



Do Our Clients Value the Things We Think They Value?

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INTRODUCTION

Perspective, as defined in Cambridge Dictionary Online Dictionary 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. Take for example the 2015 Banfield State of Pet Health¹ report, 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. The findings are both disturbing and astonishing. 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?

How do veterinarians become the preferred partner of owners in providing preventive care for their pets? I suggest that we begin by paying attention to what our clients tell us they value. How do we know this? Below are some ways to determine the answer to this very valid question.

Literature Reviews

In the past decade, there have been many studies^{2,3,4,5} that seek to answer what pet owners want from their veterinary interactions and experiences.

Specific to preventive care, clients have indicated:

1. Education and increased client awareness can increase adherence to recommendations

When veterinarians and veterinary teams do a better job explaining the value of preventive care by explaining the need for comprehensive examination procedures and diagnostic testing, clients more readily agree to the recommended services.

One study found that adherence increased 40% with clear communication. Another study cited that while 9 out of 10 clients view these discussions as important for their pet's health, only 6 out of 10 recalled having preventive care discussions with their pet's health care providers.

2. Clear and consistent recommendations are crucial when discussing preventive care services

Veterinary hospitals that offer thorough explanations and recommendations benefit from the increased perception that veterinarians are only selling clients the things their pets need.

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While it is often the perception of the animal health care team that price is the barrier to client acceptance of recommendations, studies have

demonstrated that only 2 in 10 clients declined care because they couldn't afford it.

The main reason for lack of adherence is that clients were confused or uncertain about how the recommendation would benefit their pet.

This lack of clear communication led to misunderstanding, with the owner perceiving that recommended preventive care services would not benefit their pets.

3. Talk to clients about pet foods, exercise and behavior

To regain our status as the preferred pet care advisor and partner, it is important that we incorporate the clients' perceptions of preventive care into our conversations and recommendations.

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At every wellness visit, animal health care teams should talk to clients about the following:

- How and what they feed their pet, how much they feed their pet and what else the pet eats other than the regular meals.

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Veterinary teams should be comfortable offering owners' specific guidelines for choosing a diet and be prepared to make specific diet recommendations that include brand and variety of the food and quantity to be fed.

- What does a day in the life of the pet look like? How much exercise is the pet receiving daily and what type? Exercise guidelines for different life stages should be discussed, particularly for young and aging pets.
- What behavior concerns does the pet owner have about their pet? Veterinary teams should educate pet owners about forming appropriate behaviors in puppies and kittens, including socialization.

If training and behavior services are not offered at the hospital, clients should be provided with reputable trainers and if needed, behaviorist referrals.

4. Make preventive care easy

Owners have indicated in multiple studies that veterinary teams can help make preventive care easier by:

- Providing written reports on examination results. These results should include clear recommendations for the care of the pet until the next visit, including when the pet should next be seen by a veterinarian and why.
- Forward booking the pet's next appointment before the owner leaves the hospital. In recent studies, 60% of pet owners would prefer to have their next appointment made before leaving the veterinary clinic. For more information about how to integrate forward booking into your practice, please see "Forward Booking Appointments: Is Your Practice Benefitting?"⁶
- Providing bundled preventive care plans that offer monthly payment plans. According to the Bayer Phase 3 study "8 of 10 pet owners indicated interest in preventive care payment plans—and interest level was not determined by income."

Client Surveys

Another excellent way to find out if clients value what we think they value is to ask them. There are many ways to survey clients.

Many practice management software (PMS) packages can send email surveys to clients after each patient visit. Other companies exist that provide these surveys independent of the PMS. Tailor questions on the surveys to determine what clients truly want.

Some hospitals prefer to offer an annual client satisfaction survey, such as the one offered by the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association⁷. Partners for Healthy Pets offers valuable free tools to train teams about preventive care and the benefits it conveys to pets and their owners. Veterinary Hospitals can access a free client survey, "The Opportunity"⁸, designed to elicit clients' opinions and needs about preventive care.

Finally, focus groups offer veterinary hospitals the opportunity to directly interact with a select group of clients in a facilitated discussion to explore what clients really value.

Conclusion

To meet or exceed client expectations, we need to define what they are. When we seek to understand client perspective, we can partner with them to deliver experiences that bring positive value. These types of interactions increase client satisfaction and create opportunities to provide better care for pets.

When veterinary teams proactively educate clients about preventive care, they become collaborators in helping pets live long and healthy lives. It's worth asking if your clients value the things you think they do!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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