

## WHAT TO DO WHEN APPOINTMENTS SLOW DOWN APRIL 2022

After the chaos of the past two years, we can use a break - such as a slow day, finishing appointments on time (or even a little early), or grabbing a quick lunch break. But are a few days in a row or an entire week of these types of breaks still welcomed? Or does it stir up an uneasy feeling? Does it encourage the “what ifs” to creep into your thoughts? What if inflation is causing pet owners to back off of veterinary care? What if our team’s stress caused us to deliver poor client service, which drove clients away? What if clients got the wrong message that we can’t or don’t want to see emergencies or sick pets? What if the big box store is taking clients away from us? Before spiraling downward, stop, take a breath, and assess the current environment.

Rest assured, all practices will inevitably experience some slow times. Yes, the economic downturn is affecting the business and consumer attitudes – but you can survive it. Survival requires guiding the veterinary healthcare team on how to maximize their time on slow days. If you are not experiencing a slowdown already, take the time to create a strategic plan so you can take action when needed.

Whether experiencing a slowing down in appointments or simply creating an action plan for a slow time, here are some recommendations to ensure that your team remains productive and the business continues to maintain profitability.

### Assess Key Metrics

Most practice managers already review daily, weekly, and monthly KPIs. However, during those busy months of the pandemic, some metrics were not very important because the practice could not handle any more appointment requests (e.g., patients needing follow-up services, lapsed clients, and patients missing services like vaccines or long-term medication tests, etc.). Therefore, as a slow trend becomes apparent, designate a team member to run those reports and reach out to clients.

Additionally, other “regular” reports should receive more scrutiny, especially to identify changing client behavior and cash flow concerns. The income to expense ratio is one of the best ways to identify problems in specific revenue-producing categories. The ratios should be steady or increasing, not going down. For example, if the food income to expense ratio falls, it may signal that food is sitting on the shelf because client purchasing habits have changed or purchase prices have changed, and the business has not reflected that in new pricing.

### Personnel Development

Remember all those missed training opportunities because the practice was short-staffed? Survey the team to find out what they want to learn and catch up on annual training topics (from human resource topics like safety or harassment to interpersonal and communication skills to medical and technical skills). Schedule cross-training to strengthen team performance during those times of staff shortages or busyness. Review protocols and procedures with the team (such as role-playing emergency scenarios) so everyone is on the same page and better able to respond.

### Appointment Scheduling

It may be nice to be slow, but don’t take longer to perform services. Conduct a team huddle before each shift and designate appointment slots for last-minute appointment requests or walk-ins (using social media to announce available times). Remember, the last two years did not allow easy access to appointments for clients, and this may have damaged the practice’s reputation or lowered client loyalty. Promoting available appointments and welcoming last-minute requests can reverse some of the negativity experienced during the pandemic.

### Refine And Improve Systems And Processes

Bureaucratic creep – it happens to all of us. An SOP that started as a few steps grows into two pages and involves three people. Use slow times to review processes and fine-tune them for efficiency. While you are at it, look into technological advancements that can improve team efficiency, client service, and patient care. For example, scheduling an appointment - How many steps are described in your receptionist training manual? How long does it take your receptionist to access the medical record, update information, get answers to specific questions, and book the appointment? Can technology create a more efficient way – allowing the client to schedule at their convenience and freeing up the receptionist to handle more complex client concerns? Slow appointment times allow the team a chance to review and improve systems and processes.

### Strategize

When was the last time the management team performed a SWOT Analysis on the business? When was the last time the team was informed about new initiatives or given an update on key practice indicators? Most likely, the last “game plan” discussed with the team was curbside services. Other than that, it has been too hectic to spend time analyzing or strategizing. But isn’t that exactly what every business must do to stay competitive and be successful? Schedule time to meet with your accountant or consultant and plan some time with the managers and other coordinators to discuss business needs and future plans.

### Focus on Team Well-Being

The team has been running “full throttle” and may be experiencing difficulty (e.g., compassion satisfaction, compassion stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout). The AVMA has resources to help support a culture of well-being, and it is crucial that the practice prioritize team care. Go to <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/wellbeing> to get started. Your team will appreciate the effort.

### Host Workshops For Clients

How many times do you deal with “Dr. Google” recommendations? Wouldn’t it be nice to put information in your clients’ hands that your SOPs support? Consider hosting client workshops to discuss timely topics, wellness, and specific medical conditions (e.g., kidney disease, obesity, hyper/hypo thyroid, Lyme disease, etc.). Ask vendors to donate educational materials and ‘treats’ for clients or participate in the seminar via a Zoom call. Create a brief presentation to educate the clients and allow plenty of time for Q&A . Encourage attendees to schedule their pet’s next visit at the conclusion of the session. Workshops are great for gathering together clients dealing with similar medical issues and giving the team a chance to bond with clients.

### Conduct surveys

Use slow times to find out what you don’t know. Do a Net Promoter Score for your clients by asking, “How likely are you to recommend us to your family and friends?” Then dig a little deeper to find out what great things you can brag about on social media and where you need to improve. Another client survey is the Client Effort Score, where you choose one question and tally the responses. For example, “How difficult was it to schedule an appointment using our online scheduler?” You can do both surveys at check-out or via text/email.

For the team, survey practice culture, employee engagement or satisfaction, or do a pulse survey for a quick snapshot about a key topic. Just be sure you are willing to act on the feedback from your team.

### Marketing

During the chaotic pandemic months, the marketing effort may have suffered from a bit of neglect. Now is the time to regroup (AKA strategize) and map out the calendar for the remainder of the year to help drive immediate traffic and fuel long-term growth. Update social media platforms and stock up on content and pictures (here is where having a map/schedule of topics for the next few months is helpful). Find out who is passionate about a topic and involve them in a marketing project.

### Organize and clean

This may be obvious, but just had to say it for those who feel they never have time to clean and organize the pharmacy, reception area, exam room.... Connect this effort with improving processes, and you have a win-win for improving efficiency. For example, think about how many times you exit an exam room to go in search of something (like for an eye exam or skin scraping) - update those SOPs and organize small bins of supplies to keep in the exam rooms. In addition to the physical act, do the digital organizing and “cleaning” - remove obsolete files, update inventory counts, create/update training manuals and client education materials.

If the free time can still be productive, slowing down may not be detrimental to the business. Mike Vance, creativity expert and former Head of Idea and People Development for Walt Disney Productions, said, “Slowing down is sometimes the best way to speed up.” What better way to position the practice for future success than to take the time to make improvements? Formulating a plan for slow times allows you to remain calm and pragmatic, avoiding any emotional, knee-jerk reactions. As another saying goes, “Keep calm and carry on,” knowing that you and your team are using time wisely.