



Challenging clients - what practical communication skills make all the difference?

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What is a “challenging client”? This terminology may actually not be the best starting point - we immediately imply that we are right and the client is wrong. Maybe our starting point should be “challenging situations involving a veterinary health care professional and a client”. This is a better strategy, as we will approach the situation with an open mindset.

Whatever the terminology, the fact remains that most veterinary health care teams dread these situations. That is not surprising, as they can be very time consuming and drain a lot of energy from the veterinary hospital/practice. Not a dream scenario for anyone.

Many different sequences of events can lead up to a “challenging situation”, but the common denominator is, that we have to deal with a client who is either dissatisfied or angry – or both. In order to ensure best possible outcome, you must be prepared for these situations and you must have a plan.

What are the primary practical communication skills we must have in place when faced with an angry and/or dissatisfied client?

Most important advice: Complaints/anger must be handled immediately and effectively. The veterinary health care team must have a protocol in place for dealing with feedback from an angry client. The right protocol can make a huge difference for everybody involved – and is the first step towards a good resolution of the conflict.

Essential initial action: First listen – then respond calmly and sincerely. Clarify what the issue is – you must understand your client’s point of view. Remember that the client’s mindset and focus may be different from yours. Show the client that you have understood their message and that you understand how they feel.

Best outcome: If the angry/dissatisfied client feels that their issues with the practice are solved quickly and effectively, the probability of retaining them as a client is high.

Best prevention: Most complaints can be avoided by giving clients enough information at the right time – better known as clear, concise and timely client communication. Always remember the importance of clarification: Clarify that you understand and respond to what the client actually is communicating to you, and clarify that your messages have been received and understood by the client.

How can you work with communication in practice so everybody in the team buys into the idea – and what may be good ways of implementing the relevant procedures and getting the whole team on board?

First of all, be aware that “challenging situations” often arise on days where you are short staffed and/or running behind schedule. Always remember this, and avoid shortcuts in your client communication. The few minutes you save now can have significant negative consequences later, that may take hours - or days - to sort out afterwards. Have a Plan B ready for when you are having “one of those days”, so you avoid short-changing your clients on communication.

You and your team may choose to visualize excellent client communication with each and every client as a safety net against finding yourselves in a potentially challenging situation involving an angry or dissatisfied client. Alternatively, you may imagine that your excellent client communication vaccinates your clients verbally and in writing against becoming angry or dissatisfied with you and your team. Whatever works for you is fine – as long as you have a plan of action.

Selected references

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