

2019 APVC proceedings

Finessing the customer experience - it's all in the detail

People buy from people - if anyone on your team makes clients feel undervalued, ignored or patronised then those customers won't come back. They'll also tell their friends. An excellent customer experience isn't a 'nice to have', its essential if you want to attract and retain clients. Every other business sector understands the commercial significance of the customer experience, so why don't we? This session will share research and case studies from UK practices to illustrate and quantify the potential business opportunity for your practice.

Every single piece of research done with pet and horse owners, smallholders and farmers alike confirms that the most important factor when choosing a veterinary care provider is convenience. They want to be able to get to and contact the practice quickly. They want the phone answering when they call, and they want to receive advice tailored to the needs of them and their animals. They want to book appointments online, access test results quickly and speak to an expert quickly when needed. It sounds obvious, but so many practices overlook the basic principles and important tiny details that have such a vital impact on the customer experience.

First contact resolution

With 90% of initial client contact taking place on the phone, this is one crucial area where people and processes need to be optimised. The Onswitch Index programme calls over a thousand practices across Europe, Scandinavia and Australia every month. The evidence shows that many practices are still not grasping the vital importance of providing potential clients with the service they seek over the phone - yet these are people who have researched local practices and chosen you to call. They need veterinary care and they've chosen you to ask - why wouldn't you do everything you can to secure their business?

In this session we'll look at real data from practices that have used both the Onswitch Index reporting programme and the 5 Steps to measure and improve the quality and consistency of their telephone customer care:

1. Give a great greeting
2. Use the name of the owner as well as her pet / horse
3. Create an emotional connection
4. Provide additional information - leaflets or website
5. Offer an appointment

Demonstrating genuine care and building rapport with potential clients at this early stage of the customer journey is essential if you are to turn an enquiry into a loyal lifelong client. Owners have plenty of choice when it comes to picking a veterinary practice and research finds that they are much more likely to choose those that are interested in the pet and really want to help.

Finessing face-to-face contact

Small animal practices should aim to convert 40% of calls into paid consults, but even once the owner is in the building her continued custom is not guaranteed. New and established clients alike will notice all the little things about your team, processes and building that you might miss, so it's important to pay attention to the detail when it comes to delivering an excellent customer experience. Areas to consider include:

- Is the practice exterior clean and tidy? Is parking available and well signed?
- Do notices and signs look fresh and recent, or dog-eared and faded?
- Are your out of hours contact details and opening hours clearly displayed on your website and on the door?
- Are posters and leaflets well organised and neatly displayed, or is there an overwhelming amount of information on show?
- Do cats and dogs have separate areas to wait, with high shelves and blankets available for nervous cats?
- Do the reception team welcome all visitors with a smile, even when they are on the phone? Positive body language and eye contact are so important when building rapport
- Does the practice feel calm and welcoming, or is there an air of mild chaos? (Loud TV, clutter, shabby paintwork and no uniforms)
- Is there a photo board showing all members of the team? Does everyone have a name badge? Are clinicians' names displayed on the consult room doors?

Each of these things, and many more important details, plays a role in shaping the client's impression of your practice. Taken individually they may be so small as to be thought insignificant, but together they *are* your practice - a business that hasn't provided toilet paper or dry towels for customers might just as easily be overlooking other details in the operating theatre.

Listening and hearing

Of course the customer experience isn't just about housekeeping; it is shaped by a wide range of senses and emotions. We'll also consider the importance of communication, sharing tips for active listening and handling difficult situations, such as KLARDOC:

Keep calm

Listen	Put assumptions aside and really hear what the client is telling you
Acknowledge	Repeat what you have just heard, for clarity
Refine and Define	Summarise the key facts, aside from the emotion
Overcome	Present possible solutions and alternatives
Close	Thank the client and detail the timings of any further action

Almost always, a 'difficult' conversation stems from the fact that your client is frustrated, confused, worried or distracted. Understanding her state of mind and looking at the situation from her perspective will usually help inform a solution, and it always helps to use calming, reassuring language:

- Don't use technical language or practice jargon
- Keep your body language open and professional
- Speak at the same pace as her
- Repeat key words and phrases back to her
- Use open questions to ascertain what the problem is
- Ask politely for clarification of the issue, don't assume

Customer experience - top ten tips

In this session we'll look at simple but effective ways in which you can ensure the customer experience your team provide is second to none, culminating in a set of top ten tips for optimising client care:

1. Make sure your practice is easy to find online. Investing in Search Engine Optimisation and ensuring your website is mobile-friendly are important considerations for practices looking to stand out from the competition and illustrate your unique benefits and approach at this vital first stage of the customer journey
2. Look at your practice branding and client communications with fresh eyes - is the design dated and complicated? Are there typos and shouty capitalised signs with red letters? Neither of these convey a warm and caring approach to customer care
3. Keep the entrance and waiting area clean, tidy and free from unpleasant odours, Provide separate waiting areas for cats and dogs, to minimise stress for waiting felines and make it easier for cat owners to visit (research consistently proves that many cat owners do not visit the vet unless absolutely necessary as it is so stressful)
4. Train everyone in the team to greet clients using the same protocols, whether on the phone or face-to-face. Body language should be positive and active listening practised so that the client feels valued and welcomed
5. Focus on two-way communication and rapport building in the consult room - listen to what the owner has to say, use the pet's name, don't use jargon and make clear recommendations for next steps
6. Provide written estimates and keep owners informed of any changes to costs as treatment progresses - unexpectedly high bills and confusion as to what they include are a major source of complaints and client dissatisfaction
7. Make it easy for owners to contact you - long opening hours (weekends and evenings), practice apps, live chats and prompt replies to enquiries through social media all help build bonds between client and practice
8. Display photos, names and roles for everyone in the team in the waiting area and online. Putting faces to names and names to jobs helps develop trust and rapport with owners. Team members should wear name badges and uniforms too (ideally colour-coded)
9. Keep in touch. Newsletters, blogs, regular Facebook and twitter posts, appointment reminders and phone calls when preventative care is due are all great ways to keep your practice front of mind through the year
10. Hold regular sessions with the team to share feedback and practical tips for ongoing improvements. Customer care training and development should feature in everybody's CPD plan and be assessed at annual appraisals to ensure standards remain high

When your customer experience is rewarding and engaging, clients will naturally want to return. Of course there are actions you can take to make this even more likely, boosting footfall and increasing Average Transaction Values in the process:

- Use the Net Promoter Score (NPS) tool. This simple and effective model measures the percentage of clients who would recommend you. The target for high performing veterinary practices is >80%, currently the average UK business' NPS is around 70%. NPS is a great way to quantify word of mouth in your local area. The NPS tool is another valuable source of feedback on your consultation effectiveness; its score is derived from

ratings out of ten given by clients in response to the question, "based on your recent consultation, how likely are you to recommend us?" - easy to ask via client surveys on your website, social media and hard copies left in the waiting area. Delighted clients will score 9s and 10s and are ranked as Promoters. Disgruntled owners may award marks of 6 and lower, and are classified as Detractors. Passives are in the middle, with ratings of 7s or 8s. To work out your NPS rating, take the percentage of detractors away from the percentage of promoters, leaving a single percentage score. The target for high performing veterinary practices is >80% and so once you have a baseline NPS score, asking the question again in six months' time will allow improvements to be measured and tracked.

- Give clients a reason to return
 - Book the next visit and / or schedule a reminder whilst they are still in the practice
 - Even if there is no reason to return with the current condition, recommend a health check in six months and get it in the diary now
 - Maintain ongoing contact with the owner, either physical (with an appointment booking), or virtual via email, newsletters etc.
- Boost Word of Mouth. It is a known truth that people choose businesses that others tell them are great, so understand how many clients recommend you currently, and encourage them to do more of it, more often
 - Friend Get Friend schemes. Rewarding loyalty is great for business and is simply an extension of your owners' natural behaviours. Personal recommendation in this way is powerful and effective - offering a £5 voucher to your existing clients when their recommended friend registers with you (generating £5 for them also) is proven to be a cost effective way to drive client numbers and sales
 - Online reviews. Ask your clients to leave comments and reviews on your Facebook page and on review sites such as yell.com
 - Encourage Facebook likes and Twitter follows by featuring your social media details on all practice literature
- Develop positive relationships with Key Opinion Leaders
 - Their importance is underestimated by many practices, yet the key opinion leaders in your area can make or break a practice's reputation. Your clients see these businesses more often than they see you, and they seek advice and recommendations from them:
 - Equine - farrier, yard owners, dental technicians, feed merchants, saddlers
 - Small animal - groomers (probably see each dog and owner up to eight times a year), agility clubs, puppy trainers, rescue centres, catteries, pet shops, dog walkers
 - Hold regular events and information evenings, send newsletters and offer CPD
- Share client testimonials and feedback
 - Create YouTube clips of owners talking about you
 - Share and re-tweet positive comments
- Ask clients for recommendation- most owners are more than happy to provide testimonials when you have helped their beloved pet or horse.
 - Find a person in the practice who is particularly good at this
 - Maintain a degree of sensitivity; know when to ask (as a client is dropping off a box of chocolates, rather than when they are settling a huge bill)

The customer journey - key touch points

Owners have so many choices when it comes to the care of their pets and horses, why should they come to you? It's no longer the case that you can sit back and wait for them to walk through the door - they will search for advice online, self-diagnose and buy medication through other channels, ask their groomer or yard owner for advice, or even visit your competitors. Assuming they do choose you, if their experience of your practice does not match their expectations then not only will they not return, but they may tell others to stay away too.

Research consistently proves that after convenience, the next most important factor for owners choosing which practice and vet to use is the customer experience - how the practice *feels* rather than what it does and how much it charges. Thus a practice that focuses on making the customer experience personal, welcoming, professional and convenient from start to finish will ultimately win and keep more clients. And let's not forget that the customer experience begins long before the owner sets foot in the door. Your website should be professional, friendly and kept up to date. Your premises should be well maintained and tidy. Your client communication materials should be professionally produced and grammatically correct! The little things speak volumes when it comes to the customer experience, and it's crucial to maintain focus and not become complacent.

Understanding the customer journey

The concept of the customer journey is not new, describing the many touch points experienced between client and practice. This journey begins long before the pet owner has set foot inside the clinic, with searches carried out online for reviews and information, recommendations sought from friends, family and pet care professionals (groomers, kennels, pet shops etc.) and impressions formed through local advertising and open days, not to mention clinic branding and appearance. Through this initial stage of intelligence gathering, known to marketers as the Zero Moment of Truth, potential clients will form an impression of the practice and the likely levels of care it will provide for them and their pets. Based on these impressions they will make a conscious choice to contact one of more practices (usually by phone in the first instance), and at this stage they will confirm or challenge their existing perceptions based on the conversation that takes place.

Potential clients are looking for genuine interest and care to be shown towards their beloved pet, and for a rapport to develop when both owner and practice share the same values and aspirations as to what great customer care feels like. It should be noted that clinical competence is taken for granted by the owner - they do not care how many letters are after the vet's name, or what equipment the clinic has, they are simply looking for their family member to be treated with respect by every member of the practice team.

Only when telephone contact has proved positive will the owner make the decision to bring her pet in, and once they are face-to-face with the reception team, vets and nurses they will once more assess the levels of customer care afforded to both their pet and themselves. Disappointing customer service at any stage of the customer journey will result in the owner choosing not to visit again, and in the worst cases telling friends and family not to do so either.

