

Oops, Watch What You Say!

Common phrases may send the wrong messages to your clients

By Wendy S. Myers

Listening to conversations between veterinary staff and clients can sometimes raise eyebrows. Team members may sound unsure, explain that it depends on which doctor you see or inappropriately describe your hospital's services. As a veterinary consultant, I witness awkward conversations first-hand during in-clinic consultations as well as through our Mystery Phone Shopper Training Program when the practice owner has us call to measure receptionists' phone-shopper skills.

Here are actual conversations from team members along with coaching on how to say it to better communicate your professionalism and medical services. Listen for words and phrases that would turn away phone shoppers and clients.



Oops: A receptionist talking to a phone shopper about her dog's spay said, "We always practice good pain management here, and, you know, it depends on the pet. Some pets have pain management and others don't because the vet never offered it."

How to say it: "A spay is similar to a hysterectomy for women. Our hospital includes a pre-surgical pain-relief injection that lasts 24 hours, and we will send you home with ongoing medication for a restful recovery." Use phrases such as "pain relief" rather than "pain injection" or "pain management." Also try "includes" in place of "requires" if your hospital's protocol is to proactively manage pain for all surgery patients. Sending medication home for a "restful recovery" communicates your compassion and post-surgical care.

Oops: When a client called about her dog's vomiting and diarrhea, the receptionist advised her to come in on a walk-in basis so a doctor could examine her pet. "Sometimes it's a 5-minute wait or a 2-hour wait. We do pretty well, but a hit-by-car could walk in and of course it's going to be seen first. Right now there are no emergencies going on but that could change in 30 seconds."

How to say it: Don't use veterinary lingo such as hit-by-car, which could have the client visualizing traumatic injuries. Instead, communicate that her dog needs to be seen today. I

advise our consulting clients to block “urgent care” appointment slots in their schedules for clients who call with sick pets that must be seen the same day. The number of work-in or urgent care slots depends on your number of doctors, staff and exam rooms. For a one- to two-doctor hospital, two or three 20-minute urgent care slots per day are usually sufficient. Stagger urgent care slots by at least one hour so both doctors don’t see these sick patients at the same time, which could cause delays in the treatment area due to work-ups. For example, Doctor 1 might have an urgent care slot at 10 am while Doctor 2 has hers at 11 am. Consider charging a slightly higher exam fee for these sick pet appointments, which require more staff, diagnostics and critical-thinking skills of the doctor—all of which demand more time. Schedule the last urgent care slot 60 to 90 minutes before closing so you can diagnose and treat the patient without incurring staff overtime. Consider extra urgent care slots on Mondays and Fridays, which tend to have more urgent care and emergency patients.



How to say it: “I’m glad you called because anytime a pet has been vomiting and had diarrhea for 24 hours, it’s important for a doctor to perform a comprehensive physical exam and run tests to determine the cause. I have an urgent care appointment available at 10 am today with Dr. Myers. Does that fit your schedule because we want to give (pet’s name) the medical care that she needs today?” Once the client accepts the urgent care appointment, let her know if there is a higher exam fee. “To help you prepare for your urgent care appointment, I want to let you know that the urgent care exam fee is \$____. Once the doctor examines your pet, she can determine what diagnostic tests or medications will be needed. During your appointment, we can provide a written treatment plan that describes our services and fees as well as answer your questions.”

If you don’t have any appointments available, offer a day admission. Do not call it a “drop-off”!

How to say it: “I’m glad you called right away about your dog’s vomiting and diarrhea because when a pet has these symptoms for 24 hours, it’s important for a doctor to perform a comprehensive physical exam and run tests to determine the cause. Although today’s appointments are filled, we could admit your pet to the hospital for the day. Our doctor can examine your dog and then call you to discuss what tests or treatments are needed. When you

arrive, a technician will talk with you about your dog's symptoms so the doctor has complete information. When would you like to bring your dog in for admission to the hospital?"

Share these scripts with your team. During a staff meeting, discuss what words and phrases you'd like your team to consistently say to clients. To make the activity fun, tape sheets of paper on break room or treatment area walls. Label sheets with "Oops" where you'll write common statements that may give clients wrong impressions. Place a sheet next to it labeled "How to say it" so staff members can fill in the right words. Practicing what you'll say to clients and phone shoppers will instill confidence and poise.

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.