

Appeared in Veterinary Economics, 2009

Unhappy patients only bite and scratch; A dissatisfied client can hurt a lot more! Tips for managing client dissatisfaction at your practice

Dissatisfied clients can certainly take their business elsewhere. They can also exert a great deal more damage to your practice by filing lawsuits and complaints, and by spreading ill will and unflattering word-of-mouth. We have all heard the old customer service line, “A happy customer tells so many others, but an UNhappy customer tells however many more.”

Having a large number of unhappy clients also demoralizes staff, making them unhappy, further impacting client service, making for unhappier clients, and so on.

On the positive side, an unhappy client can also be your practice’s best window into what is wrong and what you need to fix. Keep in mind that clients evaluate their experience differently than veterinary professionals. While technical skill and competence are expected, clients are often influenced by service factors that go beyond the treatment of their pet.

Clients voicing complaints offer the practice an opportunity to uncover possible weaknesses in service delivery. In today’s competitive marketplace, addressing these issues may help provide the type of competitive edge you need.

Improve how your practice manages client complaints by following these three steps.

1) PREVENT complaints in the first place.

Develop a proactive plan for improving client satisfaction at every point of contact or “moment of truth” with your practice.

- Appointment call
- Receptionist greeting
- Wait in the lobby
- Wait in the exam room
- Discharge
- Follow-up

Some of these represent greater sources of client satisfaction / dissatisfaction than others.

All represent opportunities as well as areas of vulnerability for the practice.

The kitten died and the owner threatened to sue. While this particular practice has a basically good reputation, the discharge instructions were vague and failed to spell out the seriousness of follow-up care. Due to the incomplete instructions, the owner neglected adequate follow-up care and failed to read warning signs of further distress.

More thorough information could have prevented this tragedy. To me, discharge instructions are one of the weakest links at many practices. They are also an area over which the vet has a great deal of control, at least in the information being dispensed.

Throughout your practice, you have more control over some points of contact than others. For those with which you have less control (wait time for example) , look for ways in which the time being spent is of at least some VALUE to the client. Fill empty time with educational materials, DVDs, a place to nap, beverages or light snacks.

At EVERY point of contact, consider how your practice is being evaluated, what is important to clients and what will make their visit more pleasant. I travel two hours for dental care for a pet rabbit. Our vet has a room ready when I walk in, a place for me to set up my lap top if I need it and offers to put on a fresh pot of coffee by the staff.

Eliminate the guess work by ASKING clients what is important to them. Use client focus groups to surface weaknesses as well as new ideas. Conduct periodic client surveys to gauge client satisfaction. Consider appointing a client advisory panel to assist with continuous practice improvement.

2) Make it EASY to complain.

If veterinary clients are like other customers, in more than half of cases, they will leave without complaining, at least not to YOU.

In most situations, clients will voice their dissatisfaction to family, friends, the veterinary community, perhaps to the local news media. That is NOT how you want to find out that a client has a problem with your practice!

Instead, make it easy for clients to voice their concerns directly to your practice. Some vets will say, "Of course, clients can always come to me." Remember – most will not. You have got to make it easier than that.

- A. Start by adopting the right CULTURE. A practice culture that views complaints as a hassle, or only punishes the "perpetrator," discourages staff from acting constructively. Remind staff that complaints are OPPORTUNITIES to strengthen client service and are everyone's job. Make it part of regular staff meetings to go over complaints and how they were remedied. Reward staff members who act quickly to achieve positive outcomes.
- B. Provide clients with the necessary channels and make them obvious. Let clients know where to go with feedback by posting messages in the lobby, on the website, discharge instructions and invoices. Be specific by providing a form to fill out for the suggestion box or a special email address. Let clients know that servicing them is a priority.
- C. Get information to the top of the practice. Make sure that complaints – or perhaps a weekly summary – are shared with practice managers and owners. This not only demonstrates the importance of this information to staff, but shares vital information about how clients view the practice.

- D. Monitor and track complaints. Maintain a database for coding and tracking types of complaints and their frequency. This is great way to determine if solutions are having an impact. This also helps you with number 1 above.

3) Respond to complaints QUICKLY.

Once a complaint surfaces, handle it quickly. Once you have invited client to share the information, it will make the situation worse by failing to act in a timely manner.

For this purpose, have a complaint protocol in place that includes:

- Types of (anticipated) complaints
- Identification of who handles the complaint
- Protocol for handling each type of complaint
- Agreed upon remedies / what staff is empowered to do
- Exceptions to the above
- Complaint /outcome documentation
- Client follow-up

Follow some basic rules for handling any complaint.

DO

Provide the client with a private setting where he/she can be comfortable discussing the complaint.

Allow the client to communicate his/her concerns to an empathetic listener even if the client becomes emotional. Show interest and concern while documenting the information.

Double check information on both sides. Obtain as accurate a picture of what has happened as you can.

Ask the client what you can do to remedy the situation; what he or she thinks would be fair.

Determine what is possible. You may ask for a compromise.

Look for ways to keep the client connected to the practice. For example, if a client was dissatisfied with a nail trim, instead of refunding their money, offer a certificate for a free service on the house.

Thank the client for bringing the situation to your attention. Remind him/her that the practice is always looking for ways to strengthen its services and client satisfaction.

Look for ways to prevent this type of complaint from happening in the future.

NEVER

Make excuses. ("The staff must have been tired that day.")

Put the practice on a pedestal. ("We are still the largest and best vet hospital in the county.")

Offer blank apologies. ("Gee, sorry about that; that must have been the new person.")

Trivialize the complaint. ("Gee that happens all the time and no one else has complained.")

Brush them off. (“Give me a number and I’ll have someone call you.”)

Based on the seriousness of the situation, a client’s complaint may still progress to a point at which it draws negative attention to the practice. Always be prepared for damage control.

Should the problem spread to other clients or to the local news media, seek professional guidance in crisis management. While such counsel cannot make the situation disappear, it can provide strategies for managing – and possibly minimizing -- its impact.