



Taking communication to the next level - what are the key skills to focus on?

Lotte Davies DVM, MRCVS

InsightPraxis and Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences,
University of Copenhagen
Denmark
lotte.davies@insightpraxis.com

Veterinary health care teams communicate with clients every day. Excellent client communication can make a real difference in your daily work. It can actually make the difference between a really successful practice with a fantastic reputation and a practice with average success. It can also literally save the day if you are in a situation where you have to deal with an angry and/or dissatisfied client.

Important questions to ask ourselves:

1. What do our clients really want from us – and how do we deliver?
In order to deliver excellent communication, we need to know what the clients want. It is not enough to think we know – that is called guessing.
2. What do we as a profession actually know about this important topic – and how do we use this knowledge?
20 years ago, not many of us asked these questions – and we had very few answers. That has fortunately changed. Many studies and client questionnaires carried out over the last decades across Europe and North America show, that our clients want a shared responsibility with the veterinary practice team to obtain/maintain optimal health for each individual companion animal.

What does this mean for us when we communicate with our clients?

It means that awareness of the human-companion animal bond (HCAB) and a client-centered approach for each individual patient are important parameters in all client communication. Client communication is not simply an exchange of information – there are many emotions involved. Clients often imagine the worst and fear the consequences for their companion animal. They are usually much more concerned about the prognosis than the diagnosis. Our clients want clear, concise and timely information from us in a language they understand and can relate to. Specifically, they want us to listen to their concerns, they want us to show that we really care and they want to know what to expect.

The key communication skills the veterinary health care team needs to focus on are active listening and compassionate communication. We must understand how the client feels and we must be able to show empathy. Interestingly, this is also the case in situations where a client is angry or dissatisfied.

Be aware that time pressure is a serious threat to good client communication. Many of us take shortcuts when pressed for time – including shortcuts in communication. This must be avoided. Spend the time required to communicate clearly with each individual client at the time of the consultation. If this, on rare occasions, is not possible, make sure that you, or one of your colleagues, gets back to the client as soon as possible. You must ensure that the client has understood your messages and that you have answered their questions. This is alpha and omega in companion animal practice. It will facilitate best treatment of the patient and prevent the client from worrying unnecessarily. At the same time, it also decreases the risk of client complaints.

Active listening and compassionate communication

Active listening and compassionate communication are key skills we all can work on - and most of us can learn to do both exceptionally well. It is never too late to increase your focus on client communication and to add and build on the knowledge and experience you already have. Together with good time management, the right mindset and an awareness of your non-verbal communication cues, it can make a real difference in your everyday work.

Selected references

American Animal Hospital Association State of the Industry Presentation 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016.
Published on www.aaha.org

Dowdy T. Give Clients an experience, not just an appointment. Veterinary Team Brief, June 2016. Published on www.cliniciansbrief.com

Englar RE. Post-appointment follow-up: What veterinary clients say they want. DVM360 Magazine, May 2018. Published on www.dvm360.com

Osborne CA. Lessons on Listening. DVM360 Magazine, May 2008. Published on www.dvm360.com

Volk JO et al. Executive summary of the Bayer veterinary care usage study. JAVMA 2011;238:1275-1282.

Volk JO et al. Executive summary of phase 2 of the Bayer veterinary care usage study. JAVMA 2011;239:1-6.