

GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE – KILL THEM WITH KINDNESS

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The client glares at the receptionist and complains about the wait time and fees. The receptionist looks at the technician nurse - both are caught in that awkward moment. What do they do next? How should they respond? Suddenly, those old phrases about customer service come to mind - "Kill them with kindness!" and "The customer is always right." Are these phrases part of your client service SOP? Do you and your team firmly believe in them? Well, we know that it isn't necessarily true, but it does provide insight into the fine line we walk when delivering client service. Sometimes allowing the client a "win" will earn you the win in the long run. However, there is more to providing excellent client service than letting clients always have it their way. And, during this time of pandemic stressors, client service is becoming a high-priority issue.

The level of client service your veterinary healthcare team delivers requires more than simply saying 'the client is always right.' It requires knowledge about what is important to your clients and developing excellent people skills. Much of this does not come naturally and must be taught to the team with continued fine-tuning over time. So how do we "wow" clients with our service to make them want to come back? How do we make it easier and more pleasant for your clients to do business with you? Look at these three areas when assessing your delivery of exceptional service:

- Make it easy to do business with you,
- Build a trusting relationship, and
- Care for your team.

Is It Easy to Do Business with You?

Call your practice, sit in your parking lot, walk through the front door, visit your website... assess how hard or uncomfortable it is to do business with you by viewing your business through the eyes of a client. Perhaps they have too many hoops to jump through just to request an appointment online. Maybe they are walking to the door through a minefield of poop piles or sitting in an exam room and hearing all the commotion in the treatment room.... Work with your team to determine if you are failing/meeting/exceeding what your clients expect to experience when they do business with your hospital.

Are You Building Client Relationships?

Next, expand your work with the team to include how they can gain a client's trust and build a relationship. That relationship starts from the first time they interact with the client, whether a phone call to set up a new puppy appointment or racing through the door with an emergency. While caring for the pet is your priority, taking care of that client is also of vital importance. Clients do not always need to be "right" - but they should always feel that they are "heard." If someone thinks they are being listened to and their concerns are being addressed, they tend to, more likely than not, become loyal customers.

Who is your hospital's most important client? Sorry – that's a trick question! Regardless of who spends the most money or which clients are staff favorites, the most important client is always the one you are with at the moment. Every client deserves your full attention and respect.

Is Your Team Engaged?

There is a link between team member satisfaction and customer satisfaction. When your team is stressed or unhappy, customer service will suffer. Conversely, Gallup reports that employees who are engaged can improve customer relationships and increase sales.¹ Take the time to talk to the team and ask for feedback - gaining insight into their wants and needs. Similar to your clients, your team wants to be heard and valued. Additionally, attention to team engagement will have a ripple effect on other key business metrics like turnover, shrinkage, safety, productivity, and profitability.

Pandemic Puts Pressure on Customer Service

The pandemic presents unique challenges to client service. Clients are stressed and more likely than ever to complain about how long it took to get an appointment, how long they waited at your practice, how much they were charged, or whether the staff was professional and pleasant. From the client's point of view in your parking lot, they can't see how stressful your day is, that you are dealing with an emergency, or that the phones are ringing off the hook. All they know is that they have been sitting for "hours," and no one is taking the time to talk to them.

Veterinary practices outshine many, if not most, other professional service providers. But working overtime and suffering from a lack of new hires or team members for COVID reasons are dimming our team's ability to shine. Your clients are used to personal greetings, sharing smiles, and even hugs. Most people don't hug their dentists, accountants, or attorneys – but they often hug someone in their veterinary practice. However, the team is limited by rules of social distancing, masks cover up those smiles, and stress is at an all-time high. Set aside time to acknowledge and reward the team. If you haven't already, consider providing lunch or special snacks, create an easy way for clients to submit 'grins and cheers' to praise the team after a pet's visit, provide wellness-related team meetings, or survey your team to find out what rewards are valued. After all, those smiles need recharging after a tough day, and taking the time to care for the caregivers is more important than ever these days.

While hugging may be out, continue to connect with clients on an emotional level. Veterinary practices are in a unique position to do this! You and your clients share a common passion – their pets! Provide team training on communication skills - focusing on how to talk to an upset client and how to keep each other informed about client flow. Take advantage of the hospital's social media tools to keep clients up-to-date on practice information (curbside care, changes in check-in procedures, emergency causing delays in seeing appointments, etc.) and pet wellness care (from scheduling to preventive care to the latest medical developments). Additionally, explore new, innovative ways to use technology to stay connected with clients.

If you are continuing curbside or drop-off appointments, physical appearances and communication are more critical than ever. Designate curbside spaces and how to contact the team upon arrival and coach the team to deliver exceptional care in the parking lot. Please don't leave a client alone in their vehicle for 45 minutes without an update. Nurses and assistants can quickly send a text or a picture of the pet to let clients know they haven't been forgotten. Speaking as someone who's been there, it's lonely in the parking lot, and honestly, it's a little scary. In the absence of information, I worry that my pet's condition is much worse than I thought or that a problem of some sort is happening. A little information goes a long way.

Achieving a Win-Win

Delivering exceptional client service does not mean letting "the tail wag the dog" (so to speak). Clients can be demanding. At times, their demands, or complaints signal that your level of client service is floundering and needs some fixing. Other times, it is merely a signal that the client is stressed and needs a time-out. And at times, it's just the sign of a bad client. We've all seen "those viral videos" circulating on the web! The team can't help what happened during the client's day. Still, they can mitigate some predisposing factors that might cause a bad client experience - things such as non-user-friendly processes, unpleasant physical environment, poor communication skills, lousy attitudes, or an unengaged workforce.

Consider creating a client experience task force to monitor client and team feedback, conduct reality checks on client flow, explore new ways to improve client service, and train the team to improve communication skills. Delivering exceptional client service is not accomplished from a mandate announced by the practice owner; it is a team effort with each person playing a significant part. In the end, it is the pet that will benefit from continued veterinary care.

¹ How to Improve Employee Engagement in the Workplace - Gallup