

How Can I Persuade The Practice Owner To Send Team Members To Continuing-Education Seminars?

By Wendy S. Myers



Q. Our doctors regularly attend continuing-education meetings and return with new energy and ideas. I'd like team members to enjoy the same benefits. As the practice manager, I know training is a valuable staff-retention tool. How can I persuade the owner to pay for staff members' continuing education?

A. Continuing education for staff members is one of the best investments you'll make. You'll improve morale, skills and your bottom line. Most practices spend 1 percent of revenue on continuing education.

Because your owner understands the importance of ongoing training for veterinarians, discuss the need for staff members to grow. Persuading the owner to foot the bill will be your toughest challenge. With preparation, you can make a case for staff continuing education. Follow these steps to design a program for your team:

1. Set a budget. Your owner will ask how much training will cost, so do your homework. Choose a local, state or national conference that staff members could attend. Find out the registration fee and estimate expenses for travel, hotel and meals. Out-of-state meetings can easily cost \$1,000 per person. If you want several staff members to attend a meeting, you might consider a local or state conference.

Dr. Richard Branson, owner of Cherokee Animal Clinic and Cherokee Cat Clinic in Overland Park, Kansas, sends his team to the Central Veterinary Conference in Kansas City, Missouri, each year. The practices close, leaving two staff members behind to answer phones and handle emergencies. Dr. Branson spends about \$2,000 on registration fees for 20 staff members and doesn't incur hotel or travel costs because the national conference is within driving distance. "We talk about which sessions we'll attend before we go to the conference," Dr. Branson says. "Everyone must come back with at least three ideas. We meet after the conference to discuss what we learned and which ideas we'll implement. We always experience good growth for several months after the conference."

2. Create learning goals. When you conduct performance reviews, ask staff members to write specific learning goals. If several employees share similar interests, consider an on-site seminar. For example, AAHA offers On-Site Practice Team Education workshops, including “Communication and Team Building.” An AAHA practice consultant customizes a workshop for your practice’s specific needs and spends four hours training your team. Sessions include workbooks, exercises and quizzes. For details, call Jeanette Moore at AAHA at (800) 252-2242, ext. 276, or e-mail jeanette.moore@aahanet.org

You also can create your own in-service seminars. Cherokee Animal Clinic and Cherokee Cat Clinic closes each Thursday from 11:45 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. for staff training. Doctors present interactive lectures with slides, quizzes and role-playing exercises. Dr. Branson bought an LCD projector and laptop computer so he can create Power Point presentations. Vendors also present seminars every other month. “Everyone looks forward to our Thursday training sessions,” Dr. Branson says. “We don’t let them turn into gripe sessions. If you have a complaint, you must offer a solution.”

3. Choose conferences that match your learning goals. Most national conferences offer programs for technicians, receptionists and practice managers. Contact conference organizers to request a seminar schedule and registration forms. Try these national meetings:

- American Animal Hospital Association, (800) 883-6301, www.aahanet.org
- American Veterinary Medical Association, (800) 248-2862, www.avma.org
- North American Veterinary Conference, Orlando, Florida, (800) 756-3446, www.navconline.com
- Western Veterinary Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada, (702) 739-6698, www.westernveterinary.org
- Central Veterinary Conference, Kansas City, Missouri, (800) 255-6864, www.vetmedpub.com
- Wild West Veterinary Conference, Reno, Nevada, (877) 846-9378, www.wildwestvc.com

4. Join an association. You’ll get newsletters, continuing education, certification programs and networking contacts by joining a veterinary association. For example, AAHA now offers a practice team membership that includes veterinarians, hospital managers, technicians, assistants and front-office staff. You’re eligible for member discounts on AAHA continuing education, publications and services. Call (800) 883-6301 for details.

If you're interested in networking with peers, try these organizations:

- Veterinary Hospital Managers Association, (518) 433-8911, www.vhma.org
- North American Veterinary Technicians Association, (765) 742-2216, www.avma.org/navta/
- National Dog Groomers Association of America, (724) 962-2711, www.nauticom.net/www/ndga/
- Association of Pet Dog Trainers, (800) PET-DOGS, www.apdt.com

5. Try distance-learning programs. You can train your team with videos, CD-ROMs, online classes and distance-learning programs. AAHA offers a veterinary receptionist certificate and veterinary assistant certificate through the Distance Education Institute for Veterinary Assistants. You also can become a certified veterinary technician with an associate's degree through the Cedar Valley College Distance Education Veterinary Technician Program. Call AAHA for enrollment details.

Staff members at Cherokee Animal Clinic and Cherokee Cat Clinic watch "One Client at a Time: Building Customer Loyalty and Practice Success Through Personal Marketing," an AAHA video and workbook series by Dr. Cecelia Soares. The 25-minute AAHA video teaches you how to explain services, tailor recommendations, address objections and help clients make informed decisions. "The difference between a successful veterinary practice and a struggling one lies in the emphasis placed on strong internal marketing techniques," Dr. Soares says. "A top-notch practice also thrives on teamwork, especially when it comes to marketing specific services."

Team members can get online training through Veterinary Support Personnel Network (VSPN) at www.vspn.org. Offered by Veterinary Information Network (www.vin.com), VSPN caters to technicians, veterinary assistants, practice managers, receptionists and animal caretakers. VSPN features online continuing education, message boards, abstracts and a rounds room. You can learn about OSHA safety, toxicology, scheduling tips and more.

Staff continuing education can help you retain team members and improve your productivity. Dr. Branson offers this advice for owners who are reluctant to spend money on staff continuing education: "You're missing the boat because these are the people who make your clients feel comfortable. Staff continuing education helps everyone feel they're part of the whole practice, not just an employee."

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.