

## **SATURDAY HOURS - MAKING A POSITIVE CHANGE**

### **November 2021**

The pandemic ushered in many changes to the veterinary industry. As we settle into the current “new normal,” many practices are taking a hard look at their hours of operation and what would be best for them moving forward. Specifically, Saturday office hours – do they help or hurt the practice?

Should the practice run a full day of appointments, or would a half-day satisfy client needs? What is the risk of not being open on Saturday at all? Where is the sweet spot for efficiency and profitability when it comes to Saturday hours? Unfortunately, there isn't a "one size fits all" answer. Offering Saturday hours is a decision each practice must make based on individual needs and goals.

What is at stake? For starters, not having enough people to cover all shifts is a problem facing many practices. Would consolidating hours help with the team schedule? Dropping Saturday office hours may reduce shifts enough to allow optimal coverage of the other shifts during the week. This change may even help address another pressing issue – finding people to hire. Not working Saturdays could be a game-changer in the search for job applicants. Yet this isn't just about staffing and scheduling. There are other relationships to consider.

What is the dynamic with other hospitals (both general and ER) in the area? Would closing on Saturday create an issue with patient care – especially when there isn't an ER facility nearby? For some hospitals, Saturday hours become ER hours (often extending well past quitting time) – closing on Saturday may be a blessing for burned-out team members while also being a curse for the community in terms of weekend care. Then there is the elephant in the room – what will clients say, and should you care?

Clients can become vocal when a hospital changes office hours, and social media allows their displeasure to reach current and potential clients and team members. Would closing on Saturdays severely limit client access to pet care? Or, are there creative ways to provide care – such as staying open later on other days or offering virtual care services through a third-party provider? Anytime a change is made, there is a risk of losing some clients...but there is also the advantage of gaining clients and strengthening current client relationships.

### **Weighing the Options**

Any operational change should be a strategic decision. Therefore, consider performing a SWOT analysis (assessing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) when evaluating the pros and cons of Saturday office hours.

Assess how the change in office hours will affect the following:

- Team
  - Morale
  - Work/Life balance
  - Retention/attraction
- Client
  - Retention/attraction
  - Satisfaction and recommendations
- Business
  - Patient care
  - Use of technology for client communication and patient care
  - Revenue

Notice that this isn't a listing of pros/cons. Every business is unique – culture, team, clients, services, location.... This uniqueness is also why there are so many variations in what changes are made to the office hours model.

Some practices eliminated Saturday hours and added to the weekday hours – and some practices didn't. Some changed the surgery schedule or staggered meal breaks, while others established virtual care appointments (with a work-from-home option). In this current pandemic era, practices that eliminated Saturday office hours discovered improved team morale (having two days off in a row can be a good thing), and increased revenue (clients are comfortable with different hours of operation - especially after all the changes last year). The point is that each practice made the decision based on their unique needs and goals. What is your decision? Once the decision is made, following a strategic change process will ensure success.

### **Making the Change**

Implementing change is difficult, and how it is carried out can result in success or failure. For example, don't make a sudden decision to change business hours without having a game plan and communicating with the team and clients.

Follow these steps for any change management process:

- Describe why you are changing
- Provide clear and concise information about the new process
- Ask for feedback and address questions and concerns
- Train the team for the change
- Implement the change
- Measure and analyze the effects

For a practice deciding to close on Saturdays, the “why” is easy. It is addressing all the “what ifs” and “yeah, buts” that cause problems. Management must provide a roadmap to the team – training the team on the new process, what the goal is, what success will look like, how to handle questions and concerns from clients, and how to identify and remedy snags or problems. A prepared team can handle any situation.

Failure to properly implement the change process can lead to loss of motivation, attrition (churn), resistance to change, a decline in productivity or compliance, and tension between groups. Now, you may be thinking these are problems among the team, but these may also be problems among your clients. The team is the force behind a great client experience. A team struggling with a change cannot deliver a great client experience. It may even deliver such a poor experience that clients leave (not due to the actual change, but solely because of the poor performance by an unprepared team). In addition, clients hearing the words “our policy” about the new office hours may resent both the messenger and the message – and search for a new practice. Strategically implementing a change helps to “cover all the bases” and ensure a positive message and exceptional client service.

Finally, monitor the results. This step may involve monitoring appointment fill rates, client and team churn versus acquisition, team efficiency and productivity stats, and revenue production. Expect to make some tweaks to appointment scheduling and staffing levels in the early stages of implementing the change. Monitoring reduces the chance of an uncomfortable end-of-year surprise.

Change can be a good thing. As the saying goes, "no time like the present," and the current environment provides a ripe opportunity to make changes. Businesses everywhere are reducing hours and reimagining ways to stay connected with customers, and customers are more willing to accept and adjust to these changes. The veterinary industry is no different. The veterinary practice model, including hours of operation, does not have to be set in stone. You don't need to follow anyone else and don't apologize for changing. Consider the specific environment at your practice and decide what is best for you and your team.