Ann Vande Linde

Powering Up Recommendations

Communication is the creation of shared understanding or meaning through interaction between two or more parties. **Communication is the foundation of your practice.** Through communication you relay the values and processes of the hospital to the health care team, your clients and the community. Through communication you build trust which is the lynchpin of the success of your business. There are five components to trust building communication:

1. Consistency and predictability
2. Integrity
3. Respect for confidentiality
4. Commitment to shared cause and goals, behaviors
5. Examining mistakes - and problem-solving - as a team, not assigning blame

Be aware that trust can be undermined quickly. Trust breakers include:

- failing to deliver on commitments
- gossiping or disregarding confidentiality
- ignoring problems when they occur
- not communicating clearly

Communication Skills

The first communication with clients often starts on the phone. A well-trained front office team can enhance the success of your practice by using communication skills that attract new clients and bond them to your practice

Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication can be just as important if not more powerful than verbal communication. Regardless of what we say, our body language also tells a story. It's imperative that team members be mindful of the message received by clients as a result of non-verbal communication.

Eye contact is one of the most significant non-verbal communications. Be sure to establish eye-contact with clients when they arrive at the practice, when you ask them to follow you to exam rooms, when you greet them in exam rooms, when you ask clients questions and when you say good-bye.

Try to sit down next to clients during important discussions. This helps make clients feel like they are a partner in the care of their pets and facilitates easier dialogue without distractions.

In addition to your own non-verbal communication, observe the non-verbal communication of clients which will give you clues about their feelings and what actions you may need to take to improve communication.

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Open Ended Questions

To determine what your client's needs and wants are, ask questions. How does your client value their pet? Find out what activities they do together. What is the pet's lifestyle: indoor, outdoor, hunting, community service? Questions can assist and guide the owner to see and understand the medical concerns.

There are two types of questions that to gain trust and valuable information so we may know our client's expectations and create compliance.

Open Questions: The question process is like a **funnel**. The beginning of the process is very open and broad. It is here that we use questions beginning with How? What? Where? These are called *open questions*. They are designed to get opinions, attitudes, and beliefs about the pet and owners needs. Let's look at examples of open questions about dentistry for Marty (the cat) and Ms Vickers (his owner). They progress from general to more specific.

From asking open questions you tap into a client's insights about the health of their pet. This allows the veterinarian to see gaps in the client's understanding of a disease process, such as dental disease, and the pet's current health status.

Closed Questions: How do we close these gaps? There are *closed questions*. These are yes or no questions that determine facts and specific information.

Closed questions following open questions allow the owner to track with the doctor step by step through the disease process. Some short explanations with the questions are helpful however explanations are best understood if accompanied by a visual (such as a cat dental model or a picture of the cat's mouth before and after cleaning). The rule of thumb is 70% of the time the client is the person talking and sharing. The remaining 30% of time are yours.

Listening

Your secret communication weapon is listening. Listening requires an active response, not a passive one. Effective listening doesn't just happen; it takes thought—and thinking can be hard work.

When the client responds to your questions, it is critical that you LISTEN to their words and to their non-verbal cues.

What does empathetic listening look like in the questioning process? The listener is focused on the words, inflection, facial expressions and body postures of the client. The listener gives verbal and non-verbal feedback to communicate understanding, clarify information or to encourage the client to continue.

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Examples of obstacles to effective listening include:

- Distractions from thoughts outside the exam room
- Preparing your response while the client is still talking
- Preconceived judgments of the client
- Noise, activity

Empathy Statements

These statements convey to the client that you understand their perspective and feelings. Empathy statements are an acknowledgement of the client's emotions or their position. Empathy statements don't have to be confined to discussions about the pet.

Team-Based Client Education

Strive to define clear job roles and responsibilities for all team members to create the best client experience that will also result in pets getting the care they deserve. For this to happen, client engagement and education needs to occur before clients are given recommendations they aren't prepared to accept.

1. Identify client concerns/preparation (this happens mostly before the client arrival):

- Consider: how is this client different, what are the pet's needs
- Think about how to develop rapport and personalize the visit for this client
- Meet as a team to discuss the client and pet before the appointment, define each team member's role
- Color code charts, review medical records before appointment
- Print a list of appointments for the day w/ notes

2. Client engagement/Needs assessment (getting clients involved in process):

- Consider the client vs. team member perception
- Client engagement very important
- Develop scripts for needs assessment process and visual tools to help client with descriptions of concerns or questions.

3. Solve problem/ Make recommendations / Client education (focus on what client needs and wants)

- Gap analysis: ask open-ended questions, listen
- Perform physical exam
- Don't tell client before they are ready to hear information.
- Focus exam on showing vs telling
- Educate client using support materials, literature, models, computer educational programs and posters to illustrate and educate on the main points.

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- Use email
- Provide the client a report card of findings
- Present treatment plans
- Strive to build trust

Check for understanding/overcome objections:

- Use communication skills, talk about money with confidence

4. Commitment (want client to take action) and Satisfaction

- The staff reinforces the DVMs recommendation, provides further information and support so client feels assured in the decision.
- When the client commits to the recommendation, it is written down and prioritized and
- The client is taught how to perform the treatment plan needed.

5. Reinforce messages/gain commitment (want client to take action):

- Use consistent messages by team
- Keep in touch with clients with progress phone calls
- Schedule rechecks at time of first appointment
- Give CE handouts
- Take advantage of online resources and your website to give clients

Check your mindset - Stop selling and start educating

If you want to increase service utilization and compliance for wellness care services at your practice, then start educating pet owners rather than just making recommendations or “selling”. Here are some tips on how to take steps to educate pet owners and inform them about the value and benefits of services:

- Don't assume clients are knowledgeable.
- Ask open-ended questions about pets and engage clients in a dialogue before immediately launching into what services you recommend.
- When team members make recommendations for wellness care prior to the veterinarian doing a physical exam and consultation, be sure to let clients know that the doctor will do a full evaluation of their pet's health and answer any questions they may have.
- Give clients sufficient information.
- Don't just make recommendation-focus on need recognition and the value of the services. Tell the client why the pet needs the tests.
- To effectively communicate the value of a veterinary service or product to clients, make sure everyone on the team understands and agrees with the value of the hospital's services and products.

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- Staff meetings are an excellent time to discuss the value of veterinary services.
- Be sure to give clients consistent messages about the value of routine preventative healthcare services and products.
- Remember to always highlight the benefits of services to clients even when the client has purchased similar services in the past.

Summary: Measuring Results, Fostering On-Going Relationships/Client Loyalty

When the whole team focuses on enhancing client communications, you will improve client engagement and trust which leads to greater client loyalty and client compliance with treatment recommendations.



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The Process

- Enhancing the Exam Room – 6 Step Process
- General Skills – Observation Sheet for the Exam Room
- General Note Taker

The Motivation

- Overcoming Concerns Handout
- Learner Judger Model
- Phrases

Case Studies and Information

- Case Studies
- Case Studies Complicates
- Evidence Worksheet

KEY POINTS

- Most Decisions are Emotional (90%) vs. Logical (10%)
- Open questions open clients' minds to possibilities
- Client Concerns are not about you!!
 - They show unmet needs or confusion.
- Clients need to experience the value of the recommendation before, during and after...
 - They need to visualize – what they really want...
- Recommendations talk to the client's primary concern first:
 - What this means to you... (With a fact or evidence or related benefits)