

How Can I Grow My Practice in the Face of Decreasing Vaccination Frequency?

By Wendy S. Myers



Since 1945, Arkansas state law had required dogs and cats to receive annual rabies vaccination. The mandate changed January 1, 2010, when the state became the last in the country to stop requiring annual rabies inoculations. Now Arkansas veterinarians will decide whether a pet needs rabies vaccination annually or every three years. Only a third of pets in Arkansas are currently vaccinated for rabies. Nationwide, 93 percent of rabies cases were in wildlife and 7 percent were in domestic animals, according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As vaccine protocols and laws have changed, this scenario has been playing out in states around the country, causing veterinarians to reassess wellness strategies.

Yearly vaccines have long been drivers to get clients to return. While vaccines remain a cornerstone, clients need multiple reasons to come back. Here are eight ways to grow revenue as vaccination frequency declines:

1. Screen records for compliance opportunities. For practices with paper records, have receptionists pull files the day before patients' appointments. See what services and products will be due tomorrow. Highlight travel sheets, or note compliance opportunities in records. For paperless practices, use the check-in report in your veterinary software. This summarizes patients' reminder status and has alerts for overdue services and products.

2. Ask risk-assessment questions. While you may vaccinate for rabies every three years, you might decide to administer vaccines for Bordetella, Lyme disease, or Leptospirosis annually based on the dog's lifestyle. Tailor vaccine and parasite protocols for owners of multi-cat households, as well as "indoor" cats that enjoy supervised play in fenced yards or naps on screened porches.

3. Emphasize diagnostic testing. A 2003 Boston Consulting Group study found that clients purchase an average of seven months of heartworm medication each year. Annual heartworm

testing identifies gaps in protection and serves as an “insurance policy” for clients who give preventatives year-round.

Be passionate about routine testing for intestinal parasites and educating clients on zoonotic diseases. A Merial study found 83 percent of dog owners are unaware their pets’ waste can cause parasite infections in humans. Protection is equally important for indoor cats because 15 percent of potting soil contains roundworms.

Senior pets can benefit from wellness blood testing and urinalysis. You’ll catch conditions early when multiple treatment options are available. Would you rather diagnose and manage early renal disease or kidney failure?

Also set standards for feline leukemia testing for kittens and indoor/outdoor cats. Visit www.kittytest.com for prevalence rates of feline immunodeficiency virus, feline leukemia, and feline heartworm in your state and county.



4. Prescribe veterinary drugs, not generics. Grocery stores and pharmacies are advertising \$4 generic prescriptions for pets. Luring customers with cheap drugs helps retailers sell pet food, cat litter, and other items while they wait 30 minutes for a pharmacist to fill prescriptions.

Let clients know that you use drugs approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for use in animals. For example, give a patient an injection of Convenia instead of dispensing generic cephalexin. Compliance improves because the veterinarian administers the antibiotic injection, and the client doesn’t have to remember to give pills once, twice, or three times daily. Another benefit: Convenia is not available at local drug stores.

5. Reach out to unvaccinated pets. Let’s say a story about a raccoon with rabies was on the local evening news. Identify dogs and cats that you have not vaccinated for rabies. Print the report in date order, from the most recently overdue patients to those overdue by two years. Divide the list among receptionists and technicians who will call clients and say, “Mrs. Jones, there was a story about a rabid raccoon on last night’s news. Our records show Duke is not vaccinated and may be at risk for exposure. The doctors asked me to call you about the urgent need to vaccinate Duke. When could you come in this week? We could see Duke on Tuesday at 9 am or 4 pm. Which fits your schedule?”

Known as the “two yes options” technique, this phrasing increases the chance you’ll schedule an appointment. “When” encourages “yes” compared to “Do you want to schedule an appointment?” which could result in “no.”



6. Call clients with newly overdue pets. When I consulted an Ohio practice, the office manager shared frustration over stacks of uncalled clients with overdue reminders. Some patients were two years overdue. Receptionists were discouraged by the number of disconnected phone numbers, unanswered messages, and deceased pets. Instead of monthly lists with hundreds of names, I advised the manager to give each receptionist a list on Mondays of patients overdue within the last two months. The weekly overdue reminder report for two months had 100 names, divided among four receptionists. That’s 25 calls per person. If each works five days a week, she makes five calls per day. On Fridays, receptionists give the manager completed lists. The new system was more manageable—and got better results.

7. Schedule medical progress exams at checkout. Research from Veterinary Metrics in Atlanta found a two-doctor practice misses 300 to 600 follow-up visits annually. In today’s economy, you can’t gamble patients’ health or risk practice income.

Compliance is highest at checkout, so schedule follow-up visits for puppies, kittens, and sick patients. Timing is especially important for young pets. Tell the client at checkout, “Your puppy will need his next vaccines, deworming, and intestinal parasite test in three weeks. That would be (date). Does this same time work for you?” Suggesting a specific date will encourage the client to book the appointment now. Scheduling the next visit at checkout allows the client to see the same veterinarian, which increases efficiency.

To improve compliance for sick pets, hang wall calendars or open the appointment schedule on computers in exam rooms. Rather than “I’d like to recheck your dog’s ears in two weeks,” the doctor should say, “I need to see your dog again on (date). Ear infections can be painful and develop into a serious condition unless treated and re-examined to make sure the infection has cleared. The receptionist will schedule Jake’s medical progress exam on (date).”

8. Double-check every reminder at checkout. Reminders drive future business. Verify reminders for exams, vaccines, diagnostic tests, and preventative refills. If the pet was ill, enter

a callback. Were any long-term drugs prescribed for the first time? If so, was a reminder for medication monitoring entered? Is the drug listed on the master problem sheet? Are other pets in the same family overdue for any services?

You'll uncover missed opportunities in about half of patients if you look for compliance gaps. Take a proactive approach to protect patients as well as practice income.

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.