Customer Service Defined – An Introduction
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 or questions may seem basic, but have you really addressed and answered each one?

- 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 would be looking for 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

Many practices have implemented customer service standards and policies 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-focused. 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 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?

**Building Client Loyalty – ‘Going the Extra Mile’**

It is very difficult to bond with clients in the practice if the time the veterinary receptionist usually has with them is a 15-minute consultation for a yearly check up. Most clients want the very best health care for their pets and look to the veterinary reception staff to help them provide it. But 15 minutes a year is certainly too short a time to supply all the information they should really have.

Clients enjoy a club-like atmosphere, a sense of importance placed on their pet by the staff of their clinic. Successful veterinary surgeries are those who go the extra mile in providing their clients with specialised information evenings, puppy parties/school and workshops for elderly or overweight pets. Practices who run Puppy School comment that the puppy owners become their most “bonded” clients – and this is hardly surprising when these clients have spent a minimum of two hours and more often up to six hours with the practice by the time their pet is just 6 months old.

Additional services to the client create many opportunities to promote “health care projects” linked to veterinary advice and products. Clients who value and are committed to their pets are receptive and enthusiastic. They want to hear your recommendations and feel educated enough to provide their beloved pet with the best they can.

Some areas in which Client Loyalty and Education can be built are:

- **Nutritional Counselling** – puppy, seniors, diabetic, renal or liver support
- **Home Dental Care** – special teeth diets, toothbrushes and pastes
- **Weight Control Clinics** – “pet slimmers” clubs, nutrition and exercise advice
- **Senior/Geriatric Care Clinics** – nutritional advice, regular urine and blood checks, aids for the geriatric patient (special feeding bowls, bedding, mobility)
Puppy School/Parties – behaviour advice, training, healthcare information

(Source: Hills Pet Nutrition Module Four Additional Client Services)

Understanding Your Clients
The Veterinary Industry has had a fairly traditional role to play in the care of animals. i.e. Vets provide a medical service for injured or sick animals.

Some practices provide a small range of product – others don’t. Our 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 answers. Clients need assistance. Veterinary Practices who do not identify a client’s needs and help educate the pet’s owner are doing two people and an animal a disservice.

The pet........the owner.......and the practice.

Each practice will have a comprehensive range of product to market to their clients. Is it about sales? Of course! But it is more than just gaining a sale. It is about the practice’s ability to provide a total health care service including pet education to the owner.

It is about building trust and long-term relationships. It is about providing a total service. It is not enough to have wonderful vision statements and philosophies. Clients need to see and feel this being demonstrated. They need to be the recipients of ‘wonderful’ service and then they know that it is real!

Building Long Term Relationships

Relationships. There certainly is a lot of talk about them these days. The word “relationship” has never been more in vogue, especially among marketers. But, put your “customer hat” on for a moment and think about the last 5, or even 10, interactions you had with someone you buy from. How many of them felt good? How many of these encounters left you feeling like the business had even made an effort to build a long-term relationship with you?
Our guess is you can count on one hand the number of interactions you've had in the last month that come close to providing you with the warm feelings that are created when you are genuinely in relationship with someone.

Why is that? Our guess is there are many reasons. For one, so many marketing budgets are still loaded on the "acquisition" (Get New Customers) end and are running too lean on the "maintenance" (Service Existing Customers) end. Even with all the talk about the importance of retaining customers few businesses seem to be able to apply the funds to do the nitty-gritty, people and relationship related activities that provide the basis for long-term client loyalty.

What’s becoming more evident is that many businesses are still stuck in the past with beliefs about relationships with clients and the relevance to growing a business, whether it be a Veterinary practice or a newsagency.

Those business that have the foresight to work on the “relationship issues” now, develop a long term “lifetime value” mindset and back that up with the right tools and technologies will be light years ahead of their competitors in a short period of time.

So let’s get real about relationships. Clients are people, they are human, they want a connection where things like trust and respect and caring matter. They want to feel good about doing business with you. They want to trust that what you promise is what you deliver (or more). They are sick of getting trapped in the quicksand of promises and they are not going to reward you with loyalty unless you have earned it.

They do not see themselves as “targets” to “shoot” for or “segments” to be “penetrated”.

Perhaps we need to start to learn about nurturing relationships, to be willing to say we actually care whether you, the customer, is happy with our work, for which you are paid. Creating value means so much more than just putting a little extra something in the box or sending a Birthday card. Creating value is about creating relationships where people are respected, trusted and cared about and cared for.
Telephone Techniques

The telephone is often the first form of contact that the client may have with the practice and it is vitally important for the veterinary receptionist to master its use. It can be the ideal tool to create a positive and lasting impression with the client of practice’s professionalism and care. It can be the practice lifeline and invariably forms the basis for further communication with the client. All the communication principles for face-to-face apply with the slight modification to ensure you use the medium to its full potential. It is important to be prepared when taking the call. Be sure you have a pen, paper or computer ready. Where possible know the location and availability of other staff members to ensure you present an informed and knowledgeable front.

Some useful tips on successful telephone techniques are:

1. Answer the call promptly – usually at or shortly after the third ring. Be sure to take care of the client in front of you at the reception desk though by excusing yourself to answer the call. Remember that this client will want to see an attentive and caring staff member on the phone, as they may need to call the practice in the future. Some practices have multiple incoming lines, which can present a challenge when busy!

2. Greet the caller in a smiling, warm, welcoming and confident manner by identifying the practice and yourself e.g. Good Morning, ABC Vet Clinic, Sally speaking, how may I help you? Remember to always be polite and courteous.

3. This step is often the most difficult! Actively listen to the caller’s request and demonstrate interest by establishing and confirming their name, address details, the reason for their call and what or whom they require. Try to deal with the inquiry first hand, particularly if they ask to speak with the vet. More often than not, their inquiry can be easily handled by the veterinary receptionist without the need to disrupt the veterinarian in consultation or surgery – a busy vet will welcome this polite call screening, but be sure of the practice policy regarding this. It will often promote confidence of the client in the veterinary receptionist, particularly if their inquiry is handled politely, promptly and professionally, and increase the likelihood that they will not seek to speak with the vet about simple issues in the future. If a veterinarian does need to take the call, brief them about the client, their pet and their inquiry before they accept the call. In situations where the vet is unavailable, take the name, contact phone number for the return call and where possible an estimation of when the call is likely to be returned.

4. Only place the caller on hold if absolutely necessary and thank them for holding when you return to their line. It is critical that the caller is not holding for excessive periods as this shows a disregard for their time and importance to the practice. Ensure calls on hold are repeatedly followed up to ensure they desire to remain on hold. Wherever possible,
encourage the caller to call back or have the call returned so that the practice line can be free in case of other emergency calls. Record all messages in a designated message book rather than scraps of paper which can be easily lost. It is your responsibility to ensure the message is received, communicated clearly to the recipient and acted upon to the total satisfaction of the client e.g. has their pet food come in yet?

5. Always refer to the client and pet by name throughout the conversation and keep professional jargon to a minimum. Although a convenient communication tool, the distinct disadvantage of the telephone is that you cannot physically see the caller’s non-verbal communication to ascertain comprehension difficulties for example. Ensure you take brief notes particularly when the caller has multiple questions so that you can systematically answer their queries. This will support you in increasing your efficiency and effectiveness to successfully interact with clients on the telephone.

6. Be aware of the practice policy on how much information is supplied over the telephone about different medical conditions and patient status. Some vets prefer to liaise directly with their clients whereas other are satisfied with the veterinary receptionist taking the lead role in communicating the patient progress from the hospital status chart. Either way, it is prudent to record key details from the discussion on the client’s file so that other staff members are aware of your interaction particularly when instructions are given.

7. Consider the emotional and high stress levels that a sick pet can place onto a normally calm and rational client, particularly in an emergency situation. It is important to be concise and clear in the information you supply e.g. directions to the practice. Always aim to convey the very best image possible for the practice by selecting your words carefully. For example, the words ‘They aren’t in yet’ may imply the vet is late for work which may not be the situation, whereas the phrase ‘They are not in the practice at the moment’ reflects a professional image of a vet who could be attending a house call. It is these finer aspects of telephone communication that can enhance the overall professional image the client may perceive of the practice.

It is helpful to have a working knowledge of the telephone system that the practice uses. For example, a multi-line set-up such as the Commander system allows between 2 to 8 incoming lines in at any given time whereas a single line system may involve a call waiting function. It is also wise to be aware of how to select an incoming or outgoing line, how to place a caller on hold and how to page / intercom staff from any part of the practice if required.

Some “do’s and don’ts”:

- DO be prepared when receiving and making calls
- DO leave only a brief message on answering machines
- DO keep the call timeframe to a minimum
- **DO** use the name of the client and their pet
- **DON’T** eat or snack while using the phone
- **DON’T** engage in a 3 way conversation – focus your attention on the client only
- **DON’T** use slang or jargon in your conversation

Implementing quality communication in reception can serve as a valuable marketing tool as ‘word of mouth’ recommendations are often the primary source of the practice promotion. Clients often ask receptionists for their opinions or advice on their pet’s health care.

It is important to keep in mind that you are still a representative of the practice, and therefore you should reflect the vision and sentiments of the practice policies.

**Your Role As An Animal Health Professional And Responsible Pet Owner Adviser**

As veterinary receptionists we need to understand the importance of customer service to the practice, how we build long-term relationships and set standards by which we operate. This ensures the highest level of client care as well as highlighting the importance of product knowledge and understanding the range of products and services we carry in the practice. Without adequate product knowledge we cannot educate and make recommendations to our clients.

Our initial welcome to the client, our ability to establish rapport and ask questions along with having operational policies and procedures to assist us all to have **CONSISTENCY** is paramount to our customer service quality.

The actual greeting of the client, the identification of the owner’s needs and the correct identification of the nature of care required are all part and parcel of being a member of a practice team. The following up of missed appointments, accepting of payments, the education to clients of products and services we offer all make a difference to the overall service.

**Image of a “Salesperson”**

“Sales people” have not enjoyed a ‘good’ reputation. Unfortunately, when the word sales person is mentioned, visions of all the bad jokes about used car sales people come to the fore. We **DO NOT** have to be “pushy” to be a professional salesperson. We have a professional obligation to educate and offer the very best we can to our clients and their pets.

**Selling Is an Art**

Imagine walking into a shop and being greeted in a warm and friendly manner by a person who is smiling sincerely. The greeting is individual. The person actually looks as if they are enjoying themselves. They are talking to you as a real person. You are telling them things about yourself. You talk to them about your retailing needs. They listen and ask questions. Because you are encouraged and you feel comfortable, you talk some more. You make a purchase. You are thoroughly enjoying being helped with this purchase.
You tell people. You would not hesitate to go back to that shop. You are very happy with your purchase. You know it will do the job you wanted. You feel very reassured because of the questions that the person asked. This was the right purchase.

That is “selling”. It is an art. It takes practice and adapting techniques to your own individual personality and style. It is about building relationships.

Pet Education
Eeducating pet owners about their pets and how to look after them takes time, energy and expertise. Pet owners have the choice of purchasing pet food or flea treatments and a whole range of product from their local supermarket. Where is the accompanying advice? How do they know what they are buying will be effective?

You are in the veterinary industry with the ability to access information and the latest research. This is where pet owners can gain the most knowledge. How do you reach them and tell them? How do you let them know you will help them? You want to help them.

Wanting to help people provide the very best care for their animals is part of your role. Advising them on the correct product for their animal is part of our service philosophy. This is what effective selling is all about!

Effective Selling Is About Helping Customers
Effective selling has always been about helping people with their needs. Providing information based on their needs and desires and assisting them with their purchase(s).

It is always more than making a sale. It is about building relationships. Most people are capable of making a sale. It takes real talent to build a long-term relationship.

The Seven Steps to Professional Service

1. The Greeting
This is the first impression that your clients receive. The entire image of the practice relies on that first impression! Regardless about the amount of advertising, glossy fliers or practice promotions you undertake, this is where the client gains their first impression.

This is not about robotics or providing you with an exact language. It is about you using your personality to convey the very best impression you can to the client.

It is a courtesy. It is a sign of caring. The greeting reflects the practice philosophy. It is a sign that your practice is different! The very first impression is the first step on the client’s journey to a long-term relationship.
2. Questioning Techniques

Questioning techniques is about the ability to ask effective questions. We tend to work with a specific questioning technique called “Probing”. To probe effectively, we need to understand the dynamics of asking questions to gain useful and valid information.

To ask "Probing Questions" is a skill. Ask too many questions and the customer feels as if they are being interrogated. Ask too few and you cannot correctly identify the issue or the product or treatment. This step is such an important one. Probing sets up an incredible base of information for practice staff to work from when it is conducted professionally.

Your skill in determining which questions to ask each individual client, your ability to listen, to decipher the information that you gather and above all let the client see that you care about their pet.

Probing when effective is also about enjoying speaking and educating the client. As they reveal information, there is much opportunity for us to use our personality and build rapport with the client. Probing is a skill. It takes practice. How do you know where you are going if you don’t have direction? If you want to get to know your client you must put in the time. Take the effort and practice Probing skills. The effort will be worth it!

Effective Probing techniques are about:

- Body Language
- Words
- Checking in
- Listening actively
- Intent
- Asking questions

Open and Closed Questions

Open-ended questions require the client to respond with a detailed answer i.e. more than yes or no. This type of question will generally start with:

What, How, Where, Who etc

Open-ended questions are extremely effective during the first part of the client transaction process as this is where you need to find out as much information as possible from the client. Open-ended questions can be more personal and assist you in continuing to build rapport with your client.

Closed questions usually seek a yes or no or one word answer and are most effective when you wish to confirm something with the client or obtain a specific answer.

3. Presenting the Product or Service

The presentation of veterinary products and services is very much dependent on your skill and ability.
- How much do you know about the practice products and services?
- Do you know the procedures within the practice in relation to your products and services?
- Do you know the composition, features and benefits of the products recommended?
- Do you know the related or associated products the practice likes to utilize and recommend to your clients?
- Do you know the contraindications, handling and safety aspects of the products to discuss with the pet owners?
- Do you utilize the point of sale materials and information you have available for the clients?

Presenting a product is just like mathematics. It is about adding up two sides of the equation and if the numbers are right, so will be the answer.

The math’s looks like this.

Client’s correctly identified needs

+ Well-presented benefits and features of product or service

= Sale

(which means client satisfaction with service and with product)

Whenever a client buys a product or service, they buy it for what it can offer them, not because of the product or service itself or its features. This may sound unusual; because when you purchase a product or service you are paying cash for something tangible. For example, a hotel porter who carries your luggage provides a service but is really solving your problem of moving your luggage to your room.

When you really think about it, the only reason you every buy a product or service is because of what it offers you .....the benefit it provides.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>FEATURE</th>
<th>BENEFIT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>Satisfies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>hunger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We need to ensure we KNOW what we are recommending to our valued clients. The presentation of the product and service is very much dependent on your skill and ability.

- The feature is the fact about the product.
- The benefit is about your ability to explain to the client, the needs that will be met by this particular product or service

4. Handling Objections
Why do people raise objections or display reluctance to what you say? Many people may say price and this could be true. Some of the main reasons the clients may not continue with their enquiry are:

- There is something the client does not understand
- ‘value’ is not perceived.
- There is something the client does not believe
When a client does not understand how a product works or why it costs so much, you need to find out exactly what the problem is by asking questions and “solve the problem” by explaining in simple easy to understand language.

When a client does not believe what has been said, questions again need to be used with facts to support your claims such as product brochures.

Remember to always:

- Listen Actively
- Hear the client out
- Feed it back
- Think before answering
- Answer calmly and convincingly
- Confirm the answer
- Know your product and service knowledge

Remember what your practice is selling is:

- Caring
- Responsible Pet Ownership
- Follow-up
- Professional standards
- Education

Build trust with our clients. Show caring. Demonstrate your professionalism by taking the time to explain. Answer all queries.

Sell value! Build trust!

5. Closing the Sale
Many books have been written on Closing A Sale. And certainly there are specific methods to assist with this step. It is important to understand where this step lies in the client’s mind. This is about their commitment. You have told them
what you will do or what your practice can provide. One way of viewing this step is that it is the client’s turn to take the pledge to join the “partnership” that you offer your clients.

Selling to your clients is about creating a “partnership” to provide a “well being” service to their pet. This is a huge decision, one that cannot and will not be taken lightly by the client.

Many of us fear being seen as too “pushy”, that the client will go elsewhere for their products and services. It is important to remember that we have a professional obligation to offer the very best pet care or Responsible Pet Ownership concepts. On the contrary we have clients who have gone elsewhere because we DID NOT ask what their needs were!

Common Types of Closes
How do we ask clients to “buy”? How do we do this without being “pushy”? There are some specific closing techniques that are easy to use.

Be aware:

- Objections and resistance assist us in knowing what to address with the client
- Pay attention to buying signals from the client

Direct
This entails simply saying:

“So you happy to take this product?”

“Can I add this to your history?”

Choice
This entails simply saying:

“Which product will you be taking today x or y?”

“Which product will you be most happy with for Fido?”

“Which product do you prefer?”

Assumptive
This entails saying:

I am sure you will be happy with this product when you use it today

6. The Goodbye
This step is often the forgotten step in the customer service world. Once the client has made the decision to buy or purchase or book their pet in for the operation – this is the step at this point – the goodbye scene!

What is the goodbye scene about?

- long-term image (clients tell others)
- building a client base
- maintaining clients
• completing a sale to the end
• demonstrating care
• the moment of truth
• creating a long-term relationship with the client

Most of all it is about leaving the client 100% satisfied with the product or service purchased and 100% satisfied and happy with the actual interactive and personal service received from your practice. How many goodbye scenes remain in your mind as a shopper as outstanding, having achieved 100% satisfaction with the product (or service) and personal service provided? This is the part of the interaction or personal service that the client walks away with. How their interaction ends with your practice will stay with them for a long time.

The Goodbye is a very important step to securing a successful long-term relationship with this client.

This step is the confirmation for the client. Confirming that they placed their trust with the right practice. This step provides reassurance to the client that all that they heard in the sales spiel was coming from a business with a heart. Your practice is a wellness centre for pets that are household members. A demonstration of caring, ethics, sincerity, and integrity are important qualities.

7. The Follow-Up
The difference between average and excellence is often the follow-up. The interesting thing about clients is that: they remember the service long after the product has outlived its use.

Exceed your client’s expectations! Give them added value to each and every interaction. Don’t have them wanting or waiting. They can access that kind of service anywhere.