

# 10 TIPS

# TO MAKE CLIENT CONVERSATIONS EASIER

BY SHAWN McVEY MA, MSW

Positive and successful client conversations not only help more pets get the care they need, but also lead to long-term client loyalty and a robust source of referrals. The busy, distracting environment of a veterinary practice can make these conversations rushed and difficult. But with appropriate priorities, training and the right attitude, client conversations can be easy.

**1 REALIZE VETERINARIANS ARE IN A SERVICE INDUSTRY.** The vast majority of clients judge the quality of the practice as much on the experience they have as they do the medical care their pet receives. When you realize you are in a “service industry” it helps give you and your team an attitude of gratitude and a desire to provide service that equals the clinical expertise of the doctor.

**2 DO NOT CREATE BARRIERS TO CARE FOR YOUR CLIENTS.** If a pet is sick or in pain, typically price is not the client’s primary focus. Unfortunately, the veterinary staff is often responsible for making price an issue. They either avoid talking about costs or they try to gauge psychologically and financially where the client is coming from and fit care and fees into the client’s assumed situation. Clients just want to understand why it is we charge what we charge.

**3 TAKE A LESSON IN COMMUNICATION FROM A POPULAR, HIGH-END RESTAURANT.** After you are seated for dinner, your trained, professional server provides you with details on the chef’s specials. They communicate the value of the meal through description of flavors, taking the time to point out what makes that dish unique and why you would value ordering it. That’s how we can talk about veterinary services to clients instead of “fast food style,” which simply gives product and cost. Let’s help clients more easily understand the value of our services by describing what the quality of life will be for the pet after care and relating that to human medicine so clients can easily understand the analogy. We can take time to share with clients the unique equipment or skill needed, the outcome expected and the benefit to the pet.

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**4 CHOOSE WORDS THAT COMMUNICATE VALUE, NOT COST.** Don't use the word "estimate" when talking cost of care. Instead, use the term "healthcare plans" because that's really what we're providing them and it's valuable to them and the health of their pet.

**5 USE THE RULE OF THREE'S.** Offering details about the treatment is important. But to make it easier for clients, never tell them more than three things at a time. Otherwise, they may misunderstand or be overwhelmed with information.

**6 UNDERSTAND YOUR PROCEDURES.** It's critically important that your entire team knows what you do, why you do it, how much it costs and how to explain it to clients so they are eager to be compliant. There must be a training mechanism in place where we can routinely improve our understanding of the medicine we provide and our ability to convey it to clients.

**7 PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU AND YOUR CLIENTS ARE NOT SAYING.** Only seven percent of what we say is vocally heard. The rest is communicated through body language — both yours and your client's. As you present care plans and associated costs to clients, be confident knowing you are providing a valuable service, make eye contact and avoid any negative posture such as crossed arms. It's also good to be on your client's side, literally. Don't sit behind a desk or table and talk across to clients. As you discuss care and cost, pay attention to your client's body language. If they seem to be agitated or distracted, maybe avoiding eye contact or shifting in their chair and or perhaps even withdrawing from the conversation — be sure to uncover and address their concerns immediately.

"Mrs. Anderson, you are awfully quiet. I know you are probably upset and I want you to know that I want you to leave here completely satisfied with our services. If something I've said is concerning you, let's talk about it and work together to find a solution. We both want your dog to get healthy."

**8 ALWAYS ASK FOR MORE INFORMATION.** During the financial conversation, it's important you ask clarifying questions and not assume you fully understand what the client is trying to communicate. Let them know it's okay for them to tell you that money is a problem, but remember your goal is to be the patient's advocate and help the pet get the care it needs. Immediately let clients know you have financing solutions that may help them, like CareCredit's healthcare credit card.

"Mrs. Jones, I don't want to insult you by not offering the best possible care for your pet. So if money is an issue, you don't have to feel uncomfortable about that. We will do everything we can to help you with this. Is the care and cost I've presented not in your budget, or it just doesn't work for you right now? Would it be better for your situation if you could pay over time? I know together we can make care fit comfortably into your life."

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**REALIZE YOU AND YOUR CLIENTS WANT THE SAME THING.** You want pets to live long and healthy lives. So do the vast majority of your clients. Veterinarians and their teams are experts at providing clinical solutions. And for some clients, you may also need to provide financial solutions. The key is to offer solutions upfront — not wait until clients ask. As the client is checked in for their appointment, reassure them that you know how much their pet means to them AND that you will provide both clinical and financial solutions that will help them get the best care possible for their pet.

“Mrs. Smith, it’s nice to see you again. Sorry that Sparky isn’t feeling well. I know you are very concerned about him. We’ll do everything we can to figure out what’s going on with him and get him better. And we’ll do everything we can to make sure his care and the cost of care are comfortable for you. The doctor is running on schedule and will be with you in just a few minutes.”

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**LISTEN MORE THAN YOU TALK.** A great communicator will listen 80 percent of the time and talk only 20 percent. To make communications not only more comfortable but more effective, take the time to listen to what your clients are saying and notate them in their client files. This includes all types of information that may be relevant to the pet’s care and the client’s life. Listen for unasked questions. Listen for concerns. The more you listen, the better you will communicate.



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