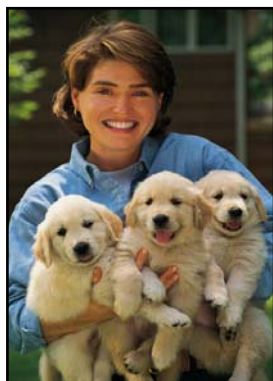


How to Upgrade Your Boarding

From “Happy Hour” treat times to tender-loving-care packages, learn how you can enhance your boarding services and please clients.

By Wendy S. Myers



When Luke arrived for boarding at Deer Creek Animal Hospital in Littleton, Colo., Susan Miller escorted the yellow Labrador to Suite 12. The luxury suite resembles a Florida beach cottage with a white rod iron gate, a window with silk flowers in a planter box, a porch light, and a mailbox to hold Luke’s belongings and report card. Luke’s 8-by-8 suite features an elevated bed, fleece blanket, dog biscuit waiting for him upon arrival, and a web cam so the Opperman family can view him while they’re in New Orleans.

During his stay at Camp Deer Creek, Luke gets three play sessions daily, including a swim in the heated pool while wearing a lifejacket. Luke can play poolside or in an outdoor courtyard with a staff member. Luke also enjoys morning and evening treats. Staff members monitor Luke’s weight, appetite, exercise, and body functions daily and record notes on a boarding report card. A technician or veterinarian does rounds each day, ensuring that boarding residents are healthy.

“Dogs aren’t just going to be stuck in a run for a week,” says Larry Keppler, hospital administrator at Deer Creek Animal Hospital. “This is a hotel environment with a courtyard, spa, and pool. Dogs are monitored closely by our medical staff, which gives clients peace of mind.”

When Deer Creek Animal Hospital opened its 22 luxury suites in August, reservations quickly filled up. By September 50 people were on the waiting list for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Because many pet owners view animals as family members, the demand for boarding extras and luxury accommodations is growing. If cat condos and dog suites aren’t an option at your hospital, you can add extras to regular boarding that increase revenue and bond clients to your practice. Try these ideas to improve your boarding offerings:

1. Offer clients extras. About 50 percent to 75 percent of clients will choose additional services for boarding pets. Create a Tender Loving Care (TLC) Package that treats pets to extras and reduces clients’ feelings of guilt for boarding their animals. A TLC package can

include a morning and afternoon treat, walk, brushing, massage, and a fleece blanket. TLC packages can range from \$4 to \$7 per day, taking a \$15 per day boarding fee up to \$22.

Also consider a “Yappy Hour” upgrade for boarding pets. This afternoon treat time features unique offerings such as Frosty Paws, a frozen ice cream treat for dogs, or Greenies®, a dental chew that freshens breath and cleans teeth. For Frosty Paws product information, call (800) 225-3636 or visit www.frostypaws.com. Get information about Greenies at (877) 468-5695 or www.kissablepets.com.

For holidays, take pictures of pets wearing a Santa hat or serve a Thanksgiving or Christmas “dinner” with a special pet treat. You also can send pets home with a holiday bandanna or a scarf with your hospital logo.

2. Provide a stress-free environment. Well-lit accommodations, friendly staff, and comforts from home can help reduce stress among boarding pets. Stress may cause weight loss, diarrhea, excessive shedding, and fear biting.

To create a calming environment, let clients bring items from home, including a pet’s bed, favorite toy, leash, or blanket. You can help prevent lost items with a wire basket on the cage door or a storage bin or drawer. When clients check in, list items they bring on your boarding form.

Research shows the beneficial effects of music on animal behavior, including reducing separation anxiety and stress. Play soft, relaxing music and keep the volume low enough to have conversations at normal levels. Try classical, soft jazz, nature sounds, or Pet Music®, a three CD collection approved by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, for \$19.99 from www.petmusic.com or (215) 628-2300.

3. Provide a boarding report card. When clients pick up pets, send them home with a report card that summarizes activities, mood, and eating habits. At Pete & Mac’s, a recreational resort for pets in Lenexa, Kan., and Lee’s Summit, Mo., pets get a report card that lists:

- Name of the “parent” (client) and “kid” (pet)
- Mood: Playful, cuddly, watchful, shy, grumpy, or cautious
- Favorite toys and activities
- Favorite playmate
- Comments
- Signature of Pete & Mac’s activity coordinator

Also consider adding a pet's digital photo to the report card. Clients appreciate information about their pet's stay and often show a report card to friends and family, which may encourage referrals to your hospital.

4. Give clients a business card of the animal caretaker. When a client arrives with a pet for boarding, your kennel assistant can greet the client and pet by name, shake the client's hand, pet the animal, and say, "Hi, I'm Julie. I'll take care of Ollie while you're on vacation. Here's my business card in case you have questions during Ollie's stay. I'll take good care of him and we'll share lots of playtimes, treats, and love." This personal introduction and presentation of a business card increases client confidence in your service.

5. Emphasize your veterinary-supervised boarding. Clients with geriatric pets or sick animals on medication need your medical expertise. These pets require extra monitoring, special diets, or medication. For example, Deer Creek Animal Hospital charges \$3 per time for a technician to administer medication.

At Muddy Creek Animal Care Center in Rowley, Mass., older cats rest in condos with a heated waterbed and an individualized ventilation system. Staff members adjust the temperature of the bed, administer medication, and monitor weight and water and food intake. The veterinary-supervised boarding costs \$20 per day.

Also consider having a veterinarian provide a brief wellness exam upon check in. The doctor may discover a lump, ear problem, or other medical condition that needs treatment. Your hospital can provide treatment or preventive services such as a dental prophylaxis.

6. Add a bath. If a dog stays five days or longer, offer a complimentary bath. You don't want the animal to leave your hospital smelling like a kennel. If a pet stays for a shorter time, let clients purchase a bath. At Deer Creek Animal Hospital, the boarding check-in form lists a boarding bath for dogs over 60 pounds for \$25 or \$15 for dogs less than 60 pounds.

7. Consider virtual boarding. Clients can view a live image of their pet on your hospital web site. All 22 luxury suites at Deer Creek Animal Hospital feature a web cam. Clients visit www.dcah.com, click on "boarding," and log on with their last name and the password is the pet's name. They can view a real-time image of their pet in its luxury suite or see a snapshot of the swimming pool.

Virtual boarding requires an investment in time and technology. Keppler spent \$400 per web cam, \$900 per month for a T1 line for high-speed Internet access, and \$10,000 in software

to upgrade the server for the entire hospital network, including all computers, not just virtual boarding. Although Keppler had the programming expertise to create the database that controls the 22 web cams and census of boarding pets, he says hiring a programmer could cost \$5,000 to \$10,000.

Whether you choose a simple idea such as a boarding report card or the high-tech touch of virtual boarding, adding extras to your boarding services will please clients and encourage repeat visits and referrals.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.