

CLIENT RETENTION

Your Most Memorable Appointment

Euthanasia visits represent a fraction of revenue but an outsized share of how clients remember your practice.

BY CÉLINE LEHEURTEUX, DMV

The room is quiet. The lights are dimmed, and soft music hums in the background. An elderly man is bent over his small shih tzu, whispering goodbye. It's a familiar scene for any veterinary professional. Euthanasia appointments take time, are emotionally intense, and often disrupt an already full schedule. They represent only 2% to 3% of a veterinary practice's annual sales, but they're one of the most important appointment types on the books. Why? Because clients will remember these appointments like no other.

When the euthanasia experience is thoughtfully structured, it can transform sadness into beauty. It reconnects us with why we chose veterinary medicine: to nurture the human-animal bond. To make a difference. To care for pets and their people.

Guidance Through the Storm

When a pet is at the end of life and its family feels lost in the dark, the veterinary team has a unique opportunity to become a guide in the storm. Offering the family an opportunity to perform a simple ritual — like writing the pet's name on the body bag, lighting an LED candle, or playing their favorite music — can help restore a sense of control in a seemingly powerless moment.

Research from Harvard Business School showed that individuals who performed simple rituals after a loss reported feeling less grief and an increased sense of control during emotionally chaotic moments.



Many families have never been offered this opportunity during a pet's euthanasia. While running the show, we sometimes forget to ask families whether they have special requests or concerns. When the veterinary team creates space for a peaceful farewell, magic can happen.

Keeping Our Favorite Clients

Attracting new clients is a costly endeavor — in dollars and effort. That's why it's important to take care of the clients you have. Despite this, little attention is often given to retaining families after the death of a pet. This oversight may not only lead to losing a client, but also delay or prevent the adoption of the next patient. It's a silent loss and the erosion of a trusting relationship, the lifetime value of which can easily exceed \$5,000 per pet in veterinary services.

A study published in VetRecord found that 14% of pet owners switched to a different veterinary practice after a pet's euthanasia, even though 75% of the owners claimed they were satisfied with the procedure.

The veterinary team must show support and give families the strength to return. During the appointment, it could be as simple as sharing your own experiences as a pet owner and saying things like:

- ▶ Today is not going to be easy.
- ▶ I have lost a pet.
- ▶ It's all worth it.
- ▶ We will remember Sunny.

After the appointment, you could:

- ▶ Provide the contact of a pet loss counselor.
- ▶ Donate to a nonprofit in the pet's memory.
- ▶ Provide a paw or nose print.
- ▶ Call the family a few days later to ask how they're doing.
- ▶ Send a sympathy card with messages from the entire team.

Dignity as a Standard

One way to keep your favorite clients is to treat their pets with respect and dignity before and after their death. Research shows that only 15% of pet owners consider the use of a plastic bag acceptable for handling a deceased pet, yet plastic bags remain the norm when we know owners won't see them. If the owner will see, we switch to a blanket or a box. In no other situation do we accept such a double standard.

Veterinary medicine has clear standards for treating animals, but far less consensus on how their bodies should be handled after death. That's one reason the American Veterinary Medical Association introduced its Companion Animal Aftercare Policy, which recommends that, "Whenever possible, deceased pets should be maintained in a condition suitable for families to



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witness their pet's aftercare."

Integrating purpose-designed aftercare bags into your standard protocol can improve the pet owner's experience and strengthen your bond with them. Reassure them about their pet's journey after death before they even ask questions. Sometimes one sentence is enough: "Your pet's dignity will be preserved for the rest of the journey."

Compassion Leads to Satisfaction

Improving the euthanasia appointment profoundly shapes the client experience. It also changes how the veterinary team feels about the care they provide. When euthanasia is thoughtfully designed, it can become a meaningful part of the job and a powerful source of professional satisfaction. **TVB**

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

A 2023 study published in the journal *Animals* found that the most common (43%) post-euthanasia follow-up action reported by veterinarians was a phone call. However, 23% of veterinarians reported no follow-up at all.