A STRATEGIC VIEW OF CUSTOMER SERVICE RESEARCH AND PLANNING IN VETERINARY PRACTICE

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Customer service defined – an introduction
In this paper, aligned to the AVA Conference 2011, I will be addressing the importance of customer service research and planning and how to apply this to a 2011/12 customer service plan for your practice.

Providing good customer service is an absolute necessity if a practice wants to grow and prosper. While providing good customer service is a goal that many practices aspire to reach, for a variety of reasons, many do not.

The practices that are truly successful, however, understand that good customer service is an unending journey. It takes dedication, hard work and training to provide it. Then, it takes even more dedication, hard work and training to continually provide it.

The following list of questions may seem basic, but have you really addressed and answered each one? Have you applied the answers to your customer service plan?

- Who are my customers?
- What do my customers want?
- What is my customer’s definition of good customer service?
- How do I provide good customer service?
- How do I provide bad customer service?

Customer service standards
Setting standards is about having a benchmark. It means that all clients can be assured of receiving the same high standards in every practice.

Having a set of standards to follow is like having a road map. All practices have the same road map. All staff follow the same directions and all clients receive the same standards or benchmark across the board.

If a group of customers were surveyed from different practices they may be looking for some of the following factors:

- friendliness
- sincere greeting
- to be listened to
- eye contact
- to be treated with respect
- warmth

The survey would show the factors they do not appreciate such as:

- being ignored
- being spoken over - not being listened to
- not being given respect
- no acknowledgement of being a regular client

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Many practices have researched and implemented customer service standards to ensure that every owner receives a quality experience each and every time they visit the practice. These standards should be realistic and measurable. Although the primary operational objective of most veterinary practices is to provide the best possible patient care, the veterinary receptionist should be cognizant that it is also a business that has to be focused upon gaining and retaining clientele. So what denotes excellence in customer service?

One of the important facets of customer service is satisfying the customers needs and expectations. The veterinary practice is no different to any other small business. By understanding what a client expects from the practice and its staff, you can work towards a client interaction that meets and exceeds the client’s expectations. This is what client service excellence is all about. See Figure 4.1.

**FIGURE 4.1 What Clients Want**

To create a strong bond with the practice, clients want their veterinary surgeons to:

- Respect that the client’s time is valuable too by being on time for consultations
- Show interest in and enthusiasm for them, their pets, and their children
- Show affection for their pet
- Handle their pet kindly and not use unnecessary restraint
- Greet them and their pets by name
- Make them feel like friends, rather than numbers, by establishing personal contact with them
- Give an accurate estimate of the fees (and other expenses where possible)
- Take information/advice phone calls

(Source: *The Veterinary Receptionist Essential skills for client care* J Corsan & AR Mackay)

As with any human interaction, it is important to remember that perception plays an important role in delivering customer service in the veterinary practice. Perception can be defined as how a person, item or action is perceived by a client before verbal communication is used.

Perception can be based on the appearance of the staff, appearance of the waiting room, how staff conduct themselves with other clients and how clients are spoken to on the phone. When a client perceives they experience service that is better than what they anticipated, their level of satisfaction tends to increase. The greater the satisfaction, the higher the likelihood they will increase the number of transactions with the practice or perhaps recommendations to family and friends.

There are many benefits of ensuring that staff consistently delivers a high quality customer service to all clients. These include:

- Further elevating the client’s overall satisfaction level
- Reducing requests from clients to only consult particular staff members
- Displaying reliability and consistent service standards of the practice
- Enhancing trust to forge a long term relationship between client and practice
- Developing a broad foundation of practice loyalty
It is widely known that attracting new customers is significantly more difficult and costly than it is to look after existing ones. This important fact is often overlooked in veterinary practice. It is imperative that all veterinary staff remains client focussed. If a client stops consulting a veterinary practice, they will do so primarily as a direct result of their dissatisfaction with a staff member interaction as figure 4.2 highlights.

**FIGURE 4.2 Reasons Why Clients Leave**

- 1% die
- 3% move away
- 5% buy from a friend or relative
- 9% buy cheaper and/or better features elsewhere
- 14% because of unresolved complaints
- 68% because of perceived indifference or lack of interest by an employee

(Source: Excellence in Client Care Crampton Consulting Group)

Most consumers tend to be influenced by three main factors when purchasing 1. the price, 2. the product quality, and 3. the service quality. Unfortunately some of the general public commonly regards the veterinary surgeon as 'expensive' and without the similar distinction they afford most medical practitioners. In order to achieve the desired 'value for money' perception, the product and service quality must always be outstanding. Practices that routinely offer excellent product and service standards are said to have a 'competitive advantage' over their immediate veterinary practice competitors. Excellence in customer service and care is indeed a highly valued skill that should be nurtured and valued in much the same way as any technical veterinary nursing competency.

Knowledge of how a client will assess the veterinary practice is the next logical step once we understand their needs and what would influence them to seek veterinary service elsewhere. This can support the practice in preparing sound customer service standards which focus upon delivering excellence in the key evaluation criteria areas. These include:

- People in the practice
  - are the staff friendly, proficient, people-orientated and great communicators?
- Level of quality
  - the intangible (what you can see e.g. the reception area) and the tangible (what you can’t see e.g. confidence, professionalism)
- Level of professional fees
  - is there a perception of value for money?
- Waiting time
  - are delays kept to a minimum?
- Medical and surgical facilities
  - are the clients aware of all the facilities and services of the practice?
- Practice promotions
  - is the practice marketed well to differentiate itself from its competition?
Understanding your clients
The Veterinary Industry has had a fairly traditional role to play in the care of animals. Research tells us that the product side of the practice provides significant dollar return. There is reluctance on the part of the vet nurses or veterinary staff to ‘push’ product to the clients.

Pet products can be bought at any supermarket even the corner store (and some garages) sell pet food. Sometimes even a small range of collars and leads are sold at these locations.

Clients with pets have purchasing requirements. Animals need food. Cats and dogs need flea treatments. Shampoos, leads and collars, combs and brushes and the list goes on.

- Which product is best for the favourite family member?
- How does the client know?
- Does the aisle attendant in the supermarket tell him/her?
- What product is being currently advertised on TV? Is that best?
- What product has always been used?

These are questions requiring research and answers. Clients need assistance. Veterinary Practices who do not research and identify a client’s needs and help educate the pet’s owner are doing two people and an animal a disservice.