

## Practice Tips – Client Service

### Are Clients' Cell Phone Calls Driving You Crazy?



As you examine Mrs. Designer's dog, Prada, you explain the Labrador retriever has Grade 3 dental disease and needs a professional dental cleaning. Her cell phone repeatedly rings with calls from her ladies' Bunco group trying to schedule the next gathering. The constant interruptions prevent you from explaining the dental procedure. How can you politely tell her to "HANG UP!"?

Use signs and/or conversations filled with benefit statements to educate clients on the importance of focusing on their pets—not cell phone calls—during veterinary visits. Hang signs in your reception area and exam rooms that encourage clients to turn off cell phones. Commonly seen in human hospitals, try a sign that states "Medical equipment in use. Kindly turn off cell phones." A more client-friendly alternative might be "Please turn off your cell phone so we can serve you better. Thank you!" This benefit statement

focuses on WIFM—What's in it for me—explaining why the client should focus on the veterinary visit rather than cell phone conversations.

If the client continues to answer her phone throughout the exam, try these approaches. As the client answers her phone, whisper loudly, *"I'll be back after you've finished your call."* Most clients will quickly hang up because they don't want to wait any longer. If the client continues to yak on her cell phone, interrupt her politely and say, *"I need you to turn off your cell phone during your appointment. I want to make sure your pet gets a thorough exam and also answer your questions without interruptions. We both want your pet to get the care it needs."* Use benefit statements like these to show clients the value of hanging up!

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### Are Your Doctors Always Running Late for Appointments?

During my consultations, I follow several appointments from start to finish, noting the check-in and checkout times, communication skills of the doctors and technicians and if clients left with what they were promised and clear understanding of doctors' recommendations. Wait time is an issue at many practices. Try these proven methods that I've recommended to many of my consulting clients:

**1. Balance your schedule with wellness and sick pet exams.** If you stack one sick pet exam after another, doctors will quickly run behind. Have receptionists color code your appointment book to visually organize the day's flow. Use colored highlighters for a paper appointment book or background color blocks on a computerized schedule. For example, green= wellness, yellow = sick pet, pink = euthanasia, red = emergency and blue = diagnostics or recheck. As receptionists book appointments, balance wellness and sick pet exams. Schedule well-sick-well appointments in a group rather than sick-sick-sick.

**2. Block "work-in/sick pet" appointment slots in your schedule.** The number of work-in or emergency slots depends on your number of doctors, staff and exam rooms. For a one- to two-doctor hospital, two or three 20-minute work-in slots per day are usually sufficient. Try one 20-minute slot mid-morning and another mid-afternoon, such as 10:00 to 10:20 am and 2:00 to 2:20 pm.

**3. Train staff and doctors to “rescue” each other from chatty clients.** If the next client has arrived and Dr. Johnson is running behind in another exam room, a technician can step in and say, “Dr. Johnson, is there anything else you need as you wrap up your appointment?” This subtly tells the doctor the next appointment is here and prompts the client to ask any final questions.

Add stools for doctors and technicians to exam rooms. When a doctor sits to explain his diagnosis and recommendations, his body language communicates, “You have my complete attention, and I want to focus on you and what your pet needs.” When he stands, his body language signals, “Our visit is finished.” Likewise, when a technician opens the appointment and the client begins a lengthy description of her dog’s problem, the team member might interject, “Let me repeat one or two key problems your dog is experiencing so I can go get the doctor now and keep your appointment on time.” This redirects the conversation and lets the client know you value her time.

**4. Use timers to monitor your timeliness.** Have the staff member who escorts the client into the exam room start a timer. Clip the timer onto the pocketed folder on the back of the exam door or use timers with magnetic backs that cling to the metal door frame. Before walking into the exam room, the doctor can glance at the timer to see how long the client has been waiting and know the remaining time available. Don’t view timers as punishment for chronically late doctors. It’s simply a tool to create awareness and help every team member actively participate in solving the problem.

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## **Collect Deposits for Holiday Boarding**



As families celebrate the holidays together, your veterinary practice will become a second home to furry family members. With full boarding reservations, you want to make sure every pet checks in for their scheduled stay. Your goal is to prevent no-shows as well as walk-ins without reservations when you’re booked to capacity.

Just as hotels require a credit-card number to guarantee a room reservation, consider collecting deposits for holiday boarding such as spring break, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Review last year’s boarding reservations to identify your practice’s busiest holidays.

When clients call to schedule a reservation, your receptionist would say, “For holiday boarding, we collect a \$50 deposit to secure your reservation. This guarantees that your pet has accommodations reserved, just like hotels do. Which credit card would you like to use today to reserve your pet’s stay?”

Call clients with existing holiday reservations 3-4 weeks before the holiday. Your receptionist might say, “Good morning, Wendy. This is Susan from Myers Veterinary Hospital. I’m calling to confirm Ollie’s boarding reservation for Thanksgiving. We have a kitty condo and playtimes reserved for him from November 21 to 23. Just as hotels guarantee reservations, we’re collecting a \$50 deposit to confirm Ollie’s reservation. Which credit card would you like to use today to confirm Ollie’s stay?” If you leave a message, the receptionist might say, “Please call us within one week to confirm your pet’s reservation. We have a high demand for holiday boarding and want to make sure we keep your pet’s reservation. If we don’t hear from you within one week, we will release your reservation. We look forward to hearing from you and caring for your pet.” If a long-time client questions your deposit, say, “We value our relationship with you. We are collecting deposits from everyone who has holiday boarding reservations so all clients are treated with the same fairness. We only collect deposits for holidays because it’s important for us to be able to guarantee your pet’s reservation.” Avoid making exceptions because you’ll only create

a demanding client who will expect special treatment for other services. Refund deposits for holiday boarding if cancelled within 48 hours of the reservation.

Pets should be current on vaccinations and preventatives prior to arrival. Provide exceptional client service by checking each pet's status when the client makes the reservation. The receptionist might say, "Max will be due for his Bordetella vaccination a few weeks before his boarding reservation. When would you like to schedule his vaccination appointment so he's fully protected before he checks in for boarding?" Ask your veterinarians to set protocols about whether vaccines can be given while boarding or are required in advance. For example, some practitioners prefer to give vaccines 10-14 days before boarding because vaccines do not have immediate response. If vaccines are given during the boarding stay, consider giving them the morning of arrival and have a staff member designated to observe the pet for vaccine reaction.

Speed check-in time by putting your boarding admission form on your website. Receptionists could make boarding confirmation calls 1-2 days before the reservation. For example, "Good afternoon, Wendy. I'm calling to confirm Ollie's boarding reservation for November 21 to 23. You can speed your check-in on Wednesday morning by going to our website at (state your web address) and downloading our boarding form. You can complete it at home and bring it with you on Wednesday. Please call us at (state your phone number) if you have questions. We look forward to seeing you and Ollie."

For sample dog and cat boarding registration forms, order *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD*. [Click here](#) for an order form.

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## **Creating a Comforting Setting for Euthanasias**



When a client says good-bye to a best friend, you want to provide a comforting environment and caring touch. To prepare your exam room for an attended euthanasia, soften the steel or laminated exam table by placing a pastel colored towel over it. The towel should be the good "company towel," not those used in the hospitalization or kennel wards. Put a pillow or two at the head of the exam table, propped against the wall to create the look of a "bed." On the "bed," place a brochure on pet loss or grief counseling. Consider the booklets, *A Final Act of Caring* and *Good-Bye My Friend* from AAHA ([www.aahanet.org](http://www.aahanet.org)).

On the exam counter, have a box of tissues available. A tabletop water fountain can provide soothing sounds and cover the noise of a busy veterinary hospital. You can choose from a variety of tabletop fountains for \$20-\$40 from [www.everythinghomedics.com](http://www.everythinghomedics.com). On a portable CD player or boom box, play calming New Age or instrumental music. Try "Pet Music," a three CD set of music especially for companions ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)). Also have a cordless courtesy phone in the room in case the client needs to call a friend or family member, especially if the client doesn't have a cell phone or your practice is in a weak signal area.

Lastly, provide a memorial gift to honor the pet. Type the "Rainbow Bridge" poem on your computer, add the date and pet's name, print it on rainbow stationery and add the pet's paw print. A product called Clay Paws ([www.claypaws.com](http://www.claypaws.com)) allows owners to immortalize their pets' footprint in clay. Go beyond the

traditional sympathy card—reach out to your clients with a heartwarming hug, words of comfort and special touches that help them say farewell to our animal angels.

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## **Don't Ask Clients If They Need Help, Just Do It!**

Think about your own experiences as a customer. When you go to the grocery store and the person sacking your groceries asks, “Would you like help to your car?” You politely decline, push an overflowing cart into the parking lot and struggle to keep it from rolling into your car while loading groceries into your trunk.



The same scenario happens in veterinary hospitals. While checking out from a wellness exam, many clients add purchases such as flea, tick and heartworm preventatives and food. A typical client spends \$118 per doctor transaction, according to the 2005 Well-Managed Practice Study by Wutchiett & Associates and *Veterinary Economics*. You hand the client her 20-pound bag of food and flea, tick and heartworm preventatives. Her Jack Russell “terrorist” tugs non-stop at the leash, and she wrestles the food and dog out to the car.

Next time, don't ask the client, “Do you need any help out to your car?” Instead, bring the bag of food to your side of the reception counter, complete the transaction and then pick up the food, walk around the counter and say, “**Let me help you out to your car.**” Hold the clinic door open for the client and her pet and carry the food and purchases to her car so she can easily get the pet settled for the ride home. The client will

appreciate the extra set of hands and your exceptional service.

Also use this “Let me help you” approach when transferring calls. Instead of “Please hold” say, “Let me connect you with the surgery technician who can give you the latest information on your hospitalized pet.” Practice using the “Let me help you” phrase in your client interactions, and you'll find folks are truly appreciative. And the next time you go to the grocery store say, “Yes, I'd like help out to my car. Thank you for offering!”

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## **Help Clients Remember When to Give Pets Monthly Preventatives**

With clients' busy schedules; sometimes they forget monthly doses of heartworm preventatives. Your healthcare team can improve compliance and get pets the continuous protection they need.



Enter product reminders in your veterinary software. For example, a 12-month supply of preventatives gets a postcard or phone call reminder in 11 months. A six-month dose is reminded in five months, and a single dose gets a callback in 20 days. Product reminders improve compliance for year-round protection and make sure clients don't run out of needed medication.

Also let clients know about monthly e-mail reminders on the day of the month their pets need to take preventatives. All manufacturers offer this free service and guarantee confidentiality of clients' e-mail addresses. When refilling a heartworm preventative, your technician would tell the client, “*Wendy, here is Kash's monthly heartworm preventative refill. It's important that she takes it on the same day each month and is protected from heartworm disease and intestinal parasites year-round. Would you like us to sign you up for a monthly e-mail reminder on the day*



*of the month that Kash needs to take her heartworm preventative?"*

For the best customer service, have receptionists sign up clients for e-mail reminders rather than giving clients the homework assignment. Based on which preventatives your practice carries, bookmark these websites so you can quickly enroll clients for monthly e-mails:

- Pfizer, maker of Revolution, offers a voice messaging call with your clinic name and the pet's name or an e-mail reminder at 1-888-REVOLUTION, [www.revolution4cats.com](http://www.revolution4cats.com) and [www.revolution4dogs.com](http://www.revolution4dogs.com).
- Merial, maker of Heartgard, offers e-mail reminders at [www.heartgard.com](http://www.heartgard.com).
- Novartis, maker of Interceptor and Sentinel, offers e-mail reminders at [www.petwellness.com](http://www.petwellness.com).
- Virbac Animal Health, maker of Iverhart, offers e-mail reminders at [www.iverhart.com/coupon\\_signup.asp](http://www.iverhart.com/coupon_signup.asp).

With reminder strategies in place, you'll protect pets from heartworm disease and significantly improve client compliance.

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## **How long do your clients wait?**



Wait time is an issue at most veterinary hospitals, and it gets worse the larger the practice. Research from 10,000 companion animal practices participating in the AVMA's National Commission on Veterinary Economics Issues ([www.ncvei.org](http://www.ncvei.org)) online database paints a concerning trend.

In a five-doctor practice, a client typically waits 19 minutes during a busy part of the day before being escorted into an exam room. Then the same client waits nearly 9.5 minutes to check out. For a 15-minute wellness exam, a client's waiting time totals 28.5 minutes or double the length of the appointment itself, with the entire visit taking 43.5 minutes.

In the best-case scenario based on NCVEI's research, a client in a one-doctor practice waits 5 minutes to see the veterinarian during a normal part of the day, sees the doctor for 15 minutes and then it takes 3.5 minutes to check out, for a total of 23.5 minutes.

Shaving minutes or even seconds off your wait time can improve your level of client service. To set a goal for improvement, first get the pulse on your current wait times. For one week, ask receptionists to record check-in and checkout times for every appointment. Track waiting time on weekdays as well as Saturdays because service bottlenecks might occur during specific times and days of the week, which helps you identify trends. For example, if the wait time on Saturday morning is 32 minutes, ask yourself whether you have the right number of staff working and the day appropriately scheduled.

Share results of your client wait time log with the entire team during a staff meeting. Discuss trends and brainstorm ideas to shorten wait times. Every team member must help develop solutions for your initiative to be successful. For a free client wait time log you can use to track trends in your practice, [click here](#).

## **Present Estimates to Show Value and Increase Acceptance**

Give clients estimates for surgical and dental procedures so they understand both the care and cost. Calling it an “estimate” emphasizes money. Doctors make recommendations based on medical need, not cost, so call the estimate a “Treatment Plan.”



Have technicians, not doctors, present estimates. Veterinarians—especially owners—are more likely to discount or give away services. The technician would say, *“I want to go over the treatment plan the doctor recommends for your pet.”* Then the technician explains each service, pointing to the left column because the right column lists prices.

Use a picture book to show clients the steps of a dental cleaning, spay, neuter or other common procedures. At West Hills Animal Hospital in Corvallis, Oregon, staff members took digital photos of the steps of a dental cleaning and labeled and laminated each. While explaining the treatment plan, a technician flips each page in the dental notebook.

When finishing presenting the estimate, the technician asks, *“Is this the level of care you’d like for your pet?”* When the client responds yes, the technician says, *“In order to get your permission to schedule or proceed with treatment, I need your signature on the treatment plan and a deposit of \$ \_\_\_\_.”* Most practices only collect a deposit for emergencies so adapt this script to fit your policy. If the client cannot afford that level of care, the technician says, *“Let me go get the doctor so he can recommend Plan B/options for a treatment plan that fits your budget.”*

Always get a signature on an estimate. Give one copy to the client and keep the other in the medical record. When you change your terminology and show clients photos of procedures, you’ll get more clients to say “YES!” to your recommendations.

## **Prevent Sticker Shock When Presenting Estimates**



Using positive body language and convincing phrases can help you confidently present estimates. Because doctors recommend surgery or procedures based on medical need, call the estimate a “Treatment Plan.” The word “estimate” focuses on money, not on the care the patient needs. Also have staff—not doctors—present estimates.

When discussing treatment and finances, don’t stand behind the exam table and talk across it to the client. This face-to-face posture might be perceived as confrontational. Instead, stand at the end of the exam table, forming an “L” shape between you and the client. Even better: Stand on the same side of the exam table, shoulder-to-shoulder with the client. This body language is collaborative rather than confrontational. The technician would then say, *“I want to go over the treatment plan the doctor recommends for your pet.”*

Explain each item, pointing to the left column that lists medical services. Don’t point to the right column—it has prices. Consider creating a three-ring binder with labeled pictures for common procedures such as dental cleanings, spays and neuters. Match the order of photos to your estimate format so you can flip

picture pages as you describe each medical service. For example, show a photo of a technician running in-house blood work while explaining pre-anesthetic testing. Show a picture of a pulse oximeter and EKG when describing monitoring. Pictures help clients better understand procedures, and an educated client is more likely to comply with the doctor's recommendation.

When finishing presenting the treatment plan, the technician asks, *"Is this the level of care you'd like for your pet?"* When the client responds yes, say, *"In order to get your permission to schedule/proceed with treatment, I need your signature on the treatment plan."* If an emergency, say, *"To get your permission to begin emergency treatment of your pet, I need your signature and a deposit of \$ \_\_\_\_\_."* Many practices require a 50% deposit for emergencies.

If the client cannot afford that level of care, the technician says, *"Let me go get the doctor so he can recommend Plan B/options for a treatment plan that fits your budget."* Oftentimes, the client will find a way to pay for the needed care. If not, the doctor can revise the treatment plan based on medical need rather than cost.

To practice this skill, print an estimate from your veterinary software. Role-play conversations with staff and ask them to suggest improvements in your body language and phrases. With training, you'll become a confident communicator and get more patients the care they need.

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## **Surgery Confirmation Calls and Callbacks Show Clients You Care**

Surgery confirmation calls help clients remember fasting instructions and to allow ample time for check-in. For example, receptionists would call clients the day before surgery and say, *"This is Wendy calling from Myers Veterinary Hospital to remind you of Ollie's surgery tomorrow. Please withhold food after 10 p.m. tonight. Your surgery admission appointment is scheduled for 7:45-7:55 a.m. with a technician, who will spend 10 minutes reviewing the consent form, answering your questions and getting numbers where we can reach you the day of surgery. Please allow at least 10 minutes for Ollie's admission to the hospital. If you have questions, please call us at (555) 555-5000."*

Remove "drop off" from your vocabulary and hospital forms. "Drop off" implies the surgery admission process takes seconds. Filling out paperwork at the front desk also reduces compliance for pre-anesthetic testing and elective services such as microchipping. When a patient is being admitted for surgery or dentistry, you need a minimum of 10 minutes to sign consent forms, collect contact phone numbers, answer the client's questions and explain when you will call following the procedure.

After any hospitalized patient is discharged, the client should be called within 24 to 48 hours. The 2003 AAHA study, "The Path to High-Quality Care," found 75% of pet owners wanted their veterinarian or a staff member to call to follow up on the pet's condition after a medical problem but only 52% received a call.

Callbacks let you check on the patient's recovery and reinforce home-care instructions and rechecks. With proper training, any staff member can make callbacks. To create callback protocols, list common categories such as dentistry, spays, neuters and other procedures, when and who should call. For example, technicians and receptionists can follow up on routine procedures while doctors may want to call clients about complex or chronic cases. Discuss callbacks as a team and decide what's right for your practice. Use the recall report in your veterinary software to enter callbacks, along with the appropriate staff ID number. Receptionists then print the recall report daily and distribute the list to specific individuals.

### Sample Callback Protocol

Type of callback	When to call	Doctor	Technician	Receptionist
Spay/neuter	Within 24-48 hours		X	
Vaccinations and wellness exams	Within 24 hours			X
Lump removal, possibly cancer	Within 24 hours and again when pathology report is received	X		

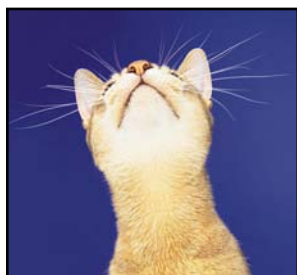
### Try These Helpful Phrases When Dealing With Angry Clients

Tensions can run high when caring clients are worried about their best friends. As a veterinary professional, you need conflict-resolution skills to recover relationships with valued clients. Because it costs 5 to 6 times more to get a new client than to retain a current one, you should focus on service recovery when dealing with an upset client. Here are helpful phrases to try:

1. When you need to fix a client service slip-up, say: *“You and your pet deserve the very best, and we seemed unable to provide it today. Because you’re an important client to us may I suggest...”*
2. If you must gather details and call the client back, say: *“Let me talk with the doctor/technician who cared for your pet to get accurate information and then I will call you back. When would be a convenient time for me to call you with a solution?”* Solution is a magic word when communicating with clients because it indicates that you want to resolve the problem and respect their request.
3. When you must tell a client “no” with professionalism, say: *“Although you may not agree with my decision, I’d like to explain it so you will understand.”*
4. Say to the cursing client: *“If I hear that language again, I won’t be able to assist you. Unless we can find a different way to communicate so we can find a solution together, I am going to hang up/leave.”*

To improve your conflict-resolution skills, role-play common scenarios with other staff members. Practicing these skills will help you have win-win conversations with clients.

### Win over phone shoppers every time



When phone shoppers call, are your receptionists winning new clients or are they turning them away with poor service? As a veterinary consultant, I overhear abrupt conversations where a busy receptionist simply quotes the price and hangs up. Short calls result in shortcomings in new client numbers.

A receptionist needs to spend 2-5 minutes with each phone shopper to answer questions, describe services and “close the sale.” Exams, vaccines, spays and neuters are the top three phone-shopped services, according to research by the National Commission on Veterinary Economics Issues



([www.ncvei.org](http://www.ncvei.org)).

Phone training and mystery phone shopper calls can help your team significantly improve their skills and gain more new clients. Follow these tips to successfully “close the sale” when talking with phone shoppers:

- Use the caller’s and pet’s name in the conversation to bond the prospective client to your practice
- Describe services first, always stating the price last
- Say something great about your clinic to distinguish you from neighboring practices
- Offer to mail the caller an estimate, hospital brochure, business card and/or magnet
- Ask for the appointment at the end of the call

Here is one of our sample conversations we teach veterinary receptionists during phone-skills workshops.

Phone shopper: “How much are vaccines and an exam for a new kitten?”

Receptionist: “Congratulations on your new family member! For an 8-week-old kitten’s first veterinary visit, we recommend a comprehensive physical exam and FVRCP vaccination to protect your kitten from feline distemper and two upper respiratory diseases (tailor this script to your vaccine protocol). Your kitten will need to receive booster vaccines again at the age of 12 and 16 weeks. We also need to test your kitten for Feline leukemia and FIV, which is feline AIDS. We need to do an intestinal parasite screen and deworm your kitten. We’ll teach you about nutrition, socialization, litter box training, parasite control and kitten-proofing your home. As our baby gift to your new family member, you’ll also receive a free kitten educational booklet, a sample of premium kitten food, a free heartworm preventative pill and a free flea and tick control that each last one month. This gift is valued at \$\_\_\_\_. The total for your kitten’s first visit is \$\_\_\_\_. **WHEN** would you like to schedule your kitten’s appointment?”

This script goes beyond an average call—explaining the additional value of a “baby gift” for the new pet. If your clinic has puppy or kitten kits, describe the contents and value of the gift. When the caller hears the total for services, plus a free gift valued at \$35 or more, she will book the appointment with you!

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## Watch What You Say



When talking with clients, we don’t realize the message we send with relaxed terms. The wrong words can deliver the wrong impression to trusting clients and harm the perception of value for your medical services.

When collecting blood, urine or fecal samples for diagnostic testing, we often tell clients, “I’m going to take your pet in the back.” The phrase “in the back” tells the client we are taking their beloved family member to a secret place where they sometimes hear cries from nervous patients or other strange noises. Instead, communicate the professionalism you intended and say, “I’m going to take your pet to the treatment area where we will collect the needed samples.” The term “treatment area” more accurately describes what will happen and where you’re going with their best friend.

Likewise, a medical term such as a “professional dental cleaning” is too often shortened to “dental.” Don’t tell a client, “Your dog needs a dental.” Communicate the comprehensiveness of this professional service by saying, “Your dog needs a professional dental cleaning.” In some communities, groomers advertise that they do “dentals,” which is essentially brushing the pooch’s teeth, a very different service than your professional dental cleaning with the pet under anesthesia. How can you expect clients to pay hundreds for a medical procedure when you’ve made it sound so casual and cheap?

Avoid malpractice of the mouth and talk about procedures with a professional tone and terms. Try these phrases to speak to clients with confidence:

<b>DON'T say this...</b>	<b>DO say this...</b>
<i>“Dental”</i>	<i>“Professional dental cleaning”</i>
<i>“Fecal”</i>	<i>“Intestinal parasite screen”</i>
<i>“Estimate”</i>	<i>“Treatment plan”</i>
<i>“I’m taking your pet in the back.”</i>	<i>“I’m taking your pet to the treatment area.”</i>
<i>“I’d recommend a senior screen for your pet.”</i>	<i>“Your pet needs a senior screen to help us get a baseline and detect any changes early.”</i>
<i>“No.”</i>	<i>“This is what we recommend...”</i>
<i>“We can’t see your pet today. We’re too busy.”</i>	<i>“I have an appointment available on Thursday at 9:30 am or 1:30 pm. Which best fits your schedule?”</i>
<i>“Hang on, or Please hold.”</i>	<i>“Are you able to hold for a moment while I get your information, or would you prefer that I call you back?”</i>
<i>“What?”</i>	<i>“Could you please repeat that information so I fully understand your question?”</i>
<i>“Please hold while I transfer you.”</i>	<i>“Let me connect you with the surgery technician.”</i>
<i>“Do you have any questions?”</i>	<i>“What questions do you have?”</i>
<i>“I’m sorry you had to wait.”</i>	<i>“Thank you for waiting. I know your time is important, so let’s get started.”</i>
<i>“You’ll have to put down a deposit for emergency care.”</i>	<i>“In order to begin emergency surgery on your pet, I need your signature on the treatment plan (formerly called an estimate) and a deposit of \$_____.”</i>
<i>“Do you want to know how much this is going to cost?”</i>	<i>“Before we proceed with your pet’s x-rays, would you like a treatment plan so you can understand the service and fees?”</i>
<i>“If you don’t quit cussing at me, I won’t help you.”</i>	<i>“If I hear that language again, I won’t be able to help you. Unless we can find a different way to communicate so we can find a solution together, I am going to hang up/leave.”</i>
<i>“I don’t know what’s going on with your pet. It’s not my case.”</i>	<i>“Let me talk with the technician and doctor who are caring for your pet and call you back. When would be a convenient time for me to call you with complete information?”</i>
<i>“Can I help you out to the car with your pet food?”</i>	<i>“Let me help you out to the car.”</i>

**Making reminder calls for pets overdue for services: An excerpt from our new book!**



*Veterinary Economics'* research shows 70 percent of clients respond to phone calls, so have receptionists call between 5 and 7 pm on weekdays and 9 to 11 am on Saturdays. You're more likely to catch clients arriving home from work during the week or on Saturdays mornings before weekend errands. Phoning during these opportunistic windows is important to reach clients who have already overlooked two notices about their pets' needed veterinary care.

Finding time for staff members to make one or two reminder calls each day can be challenging during high-traffic times of evenings and Saturday mornings. But the effort earns immediate rewards. One reminder call will take a receptionist 30 seconds to 2 minutes. Considering the average charge per transaction is \$148, isn't it worth a few minutes of a staff member's time to secure an appointment? If the receptionist schedules one appointment for an overdue patient each day, she could increase practice income up to \$800 per week!

Some receptionist may shy away from calling clients, claiming they feel like telemarketers. But that's simply not true. The 2003 American Animal Hospital Association compliance study, "The Path to High-Quality Care," found 78 percent of clients surveyed wanted to be called about overdue vaccines and medication but only 52 percent actually received a call. Receptionists are calling as patient advocates. After all, the family pet can't read his mail and pick up the phone to schedule an appointment!

When receptionists call clients about pets' overdue services, they might say, "This is Debbie calling for the doctors at Myers Veterinary Hospital. We are worried that Ollie is past due for his wellness exam, vaccinations and intestinal parasite screen and might now be unprotected. Will you please call us at 720-344-2347?"

The phrase "calling for the doctors" communicates that your veterinarians are aware of the pet's overdue status and are genuinely concerned. The warning of "may now be unprotected" is a call to action. Timing can be critical for canine patients because the American Heartworm Society ([www.heartwormsociety.org](http://www.heartwormsociety.org)) recommends that dogs missing 45 days of preventatives be tested for heartworm disease before restarting monthly preventatives.

For pets overdue two or more months, your receptionists might call and say, "We are updating our files and noticed that Ollie hasn't been seen for his wellness exam and vaccinations. Has Ollie received his exam and vaccines elsewhere?" This lets you either schedule an appointment or identify clients who moved, no longer have the pet or are receiving veterinary care elsewhere. Keeping your database clean lets you maintain accurate patient records and avoid wasting money on mailing reminders to inactive clients.

If your receptionist speaks with the client, she would say, "This is Debbie calling for the doctors at Myers Veterinary Hospital. Ollie is overdue for his wellness exam, vaccinations and intestinal parasite screen, and we're worried about his health. When is a convenient time for you and Ollie to come in for an appointment this week? The doctor can see you at 6 pm on Thursday or at 9 am on Saturday. Which is more convenient for you?"

This is known as the two-yes-options technique, this phrasing significantly increases the chance you'll schedule the appointment because you direct the client to two possible appointment times. This phrase is stronger than "Do you want to schedule an appointment?" which is a yes-or-no answer.

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### **Create A Script Book For Perfect Phone Conversations**



Calls from clients and phone shoppers seeking information about your services and prices can prove challenging in a busy front-desk environment. While receptionists can quickly access estimate templates on the computer, do they get flustered and forget to ask questions to tailor conversations?

To keep conversations consistent, place a script reference book near each phone. Create three-ring notebooks with information on frequently shopped services. Inside plastic protective sheets, place estimates on right-hand pages. On left-hand pages, write talking points and key questions to ask.

Common questions to ask to bond with the caller and gather information so you can tailor your recommendations include:

- Thank you for calling our hospital. I'm happy to answer your questions. May I ask your name and your pet's name? Let me ask you a few questions about your pet so I can give you accurate information.
- What is your pet's name?
- Where did you adopt your pet from?
- How old is your pet?
- What vaccines has your pet had?
- Has your pet had an intestinal parasite test? What was the result?
- Is your pet on a flea, tick and heartworm preventatives?
- Has your kitten been feline leukemia tested? If yes, what was the result?

Communication Solutions for Veterinarians offers a Mystery Phone Shopper Training Program that includes a recorded conversation of an actual call to your practice, transcript of the conversation and coaching recommendations to improve the receptionist's skills with sample scripts. It's a great way to train both new and seasoned employees. [Click here](#) for a sample report and information on our Mystery Phone Shopper Training Program.

Most phone shopper calls average 2 to 5 minutes. Of the hundreds of practices we've shopped, the average score is 2 of 5 possible points. Even seasoned receptionists have conversations that could be significantly improved. Ongoing training in phone skills and tools such as a script reference book next to the phone will help your team win new clients with every ring.

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## **What is WOW! client service?**

During a recent in-clinic training session with a receptionist team, I asked “What do you do on a daily basis to provide WOW! service to your clients?” One staff member volunteered, “We call other clinics to request medical records for new patients.” But isn’t that part of our daily duties?



Providing WOW! client service means consistently exceeding expectations. Share this checklist of ideas with your team and discuss which you’ll be sure to follow daily.

1. Know clients’ and pets’ names.
2. Stand to greet clients when they walk in the front door.
3. Offer coffee, tea and bottled or dispensed water in your lobby. One of my favorite low-maintenance and non-messy coffeemakers is Keurig single serve gourmet coffee and tea brewing system, available at Costco.
4. Shake new clients’ hands.
5. Have leash hooks on reception counters.
6. Keep an umbrella stand by the front door filled with golf-sized umbrellas for rainy days.
7. Have a squeaky clean and well-supplied restroom.
8. Give new clients a hospital tour before or after the appointment.
9. Put pets’ photos in your veterinary software so images print on invoices, treatment plans and exam report cards.
10. Tell clients “Let me help you to the car with your food” rather than asking “Do you need any help out to the car?”
11. Place digital photo frames near client seating areas in the lobby and in exam rooms. Include images of dentistry, a hospital tour, boarding and more in this educational slideshow.
12. Give every new client a welcome gift bag or folder with information about your services and product samples.
13. Use proper vocabulary with clients, including welcoming phrases such as “Good morning,” “I’ll be happy to...” or “you’re welcome” instead of “no problem.”
14. Wear a nametag so clients know who you are and your role in the practice.
15. Call clients about pets’ progress after being discharged from the hospital.
16. Give clients your business card.
17. Mail thank-you notes to clients who refer new patients.
18. Have magnets on the reception counter and in new client welcome kits.
19. Provide an exam report card so family members who were not present for the veterinary visit will understand the doctor’s recommendations.
20. Present the invoice to show value for the veterinary visit, reading services and products off the computer screen and then stating the total. “Wendy, today Ollie had a comprehensive physical exam, senior blood work and urinalysis, an intestinal parasite test, and vaccines to protect him from feline



distemper and Rabies. Does Ollie need any preventatives, medication refills or food today?" (Client responds.) "Your total today is \$\_\_\_\_\_. Which payment method are you using today?"

21. Present invoices in exam rooms when bills are \$750 or higher. Review services provided, home-care instructions and collect payment. The client can openly ask questions without others overhearing your conversation, and you can address financial issues in private. Imagine a new client standing behind a client who is checking out and hearing the invoice is \$1,000—and she's next!

22. Ask every client at check-in whether she needs medication refills or food. Then you can have items ready at checkout once the exam is finished.

23. Provide complimentary nail trims for patients receiving surgical and dental services.

24. Take before-and-after dental photos.

25. Thank clients for their business during checkout. "Wendy, it was great to see you and Ollie today. Please call us if you have additional questions."

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***MORE EVERY MONTH.....from Communication Solutions for Veterinarians!***

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