



Create a Perfect Fit! How to Tailor Your Services to Your Client's Needs

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INTRODUCTION

The 'fit' between veterinary hospitals and clients isn't as comfortable as it once was. Client expectations have evolved over the past decade as the largest generation of pet owners, the millennials, have acquired pets and are seeking veterinary services. The pandemic served as a catalyst, adding additional pet owner needs and demands. In recent surveys^{1,2}, pet owners stated they expected veterinarians to focus on preventive care, to be personally available for their pet's emergencies, provide payment options and offer customized pet health care. How can veterinary teams tailor service offerings to create a good fit for veterinary teams, pet owners and pets? It starts with understanding what clients need and value.

The Differences Between Price, Cost and Value

What clients 'value' is confused with what clients 'can or will pay for services'. When a treatment option is declined, veterinary team members often believe that price is the reason. A study found that only two out of ten clients refused care because of cost³. 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.

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There are distinct differences between the Price of Care, the Cost of Care, and the Value of Care. These differences directly relate to how we discuss recommendations with our veterinary clients. The 'price of care' is transactional, it is the exchange of a fee for a service. In contrast, 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.

The 'value of care' relates to benefits, both tangible and intangible, that pet owners and pets receive from their interactions with veterinary teams. Value is built on trust and earned by doing things right, doing the right things and by doing both without being asked.

What Do Clients Need?

Meeting clients' needs requires that hospitals understand the problem from the perspective of the pet owner by asking "What are the problems the pet owners are experiencing?" and "Why it is important to them?"

In recent surveys^{1,2}, clients have been candid about their needs:

Clients want a better understanding of the price of veterinary care.

In a fall 2021¹ pet owner survey, 26% of Gen X and 25% of millennial/Gen Z stated that veterinarians could provide better service by offering more straightforward and transparent pricing. What are the problems clients are trying to solve in asking for transparency in pricing? Do they want to understand the price of the service to choose a veterinarian or are they seeking to proactively understand the cost of care to be financially and emotionally prepared?

Studies⁴ have found that both experienced and new pet owners have concerns about inadequate discussions regarding the cost of veterinary care. Clients expressed concern that emotional bonds with their pets could lead them to commit to treatments

without fully understanding the financial ramifications of those decisions.

Treatment options should be explained in terms of context of the pet's health and prognosis, and should take into consideration the owner's goals, values, and beliefs. These actions will help increase transparency into the decision-making process.

Clients expect veterinary hospitals to provide options that help clients accept veterinary care recommendations.

33% of the Gen X and 30% of the millennial/Gen Z cohorts agree that it's very important that veterinary hospitals provide payment options for pet health care¹. This expectation will only increase with the escalating costs of veterinary care. In December 2021, year over year veterinary prices paid by pet owners increased by 7%. If that rate continues, the average cost of veterinary care will double in the next 10 years. Consider partnering with companies such as GoFetch or Vitus Vet to manage new payment platforms such as installment payment options or recommend clients explore pet insurance to help them afford veterinary care.

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Clients want to be involved in their pets' preventive care.

An example of misalignment between client needs and hospital offerings is highlighted in a study⁶ where researchers performed 'online anthropologic research' of over 2 million online conversations to answer the question "What does preventive care mean?"

The research found that pet owners believe preventive care is the pet's diet, exercise, care, play and emotional well-being. Veterinarians responded with all things medical, such as vaccinations, desexing, parasite control and dental cleanings. Pet owners believe that they are responsible for 81% of their pet's preventive care, and veterinarians contribute only 19%.

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This report showcases what is important to clients. The relevance of preventive care visits to hospital caseloads can be observed in 2021 data. The average increase in wellness visits per practice was 18 more per month than in 2019. Sick visits over that time frame only increased by eight per month. Understand clients' perspectives about wellness care and tailor your services to meet their needs by consistently asking

pet owners about concerns related to diet, exercise and behavior.

Clients want hospitals to offer wellness plans to help them manage costs.

According to an AVMA survey⁷ conducted in 2021, “24% of dog owners and 35% of cat owners don’t bring their pets for routine annual care. The primary reasons given relate to the perceived value of preventive care and affordability.

The study⁶ we just examined provides a roadmap to help increase a pet owner’s perception of the value of preventive care visits. That is only one-half of the story. Clients have expressed the need for an easy-to-follow schedule of wellness services, provided in a budgeted manner since at least 2011. Despite these requests, only about 14% of privately owned hospitals offer wellness plans⁸. One in four millennials expects their veterinary hospitals to offer subscription-based care. This can be provided as in-hospital wellness plans or through pet health insurance policies that offer wellness policies as an optional add-on service.

Be available for their pet’s emergencies.

A pet owner survey² conducted in the fall of 2021 found that 40% of dog and cat owners felt strongly that their veterinarian should be personally available for their pet’s emergencies. Are pet owners asking for 24-hour connectivity with their veterinarian, or are they asking for a trusted resource to help them recognize what level of concern they should have in a situation, and what they need to do to take care of their pet?

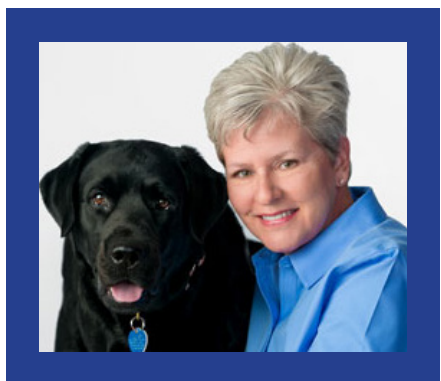
I believe it is the latter, that they want to

consult a veterinary professional approved and trusted by their own veterinarian. Third party, 24/7 telemedicine services can help satisfy this client expectation. It is important that the primary care hospital follow up with the pet owner early on the next business day following the call. This communication conveys the caring and concern of the primary care veterinarian, and commitment to both the client and patient.

A second way to identify what your clients need and want is to ask them. This can be done in a couple of different ways. When with clients during examinations ask, “What do you need from us that we are not delivering?” Listen carefully to their answers; client conversations that result in similar responses will help hospital leadership identify how to create more value. In addition to asking personally, sending surveys immediately after appointments, annually or both will provide valuable information. Use this information to tailor your services to your clients’ needs and create a perfect fit.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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, consults 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 www.peakveterinaryconsulting.com

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