

Communication tools of today and tomorrow

Veterinary Practice Management Consultant Philippe Moreau looks at the importance of valuing your clients using simple communication techniques.



Veterinary practices are businesses that exist to perform services to their customers or clients, as do dental surgeries, banks, travel agencies and many others. We should be aware today in our modern society that these clients are consumers and react and act as consumers would in places other than the veterinary clinic. Veterinary practice is also a professional service provider, but does your practice provide such excellent service that your clients will never look elsewhere?

The art of communication

Listening is not hearing. It is not a passive action but an active one that requires patience, concentration and an understanding of the other's needs. It also requires, in the animal health environment, a large proportion of compassion.

The 'active listening' phase of the relationship between the veterinarian and his or her client is critical. It is often neglected because of lack of time, but mostly because of the lack of awareness of its importance for clients. Remember the essential expectations of the clients (*IVJ* Vol 6 [5] p318-320): availability, kindness, and a capacity to listen. The veterinarian and the staff should also be able to adapt their

way of handling clients according to the client's profile and typology. I am among those who strongly believe, however, that we don't need more clients! What we need are 'better' clients: clients that follow our recommendations and suggestions and are part of our 'fan club'. With simple common sense, a little judgment and some experience of human communications, one will quickly know when and how to react when facing the different types of people that make up our clientele. Recognition and knowledge of these individualities, and the use of an adapted approach that matches the typology of person, are important parts of communication.

A perfect welcome should include several parts - and there is a true art in welcoming and greeting clients, which requires a certain technique. As one specialist in communication said: "You only have one chance to make a good first impression." It is obvious, for example, that the businessman who comes into the clinic with his Labrador dog may not request long explanations about the benefits of low protein and fat diets for his senior dog, because of obesity, diabetes, renal failure, urea, creatinine, etc. All these pertinent scientific facts would probably be superfluous for him - and potentially negative

- because, for him, these details are a waste of his precious time. He does not need nor want to know. On the other hand, a retired person, somewhat curious and literate but hesitant or undecided, may ask a multitude of questions and request more information than you were planning to deliver.

The ideal reception

The ideal reception could be divided into four phases. The first phase is how to say “hello” or “good morning “ or “hello, good morning, may I help you?” It is as simple as it is important. And you can add a smile to it. The second phase is the ‘active listening phase’. As we said earlier, it is a paramount part of the relationship with clients. One specialist in communication skills once said: “You will gain more clients in two hours trying to listen to them, than in two years making your clients listen to you!” The golden rules of active listening include:

- being calm and friendly (smile);
- establishing eye contact (and maintaining it);
- being attentive and involved;
- letting the client explain his/her problem(s) or concern(s);
- perceiving the emotional status of the client;
- proceeding to a control check-up;
- and, only then allowing oneself to interfere...

The third phase of the greeting consists of adapting your attitude and messages according to the client’s profile. Recognising the individual’s personality will help you significantly in communicating successfully with him or her. The fourth and final phase consists of discovering the client’s motivation. Clients’ motivations are partially known from their general expectations (implicit vs explicit). Some are the result of the active listening phase and reveal what are the clients’ true needs. The related services or products should be suggested and/or explained.

The importance of clients’ services

Offering services that are adapted to the client needs and expectations and achieving excellence in client service is one of the major keys to succeeding in veterinary practice. This requires planning and setting appropriate guidelines among the team. It is not sufficient to have the strong desire to do well, it is necessary to work at it and, as a wise manager once said, “quality will be judged by its use, not announced by its maker”. We are all consumers and, as such, we always wish to receive what we consider is value for our money. This does not mean the cheapest possible product or service but the one that we feel is giving us an expected value, our expected value. Usually, the highly satisfied client will feel he or she has received a high quality service. To the contrary, the dissatisfied client will be disappointed by the service quality.

Quality control at the veterinary practice

The method is quite simple to apply. Once you have identified a service based on a client’s needs and expectations, write down step-by-step what should happen for that service to be perfect. Then, for every step identify what are the things that could go wrong. By identifying these negative

milestones you will be in a position to control, or better, to prevent these events from happening. This is the basis of quality control.

Clients define quality in many different ways. A study performed in the USA describes 10 widely accepted criteria for client quality evaluation. These criteria are perfectly adaptable to the veterinary environment:

- reliability: being consistent and keeping promises;
- responsiveness: being prompt and diligently providing a service;
- competence: this needs to be demonstrated by the entire team;
- accessibility: including physical access to the service provider and his/her willingness to deliver the service in a friendly manner;
- courtesy: this again involves the entire staff;
- communication: this deals with time and contact but also, as mentioned earlier, being a good listener;
- credibility: including honesty, integrity, trust, faith and reputation;
- security: meaning minimised risks ;
- understanding and recognition: the level of effort to fully satisfy a known individual’s needs;
- and, tangibility: including the external appearance, attitude, contact, but also the physical facilities and equipment of the premises.

Planning for excellence and valuing the client

Planning for excellence requires certain considerations that I believe are important in a veterinary practice:

- positioning your clinic and your work in a high-quality market niche;
- developing and maintaining a high-quality reputation and image within that niche;
- concentrating your activities at what you know and perform best instead of doing a little bit of everything with a lower proficiency;
- and, aiming and committing yourself and your team to best please your clients and don’t accept compromises .

It is critical that the veterinarian and his or her staff understand that their work is a client-driven business and thus value the client. The clients and their pets are the reasons that the practice exists. Usually several people’s incomes, and therefore families, depend on the practice’s health and productive activity - this very basic fact is often neglected or even ignored. Finally, remember also to embrace the human animal bond relationship. In the words of veterinary practice management expert Caroline Jevring-Back: “Clients don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Phillippe Moreau graduated in 1978 from the veterinary college at the University of Liege, Belgium. He now works as a consultant in animal health and practice management, with Medi-Productions, France. For more information, contact: pmoreau@mediproductions.com.