

TEAM Struggling with client loyalty? Here's why you are failing



One of the best ways to improve your bottom line is by increasing client retention. On average, less than two thirds¹ of new veterinary customers will return. Why is client loyalty and long-term retention so difficult in this industry?

Like most doctors, you are focused on helping and healing. Unlike most doctors, you don't treat your clients. Your patients can't review your practice, or make their own medical decisions. The disconnect between patient care and customer care presents a unique challenge to veterinary practices.

Of course, you do not neglect animals, but you very well may be guilty of neglecting their human companions. Is your practice making these five common client loyalty mistakes?

1. Inadequate, or nonexistent customer service policy

Your front office staff represents your practice to the world. Rude, unprofessional, uninformed, or unhelpful employees will quickly alienate clients. People expect to have their phone calls and emails answered promptly, and receive accurate answers when they ask questions.

Since you cannot personally monitor and oversee employee-client relations, it is important to have an established customer service policy. Phone scripts, procedures for handling routine requests, and guidelines for handling problems should be well documented. New employee orientation should include customer service training.

2. Lack of incentive

If you want clients to be loyal, give them good reasons. Client loyalty programs have been popular among certain medical specialties for some time, but in the past, they were not often seen at veterinary practices. However, it is a growing trend, and one that many practices are finding very successful.

There are many options, such as:

- A punch style or electronic rewards card, which gives the person a discount or free service after a certain number of appointments
- A discount plan, giving people a reduced rate on routine services for an annual fee
- A pet health plan, modelled after human health savings accounts, which allows someone to make monthly payments toward future care
- Free extras, such as a complimentary season flea treatment for clients who have kept all their annual recommended check-ups.

3. Failure to demonstrate your quality of care

Trust is among the top driving factors when people are choosing a veterinarian. Because most people don't understand veterinary procedures, they will not know if their pets are receiving quality care unless you convey the message. When the pet owner is present during an examination or treatment, explain what you are doing and why. Provide reassurances when appropriate. Is this diagnostic test painless? Is the animal sedated during the procedure? When animals are left in your care, does your team take time to pet and comfort them regularly? People may not always ask these questions, but knowing the answers will comfort them.

4. Too long in the waiting room

According to a recent veterinary industry survey², most clients become agitated after waiting 10-15 minutes. Yet, the average wait time in a veterinary office is about 17 minutes. Even more surprising, only about four in ten practices actually keep track of how long their clients are left waiting.

You can increase customer satisfaction by improving timeliness of care, and taking steps to reduce stress while waiting.

- Keep track of your average waiting times. If the times are longer or shorter than average on a particular day, or at a certain time of day, find out why. Use these data to improve your scheduling and processes
- When there is an unexpected delay, explain to the clients and provide regular updates. For example, people are more likely to be patient if they know that you are performing an emergency surgery, rather than letting them think you are simply behind schedule. Also, they are less likely to

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judge your practice poorly on one experience when they understand that it is an anomaly

- Make your reception area as comfortable as possible. It should be spacious enough that there is plenty of room to separate animals, avoiding problems with aggressive pets and reducing stress for timid ones. Don't forget amenities for the humans, such as free wi-fi, to help them pass the time in comfort

5. Lack of communication

No one likes being left in the dark, especially when it comes to his or her beloved companions. Client communication should extend far beyond simply explaining how often to administer medication or handing the person a set of aftercare instructions.

Ask questions and provide guidance about the animal's diet, exercise, behaviour, and medical conditions. Educate the owner about ways to improve the animal's quality of life, safety, and health. This will not only benefit your patients, but also demonstrate your concern and help your human clients feel involved. Work with the owners and make pet care a team effort. Communication is the foundation for loyal client relationships.

Bonus tip – go the extra mile

Why settle for making a good impression on clients? Just a little bit of extra attention goes a long way toward making a great impression. Try these easy ways to wow your customers:

- Send holiday or pet birthday cards. To encourage appointments, include a limited-time coupon for a discount on treatment
- Try to remember, or make note of, non-medical details. Next time you see the client, mention the dog's love of tennis balls, or the cat's finicky eating habits. These things demonstrate that you care about the animal, and that you listen to the owner
- Ask if it's okay to take a picture with the pet for your social media, or encourage owners to share their photos with you. People love to show off their pets, and connecting with clients on social media is a great way to establish a long-term relationship

The key to strong client loyalty is catering to not just your patients, but their humans as well.

References

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2. Shupe, C. (n.d.). Client happiness is a reasonable wait at your veterinary practice. Retrieved July 20, 2017, from DNV 360: <http://veterinaryteam.dvm360.com/client-happiness-reasonable-wait-your-veterinary-practice>.

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