

Going from Customers to Clients

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Many veterinary teams call anyone who visits their practice, a client. Regrettably, it is not so. When people walk into your office the first time, they are customers, not clients.

I'd like you to think a little about these important words because there is a significant difference between them – one that can have huge impact upon your long-term success in practice.

According to the dictionary:

Client: One that is under the protection of another.

Customer: One that purchases a commodity or service.

Customers don't have much reason to stay;

Clients don't have reason to stray... that's the difference.

What does that mean? It means the customer is shopping for a service or product and has NOT established a relationship with your practice. They are seeking a solution to their problems or a product to purchase.

The client, on the other hand, has been so impressed by your service and value that they, in their own minds, have established a relationship with you and your team. It is this relationship that differentiates a client from a customer.

In a client relationship, the client is "under the protection" of your practice and becomes dependent upon the ongoing care by your team.

If I am in your care or under your protection and I know it, there is far less likelihood of me defecting to a competitor and far greater likelihood that I will refer others to your care and protection.

Isn't that the relationship you want to build?

Building ongoing client relationships means constantly being vigilant to insure you and your team work to build that "protection / care / dependence" paradigm with every client contact so they can say, "I depend on your practice for the care of my pets.

If so, think through your mindset and that of your staff:

- Do you actively protect and look out for your client's well-being beyond the value of that single visit?
- Do you communicate your ongoing care on their behalf?
- Do you always give them your best service and value?
- Do your clients feel they are in your constant care?

First time visitors on the other hand, even if they have been referred, do not really have a relationship with you; don't really trust you and are not sure they have made the right choice coming in.

It behooves you to turn them into clients because over the lifetime of their relationship with your practice, clients are likely to invest between \$8,000 and \$12,000 in their pet. Every client!

If you are not successful at turning your customers into clients therefore, you lose this much potential with every customer who does not turn into a client.

There is no doubt you will benefit from turning your customers into clients and in nurturing the relationship you have with them.

That means:

- Communicating that they are under your care
- Being proactive in looking out for their best interests
- Constantly working on strengthening and deepening the relationship
- Giving them your best service and value on an ongoing basis
- Providing value with every visit

In this article I will discuss the importance of turning customers into clients, and give you some effective ideas on how to do it.

In a nutshell, what turns a customer into client is the second visit.

It therefore follows that you should strive to make the second appointment. But first you need to give your customers the royal care. Customers have very sensitive antennae. They notice everything happening around them and are less forgiving. On the other hand, people expect mediocre service, because that's what they get with every service business. If you surprise them by being outstanding, you will stand out from the crowd and gain their trust and loyalty.

Incidentally, do you know how many customers come back for the second visit? If you don't, how will you be able to improve?

To be able to improve the conversion rate from customer to client, there has got to be a preplanned, predesigned process that every team member understands and has been sufficiently trained to execute. With an ability to continually monitor results, you will then be able to see progress and who needs further training. Remember what's at stake here.

First, know when a customer walks in. Asking, "How may I help you?" does not make them happy they came in. Thrusting a clipboard at them and asking them to fill out the information may be the norm, but does not make their experience memorable.

Instead, welcome them with a big smile and tell them how happy you are they chose you. If you are not sure they are the right person, ask them, "Hi, Mrs. Smith with Fluffy?" If she says yes, continue with your predesigned presentation. If possible, step from around the counter and greet the customer face to face. Shake her hand, make a nice comment about her pet, show her you care about her as a person.

When the time comes to filling out the personal information, have a team member do it with her sitting aside from the crowd in a comfortable place. This is the time to really get to know the person. What matters to customers, as to all of us, is themselves. Show them then that you care about them as individuals, not just as pet owners.

Tell customers that "here, we want to get to know our clients well." This is the time to interview customers as to the important people and events in their lives:

- Family members, especially children
- Hobbies

- Places they enjoy visiting
- Interesting trips
- Etc.

You get the point.

This information then gets transferred to their records so that next time you communicate with them, you can surprise them by showing how much you know them.

Don't assume that your clients, let alone your customers, know what services you provide. In a study done a few years ago, less than 40% of pet owners knew their vet can take care of their pets' teeth. Think about it.

So before customers leave, give them a new client welcome kit. In a nice bag, include some goodies for their pet and for them. Also include a welcome letter, explaining what you are about and outlining all the services you provide. Also include a promise about the experience they can expect to get next time they come in.

Talking about next time, try to get customers in again within the first 90 days, as their memory of you fades away quickly once they leave. There are many reasons to get them back soon:

- Follow upon a sick pet
- Follow up exam to show them how to brush their pets' teeth
- Follow up exam on the other problems their pets are likely to have
- Education on weight management, and more

Remember, if you can get customers back for the second visit, they will become clients.

At check out, ask your customers how their first visit has been and whether you have met their expectations. Thank them for positive comments and promise them you are always there to help them.

Now it's time to follow up.

I suggest following up within the first two days of their visit. The purpose of that call should be to express your gratitude for their trust in you and for their

visit. Only people who enjoy talking to clients and who have been trained to conduct themselves efficiently should make these calls. If everything went above clients' expectations on their first visit, this follow up call will be the crowning event to make customers understand that you are their best veterinarian.

In the ensuing weeks and months, you need to stay in touch with your customers. Send them emails with interesting news about your practice. Introduce them to team members who are eager to see them again. Ask about their pets and about themselves, using the information captured during the initial interview. Show them that by coming to your practice, they have gained a friend. That's how you turn customers into clients and that's how you build a successful practice.

Yes, it requires investment of time and efforts, but think of the benefits turning many more customers into clients bring.

Good luck!