

Speak the Same Language: Strategies to Help Clients Understand Recommendations

Wendy Hauser, DVM

Peak Veterinary Consulting

What role does communication play in clients' acceptance of pet care recommendations? Effective communication is not about exchanging data, it's about sharing information. What are some ways that veterinary team members can share information in a manner that increases client understanding about recommendations?

Compliance versus Adherence

Veterinary care is often measured in terms of 'compliance', defined as the degree to which the client's behavior aligns with the veterinarian's recommendations. This definition implies a control-oriented, veterinarian-centered relationship, where the client's voice is diminished.

Adherence is "the extent to which the client's behavior matches the agreed recommendations from the prescriber"¹, which in this case is the veterinarian. The term 'adherence' implies an interactive, collaborative relationship between the veterinarian and the client, who work together to create positive, proactive behaviors that benefit the patient.

The differences in the meaning of these terms identifies the first step in helping clients understand recommendations: the need to partner with the pet owner by including their perspectives, beliefs, and values in all proposals. This co-created approach makes it easier for clients to accept and adhere to veterinary advice.

Perspective

Perspective, as defined in Cambridge Dictionary Online² is a particular way of considering something. When we attempt to answer the question "Do our clients value the things we think they value?", perspective becomes critically important. An example of differing perspectives is illustrated by the 2015 Banfield State of Pet Health report³, where researchers set out to answer the question "What is preventive care"?

To understand the client perspective of preventive care, researchers performed "on-line anthropologic research" of over 2 million pet owner on-line conversations found in blogs and social forums. Pet owners believed that preventive care was what they fed their pet, how they exercised them, and the love and daily attention that they provided. In stark contrast, when veterinarians were asked "What is preventive care?" the response was all things medical: regular physical examinations, vaccinations, wellness diagnostics, dental care, neutering and parasiticides.

Pet owners were asked who was responsible for preventive care? They responded that pet owners were responsible for 81% while veterinarians only contributed 19% toward pet preventive care. Because pet owners are looking for a more holistic meaning of preventive care that aligns with their perspectives, is it any wonder that they are turning to other sources such as on-line resources, breeders, trainers, groomers, and day care providers for advice about how to keep their pets healthy?

How do veterinarians become the preferred partner of owners in providing veterinary care for their pets? It begins with perspective, understanding what our clients tell us they value and effectively sharing information that matters to them.

Create Relationships

How veterinary teams interact with clients strongly influences their willingness to accept recommendations. There are two primary ways that these interactions occur: transactionally or relationally.

A transactional interaction is devoid of a personal connection and occurs when the person involved is merely going through the necessary motions to complete the encounter. It is an economical, short-term interaction that is focused on treating people as a task to be done, depersonalizing them. The team member is not invested in building a relationship. In a veterinary hospital, a transactional interaction might occur when a client asks a question and receives a reply that doesn't acknowledge the client as an individual. There is no attempt to establish common ground and typically no attempt to identify the client's needs, beyond a superficial level. Clients feel underwhelmed, unimpressed, and disregarded.

A relational interaction is formed when the team member builds rapport with the client. The needs of the pet owner are identified by eliciting their perspective. The client feels that the team member, and by extension the hospital, truly cares about them and their pet. They feel validated in their decision to interact with the hospital and experience a sense of connection, which leads to trust. This sense of belonging is a critical component in bonding clients to your hospital.

What are some ways that veterinary teams can create relational interactions?

1. Personalize the interaction

Asking for and using both the client's name and their pet's name throughout all conversations individualizes the interaction. It creates acknowledgement that the client and pet are unique. This begins to create a relationship.

2. Use of open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. They usually begin with words such as 'how', 'what', and 'tell me'. These are powerful tools in building relationships because they invite the client to share their perspective about the topic being discussed.

3. Express Empathy

Called the building block of compassion, empathy is "the awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns"⁴. Empathetic statements are those that express empathy by connecting "the 'I' of the veterinarian" (or team member) and "the 'you' of the client"⁵, usually by verbally acknowledging the client's situations or feelings. Expressing empathy to clients is a three-part process⁵:

- Gaining an understanding of and appreciation for another person's situation or feelings
- Communicating that awareness back to the person in a reassuring manner
- Pausing for a few seconds to allow empathy to be felt by the other person.

4. Active listening

Active listening requires the listener to be fully present in the moment, and hear what the client is saying, rather than thinking about their next question. By eliciting the client's perspectives and giving them space to express their thoughts, the team member is conveying a sense of interest and caring. When active listening is combined with pausing, accomplished by allowing a couple of seconds to pass after the client has spoken before responding, the outcomes are deeper and more meaningful interactions.

Price versus Cost

When a treatment option is declined, veterinary team members often believe that cost is the reason. A study⁶ found that only two out of ten clients refused care because of cost. Rather, clients said 'no' because they didn't understand how the treatment recommendations would benefit their pet, they were confused, or were uncertain about why the suggestion was made.

There is a distinct difference between the "Price of Care" and the "Cost of Care", which directly relates to how we discuss recommendations with our veterinary clients. The 'price of care' is the transaction of a fee for a service. The 'cost of care' considers the impact of a declined recommendation or treatment to the health and well-being of

the animal. It is best conveyed to clients by describing the treatment options in terms of the benefit to the pet and the pet owner.

Provide Recommendations in a Client-Friendly Way

Multiple studies have found that clients want the value of the recommendation explained to them. In one study⁷, the differences in clients' preferences and veterinarians' actions in presenting treatment options was eye-opening. Veterinarians tended to discuss treatment options, and the cost of care, in terms of measurables such as the time it took to perform the service, the specialized training or equipment and additional labor. Owners were not interested in these tangibles, focusing instead on how the service or diagnostic would help their pet, both in the short-term as well as later in life. Veterinarians and veterinary teams that fail to convey the value of the recommendation, in terms of both the benefit and cost to the pet, will have lower adherence rates.

Veterinary team members that share information in a way that increases client understanding about recommendations have learned how to speak the same language as the clients and pets they serve. Pet owners that understand the 'why' behind the recommendation are better informed and empowered to make the best choices for their pets. When veterinary team members work to build partnership with clients, outcomes are increased trust, better understanding, higher client satisfaction and better patient care.

References

1. Bell JS, Airaksinen MS, Lyles A, et al. Concordance is not synonymous with compliance or adherence. *Br J Clin Pharmacol.* 2007;64:710-711.
2. <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/perspective>
3. <http://www.banfield.com/veterinary-professionals/resources/soph-infographic>
4. Goleman D. *Working with Emotional Intelligence.* New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group. 2008
5. Adams CL, Kurtz S. *Skills for Communicating in Veterinary Medicine.* New York, NY: Dewpoint Publishing 2017
6. Lue TW, Pantenburg DP, Crawford PM. Impact of the owner-pet and client-veterinarian bond on the care that pets receive. *JAVMA*, Vol 232, No. 4, February 15, 2008. Pgs 531-540
7. Coe JB, Adams CL, Bonnett BN. A focus group study of veterinarians' and pet owners' perceptions of the monetary aspects of veterinary care. *JAVMA*, Vol 231, No. 10, November 15, 2007. Pgs. 1510-1518.

Speaker Bio:

Wendy Hauser, DVM is the founder of Peak Veterinary Consulting and has practiced for 30+ years as an associate, practice owner and relief veterinarian. She has worked in the animal health industry as a pet health insurance executive and as a technical services veterinarian. Dr. Hauser, passionate about education and innovation, partners with both industry partners and individual veterinary hospitals. She is a regular presenter at veterinary conferences, facilitating workshops on hospital culture, associate development, leadership, client relations and operations. Frequently published, she is the co-author of "The Veterinarian's Guide to Healthy Pet Plans." Learn more about Peak Veterinary Consulting at <https://peakveterinaryconsulting.com/> or contact Dr. Hauser at drhauser@peakveterinaryconsulting.com