MONEY MATTERS

Why You're Seeing Fewer Patients

Lagging appointments? Stagnant growth? Cures are available.

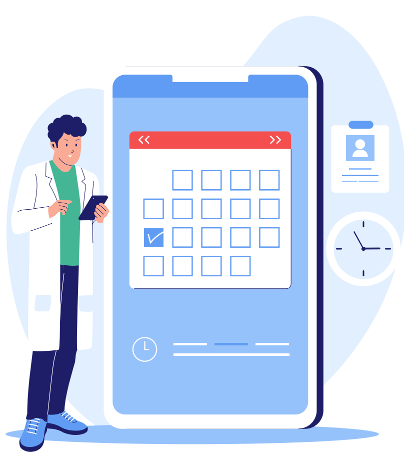
BY JASON CASTNER, CPA, CVA

A few short years ago, veterinary practices fretted over how to handle the sudden influx of puppies and kittens. Hospitals without enough doctors, staff, and exam rooms pushed appointments out weeks or months. To avoid employee burnout, patient time slots were lengthened. Urgent cases were turned away. Weekend hours were shrunk or eliminated. The emphasis tilted from providing an amazing client experience to surviving the next day, week, and month.

While all this was happening, the cost of living jumped, putting greater strain on clients' wallets. Today, as pet owners focus more on saving money and the value of services, many practices struggle to fill their same-day and next-day appointment book.

Veterinary clinics with a declining patient count and increasing labor costs are caught in the middle. The cure isn't to quickly cut staff or compensation, but instead to focus on understanding why fewer patients come in and to utilize your team better. After all, a financially healthy practice can afford to pay its staff well.

How soon can a client schedule a wellness appointment at your practice? A sick pet exam? A nonemergency procedure? If you can't accommodate a wellness appointment within a week, a sick pet exam the same or next day, and a nonemergency procedure within



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14 days, you have plenty of client demand. The focus for you is to fix your supply issues.

On the other hand, if tomorrow's schedule is barely half full and you reduced the days dedicated to dental procedures and surgeries, you have a client demand problem.

When You Can't Do More

If clients must wait a long time to get into your practice, and you have flat or declining patient counts, you need to increase capacity. Consider these four options:

- Utilize your technicians more.
- Revisit patient scheduling.
- Use technology to boost efficiency.
- Hire another doctor.

If the number of veterinarians is a limiting factor, look at doctor tasks that technicians could do, such as booster shots, recheck exams, and client education. Schedule technician appointments, and charge as much as one-third the wellness exam fee. Technician appointments empower key team members, allow your doctors to be doctors, and generate additional revenue.

Second, many clinics lengthened exam times during the pandemic and when newly graduated doctors joined the team. Determine whether the time set aside for wellness and sick exams is still appropriate. Few doctors and technicians love the idea of reducing exam times, but a 30-minute wellness appointment likely does not require a half hour of doctor time.

If your practice has enough exam rooms, could the doctors see three wellness appointments an hour rather than two? Look for opportunities to fit in one or two more cases a day per doctor. The financial impact can be immense.

Also, consider using an artificial intelligence scribe to save your doctors' time on medical recordkeeping. The benefits could range from each doctor saving an hour daily on recordkeeping to being able to fit in two more appointments.

Finally, you might need to hire an additional veterinarian. While that's easier said than done nowadays, I have seen private practices experience far more success in finding doctors compared to a few years ago.

ONE MORE TIP

Increasing revenue is a more positive approach to improving a veterinary practice's profitability than cutting costs. If stabilizing or increasing patient counts isn't possible, and labor costs are rising faster than revenue, you might need to focus on efficiency.

When Demand Is Lagging

If you have openings today, and tomorrow's calendar is less than half full, your focus should be on increasing client demand. Evaluate whether pet owners receive the outstanding experience you want to deliver. Start by:

- Communicating your vision of the client experience with your team.
- Using technology to improve employee onboarding.
- Educating potential clients about what makes your clinic different.

If your goal is to schedule more patients, be sure the entire team is on board. I have seen associate veterinarians tell the front desk staff not to give them more afternoon appointments. Technicians tell the front desk the same thing. Be sure to identify and discuss similar gatekeeping at your clinic. It happens far more than many practice owners realize.

Next, use online scheduling technology. It's the present and the future, and there will be growing pains as you tailor it to fit your practice. Clients want to schedule appointments with as little friction as possible. Practices that make it easy will capture appointments from those that do not.

Lastly, what makes your practice different? Why should clients want to come to your clinic? If your practice is privately owned, tell the world. If your clinic can accommodate same-day sick or urgent care appointments, promote the service in your Google ads. If you have amazing team members, share pictures and stories about them on social media.

Pet owners also want value — an experience worth more than the prices they pay. You deliver value if clients rave about you online and recommend that their friends book an appointment.

There are many options for veterinary care, so focus on what makes you and your team different. TVB

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