

Deliver a Great Experience to Show Value in a Down Economy

Help cautious clients happily accept the care their pets need

By Wendy S. Myers

When we adopted our 8-week-old Siamese-mix kitten from a shelter on Saturday, our first priority was a visit to The Cat Specialist in Castle Rock, Colorado, for a nose to tail assessment. I called Monday morning and was able to schedule an appointment for 8 a.m. Tuesday. The early appointment conveniently fit into my morning routine, and then I'd go to my office with Opus so he could meet my staff.



Molly Hunsberger, CVT, greeted me with a warm smile and “Good morning, Wendy. We’re anxious to meet your new baby!” Without a wait, I went into an exam room where Molly reviewed adoption papers and what services were needed. “I’ll take Opus to the treatment area where we’ll get started on his feline leukemia test and microchipping, and then Dr. Olson will perform the exam and answer your questions,” she said. Molly returned minutes later with Opus wiggling in her arms. Dr. James Olson, Diplomate

ABVP, greeted me and said, “You have a beautiful boy!” We spent 30 minutes discussing Opus’s medical needs, nutrition, parasite prevention, litter box training, and appropriate toys.

When I checked out at the front desk, Molly read off the computer screen, “Today Opus had a comprehensive exam, feline leukemia/FIV/heartworm test, microchip, a three pack of preventatives, comb, and eight toys. Your total is \$171.99.” I happily handed her my Visa. “Because the shelter gave Opus his first feline distemper vaccine on Friday, he will be due again in four weeks. Let’s go ahead and set up his appointment. Does 8 a.m. on October 30 work for you?” Molly asked.

“Perfect!” I replied. As I drove to my office with a purring kitten in his carrier, I realized this was the perfect experience that I train teams to provide as a consultant. In a down economy, we must work harder to bond with clients and show value for our services.

Research from the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (www.ncvei.org) shows revenue growth for the second quarter of 2009 is flat. NCVEI's Economy Tracker found one-third of practices have been hard hit by the economy, with revenues down as much as 10 percent to 15 percent. Another one-third of hospitals are flat, while the remaining third are doing well. If you want to be in the latter group, focus on consistently delivering exceptional service and the money will follow. Clients are more cautious about spending dollars but are willing if we show value. Here's how:



Greet clients and pets by name as they walk through the door. Look at the appointment schedule before you step behind the front desk. Study names of clients and pets along with the reason for the visit. I coach reception teams to flag new clients with “NC” or a color code in the schedule. Remember, you get one chance to wow a first-time client.

Stand as you greet clients, which communicates you're eager to help. At The Animal Center in Zachary, Louisiana, team members write names of visiting pets on a blackboard with colorful chalk. The welcome sign makes clients feel extra special. Your mannerisms, tone of voice, and personal greetings will get you off to a great start with every client.

Screen records for compliance opportunities. Besides vaccines, what diagnostic testing is due? How often are you missing intestinal parasite testing for cats? When were the last preventatives purchased, and how many doses were sold? Is the client sharing a box of preventatives between pets? Is the patient on a long-term drug that requires medication monitoring? Is the master problem sheet up to date? You'll uncover missed opportunities in about half of patients if you look for compliance gaps.

Search for other pets in the family that are overdue. Two Chihuahuas were getting “the works” along with 12 months of flea and heartworm preventatives during their annual exam at a practice I consulted in San Antonio, Texas. A second look at the medical record identified two outdoor cats that hadn't received veterinary care in four years. When I showed the compliance opportunity to the veterinarian, he casually asked the client, “How are Milo and Sammy? Did you know it's been four years since we've seen them? I could see them tomorrow afternoon to get them up to date. Since Milo and Sammy are outdoor cats, we need to protect them from

rabies, feline leukemia, and harmful parasites.” The subtle approach worked. The client returned the next afternoon with Milo and Sammy.

Review services and products when presenting the invoice. To prevent sticker shock at checkout, use confident body language and sales reinforcement techniques. Let’s say that Mrs. Arvanitis visits with Mason, a 2-year-old Newfoundland, for wellness services. As Mrs. Arvanitis nears the checkout counter, stand to greet her, smile, and make eye contact. Read the list of services and products off the computer screen, and then state the total. Don’t say prices for each item, just the sum. Besides showing value, this allows the client to add items such as preventatives, medication refills, and food.



“Mrs. Arvanitis, today Mason had a comprehensive exam, heartworm and intestinal parasite tests, and vaccines to protect him from canine distemper, adenovirus, parainfluenza, parvovirus, rabies, and kennel cough. You also have Mason’s prescription for 12 months of parasite protection. Does Mason need any medication refills or food?” After the client responds, say “Your total is \$_____. Which payment method are you using today?”

State diseases that vaccines cover rather than acronyms such as DHLPP or FVRCP. Likewise, say “intestinal parasite test” instead of “fecal.” If you screen for tick-borne diseases in addition to heartworms, call your test a “blood parasite test” or “heartworm/tick test” to show value for additional diagnostics.

Asking the client’s preferred payment method subtly tells her that payment is due when services are rendered. For new clients add which payments you take such as, “We accept cash, checks, and all major credit cards.” Once the transaction is complete, give the receipt to the client along with a smile that communicates “We appreciate your business.”

Schedule medical progress exams at checkout. Let’s say Mason also had an ear infection. If today is November 5 and the veterinarian wants to examine Mason’s ears again in 14 days, the doctor would say, “I will see Mason again on November 19. Ear infections can be painful and develop into a serious condition unless treated and reexamined to make sure the

infection has cleared. The receptionist will schedule an appointment for Mason's medical progress exam on November 19."

State a specific date when follow-up care is needed. Use the phrase "medical progress exam" instead of "recheck." "Recheck" sounds optional and potentially free, while "medical progress exam" communicates needed action. Take the same approach by pre-appointing puppy and kitten visits, stressing the timing of vaccines and dewormings as well as the next preventative dose that may change due pets' growing weights.

Thank clients for their business and encourage referrals. When clients have an exceptional experience, they'll brag about your practice to friends and family. Downturns in the housing market have resulted in declining new client numbers. Focus on getting more business from existing clients while also encouraging referrals.

Have a "How did you hear about us?" question on new client forms so you can send thank-you letters to referring clients and track which marketing programs deliver the best return on investment. Paying attention to the details of your business in a down economy will help you recession-proof your practice. What will you do to increase client service?

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.