



# The Ties that Bind: How to Build Stronger Bonds and Better Practices

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## INTRODUCTION

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**Why are client relationships important? Consider the following:**

- Patient visits have fallen 2.9% annually from 2005 through 2015<sup>1</sup>. According to VHMA Insiders Insights<sup>2</sup>, in 2016 the trend modestly reversed with an increased number of patient visits of 2.6%. In 2017, the visits had a nominal increase of 1.3%.
- According to the April VHMA Insiders Insights<sup>3</sup>, new client numbers decreased by 9% from March 2017 compared to March 2018, with numbers of new clients decreasing every month for the past 3 years.
- The 2014 AAHA Pet Owner Study<sup>4</sup>, conducted by Trone Brand Energy found that 61% of clients are predicted to switch veterinary hospitals within 5 years, based on current owner behavior.

How do we prevent our clients from seeking services elsewhere? In 2014, the AAHA State of the Industry report identified “success factors across four key relationship or bonds that support growth”<sup>5</sup>. These were discovered during a study of veterinary hospital revenue growth. In the study, 25% of the hospitals evaluated significantly outperformed most hospitals and were termed ‘Outgrowers’. Of this population, almost one-half had shown significant revenue growth over the past two years; they were labeled ‘Consistent Outgrowers’. To better understand the success of these hospitals, in- depth surveys were performed and the four key relationship areas were quantified as:

- Pet and Owner Bond
- Practice and Client Bond
- Practice and Patient Bond
- Veterinarian and Staff Bond

By examining and implementing ways to reinforce these bonds in our practice, we have the opportunity to create a practice culture that meets the needs of our clients, patients and animal health care teams.

## Pet and Owner Bond

A study done by Lue, Patenburg and Crawford evaluated the impact of the pet-owner bond on the care that pets receive. They found owners that had stronger bonds with their pets “were more likely to seek higher levels of veterinary care for their pets, were less sensitive to the price of veterinary care, and were more willing to follow the recommendations of veterinarians, compared with other owners. Owners with strong owner-pet bonds took their pets to veterinarians 40% more often than owners with weak owner-pet bonds.”<sup>6</sup>

The authors explored what factors increase the bonding that owners experience with their pets. It was found that the more time the pet spent with the owner, the stronger the bond. Those with the strongest bonds “kept their pets indoors, allowed them in all rooms of the

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house, and/or allowed them to sleep in the bedroom.” These are pets that are part of the family.

There was a significant difference in the degree of attachment that dog owners felt in comparison to cat owners. In a study<sup>7</sup> conducted to evaluate why cats are not taken to the veterinarian more frequently it was found that many cats were not ‘planned’ pets. 59% of feline owners agreed with the statement “I didn’t necessarily find the cat, the cat found me.” During focus group sessions, a key difference in owner attitudes was that dogs were viewed as companions and cats as pets, having a lower status in the family hierarchy.

Owners in households “with  $\geq 1$  dog and cat were more attached to their dogs than their cats by a 3 to 1 margin (57% vs 19%, respectively).”<sup>6</sup>

The perception was that dogs were more interactive, made better companions and were more affectionate. These owners had generally owned the dog(s) prior to the cat, so the dog(s) had been a family member for a longer period. The authors concluded that “the deeper attachment owners have with dogs likely contributed to dogs being seen by veterinarians  $> 2$  times as often as cats.”

In these studies, dogs were viewed as less independent and relying more heavily on their owners for care. Canine owners agreed that is “more important to take a dog versus a cat to a veterinarian for routine wellness exams”<sup>6</sup> because dogs are outside more. In contrast, felines were viewed as “independent and low maintenance”<sup>7</sup> and owners believed “that cats do not get sick and can take care of themselves”<sup>6</sup>.

What are ways that we can use this information to better understand the pet-owner bond? It is important to look at the relationship between the owner and the pet in the examination room, recognizing behaviors that indicate the type of bond that exists. Some ways to assess the bond include:

- Asking “What is a normal day in the life of your pet?” Highly bonded owners will likely be very detailed with their answer, less bonded clients less informative. Information gathered will likely include how often the pets are fed, how they are exercised and how they integrate into the daily fabric of family life.
- Asking “How did Fluffy become part of your family?” will help the interviewer

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understand if Fluffy was a planned pet or one that found its family. Remember, pets that find their families are not necessarily regarded as ‘less’ of a family member. When I was growing up on a ranch in Oklahoma, we had many beloved pets (dogs, cats and a goat!) that wandered in and adopted us.

- Observe verbal and non-verbal cues from both the pet and owner. Is the owner attentive to the pet in the room? Does the owner seek to reassure your patient either through petting or through words? How does the pet respond to the owner?
- How do your recommendations stress the bond between the owner and the pet? Consider the 2011 Bayer Study<sup>8</sup> focus group finding that getting cats into pet carriers and transporting them to the veterinary facility represented a major barrier to feline veterinary care. Owners dreaded the activity so much that when asked to make a collage of how they felt about the experience, they created images worthy of horror films. When asked, only 18% of owners had received any instruction on how to safely place their cat in a carrier and methods to decrease the stress on the owner and cat.

When we ask our clients to subject their pets to something unpleasant like putting a cat in a carrier, daily baths or difficult-to-administer medication, stress can occur for both the pet and pet owner. Situations like these cause the owner to dread the activity. The pet likely detects their unease and reacts accordingly. The end results are often decreased adherence, with the owner feeling frustrated and guilty toward both the veterinary facility and the pet.

## Practice and Client Bond

The 2015 AAHA State of the Industry<sup>9</sup> report identified four areas through which clients' bonds with the practice could be bolstered:

### Explain things in a way that clients understand.

In multiple studies<sup>6, 10, 11</sup> communication skills of veterinarians have been identified as one of the primary factors in developing strong bonds between the practice and the client. When veterinarians and their teams communicate with their clients about how to take care of their pets and explain recommendations and treatments in terms of how those choices can impact their pet's health, the outcome is higher adherence. The Lue study<sup>6</sup> demonstrated that when veterinarians were good communicators, the result was a "40% increase in clients who follow directions". Confusion, misunderstanding and lack of perceived value were reasons why clients did not adhere to veterinarian recommendations.

### Share test results with clients.

When animal health care teams explain

why a diagnostic test is warranted and how the information from the test can help to guide the pet's immediate and future care, clients have the critical information to make the best decisions for their pets. "Providing full disclosure about test interpretation, results and personal recommendations as well as permitting admissions of uncertainty backed with reassurances of follow-up and further investigation promotes a sense of truthfulness and integrity"<sup>10</sup> further promotes the development of trust and bonding between clients and practices.

### Treat clients like a partner.

A 2013 study<sup>10</sup> sought to explain qualities that inspired clients to trust veterinarians. Two principle qualities were identified: professionalism and technical candor. Professionalism was defined as "the actions that establish his or her role as a respected and respectful practitioner as well as a figure of authority whose procedures and professional recommendations are clear, fair and beneficial to the client." Technical candor refers to the way that the veterinarian "conveys what and how they know about the condition of the client's animal". Trustworthiness is increased when veterinarians elicit the client's perspective, recognizing and acknowledging the client's beliefs, expectations, feelings and opinions.

Clear, consistent communication and establishing a trust-based relationship are central tenets of building a relationship-centered practice. Collaborative care at its best, this practice style is a joint venture between the veterinarian and the client to provide optimal care for the patient. Clients feel valued, understood and satisfied, becoming highly bonded to the practice.

## Provide guidance and ways to make preventive care easy.

The most common response that I get when I ask a pet owner how long they would like their pet to live is 'forever'! I explain that while I can't deliver 'forever', I can help to provide the next best thing: a great quality life guided by information that will allow us to work together to proactively prevent diseases and implement early treatments as diseases and conditions arise. This is preventive care.

The focus of the 2015 Banfield State of Pet Health<sup>12</sup> was 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. The findings are both disturbing and astonishing.

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To pet owners, preventive care means what they feed their pet, how they exercise them and the love, interactions and daily attention that they provide to their cherished companions. In stark contrast, when veterinarians were asked "What is preventive care?", we responded with 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, is it any wonder that they are turning to other sources such as breeders, trainers, groomers and day care providers for advice on how to keep their pets healthy?

Make preventive care easy for clients by forward booking appointments, offering preventive care plans and educating clients about the value of preventive care. Remember to discuss the things clients have told us are important to them: dietary recommendations, exercise and weight control and asking about behavioral concerns.

## Practice and Patient Bond

Cultivating a four-legged clientele that is always happy to see our animal health care teams is a challenging proposition. Clients are uncomfortable worrying about how their pets will react to the hospital environment and dislike when their pets require restraint. Recent research<sup>13,14</sup> underscores the impact of the pet owner's emotions on that of the pet, supporting the belief that the stress levels of the human impact the pet. I believe that managing owner stress levels is an overlooked component in addressing stress and anxiety in our patients.



Candid conversations with clients regarding worries and fears about the visit at the beginning of the visit will help to alleviate stress. These conversations help the client to become more receptive to patient care recommendations allowing for more effective partnership and positive outcomes. As the stress level in the owner decreases, a corresponding decrease also occurs within our patient, leading to happier clients and pets.

There is much published about low stress handling techniques for animals; the reader is referred to the work of Sophia Yin<sup>15</sup> and more recently, the Fear Free Initiative<sup>16</sup> for more information.

## Veterinarian and Staff Bond

In order for our animal health care teams to be fully engaged and satisfied in their work, hospital leadership needs to provide the following:

### Psychologically safe work environments

When employees feel safe within their work environment, outcomes are higher engagement, more job satisfaction, better teamwork and less turnover. In a psychologically safe work space, employees do not fear reprisal for mistakes made and are comfortable taking initiatives to improve how things are done in their hospitals. A clearly defined expectation, set and role-modeled by management, governs how the group will work together thus establishing the groundwork for teams that trust each other.

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When animal health care team members feel safe at work, they can grow, learn, contribute, and perform effectively, all skills needed in our dynamic environments.

### Emotional Culture

Traditional discussions around culture refer to cognitive culture, which are the verbally enforced guidelines that exist for a group to thrive. Rarely discussed is the equally important and parallel emotional culture that exists in our hospitals. Conveyed non-verbally, this culture helps to govern the emotions that animal health care teams display at work, and which ones they suppress. Emotional culture is rarely discussed and actively managed even less often. We are emotional creatures, and we bring our emotions to work with us. When management works to welcome emotions into the workplace, they can understand and actively shape them to everyone's benefit.

### The cumulative impact of client economic limitations on animal health care teams

Two recent studies investigated factors contributing to professional stress and burnout among veterinarians. The first study<sup>17</sup> evaluated the perception

of professional burnout among small animal veterinarians. 91% of survey participants who were peers of private practice small animal veterinarians assessed burnout in other veterinarians as moderate to substantial. When the respondents were asked to gauge their own level of professional burnout, 49% stated that they were moderately to substantially burned out. The primary driver of professional burnout was client economic limitations. A second study<sup>18</sup> evaluated practice related stressors for veterinarians; clients unwilling to pay was classified as one of the most common factors creating stress. While both studies were focused on veterinarians, I strongly suspect that client economic limitations are a primary driver of burnout and turnover among our professional support staff.

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How can hospital leadership help to reduce this source of burnout? The answer lies in how we communicate about money with our clients. Clients have expressed that they expect veterinarians to discuss care considerations before cost considerations, yet in the same study<sup>19</sup> client expressed concerns around the lack of conversations around cost. Veterinarians discussed cost in only 29% of appointments<sup>11</sup> and the client initiated the discussion 33% of the time. When discussions of costs occurred, veterinarians presented the value of

the services in terms of their time, training and the cost of providing these services, rather than emphasizing the benefit to the client and patient.

What are some ways that animal health care teams can comfortably have conversations with clients about the cost of veterinary care?

### **Educate clients early about the costs of pet ownership**

These do not need to be in-depth, lengthy conversations. At a puppy or kitten visit, the conversation would sound like "Mrs. Smith, congratulations again on your beautiful new family member. As you are a new puppy owner, we think it is important to set some expectations around the lifetime cost of care for Sammy. This first year will be a little more expensive, because you will have the series of puppy visits for examinations and vaccinations, as well as the cost of Sammy's surgery to neuter him. As Sammy reaches adulthood, costs level out and then increase as he becomes a senior dog and needs more frequent visits.

### **Educate clients about financial tools that can help them plan for unexpected health crises**

"Unexpected accidents and illnesses occur. Our clients find it helpful to have pet health insurance to help them manage unforeseen costs. Puppies eat things they shouldn't and are at higher risk for accidents and injuries. Here is a brochure from a company our clients like. We encourage you to enroll today, before you need it". Set the expectation with your team that financial discussions are a critical part of every examination.

Explain to your team that studies have shown that clients expect to discuss the costs of their pet's health care with their veterinary teams. These conversations are most helpful when the pet isn't sick or injured. Clients deserve to receive the best clinical recommendations; how to financially provide care for their pets is one such recommendation.

### **Educate clients about ways to budget for their pet's health care**

Have a conversation with clients about ways to budget for their pet's health care. In my perfect world, all pets would be enrolled in a wellness plan, have pet health insurance and have a health credit card like Care Credit. These three financial solutions help to meet the needs

of the healthy patient and the sick patient, providing a health safety net for both the client and patient.

### **Discuss clinical recommendations in terms of the benefits to the pet and pet owner.**

When recommendations are explained in the context of how they can help better define a problem or plan to manage a current health problem, or how they have an impact on the pet's health and wellbeing, owners more clearly understand the value of the recommendation. Sadly, studies<sup>11, 19</sup> have shown that veterinarians often get this wrong, justifying the costs of the service by how much time, training or equipment the procedure requires.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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