

TALK THE TALK

# How to Respond When Clients Lash Out

Calm the chaos by teaching your team empathy, poise, and practiced responses.

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Imagine a dog owner scolding one of your team members in a moment of frustration. Or a client's anger escalating into behavior that crosses the line. When it happens, are your employees prepared to respond calmly and confidently? Such high-stress interactions can leave even experienced veterinary professionals unsure of what to say and how. Let's look at building a client-centered culture that equips teams with practical skills to de-escalate tense situations.

## Adjust Your Focus

In a client-centered culture, the practice team consistently strives to help pet owners and recognizes that doing so goes hand in hand with satisfying a pet's needs. When clients feel genuinely supported, they're more likely to trust your employees and less likely to become impatient or angry.

Given the rise in veterinary fees and concerns about the economy, exceptional service also prevents pet owners from viewing their visit as purely a financial transaction.

Without a client-centered focus, communication training alone won't significantly change how teams respond to angry pet owners. When the priority isn't helping the client, a team member is more likely to become defensive or irritated, and that negativity can quickly spread to other employees.

## An Ounce of Prevention

Preventive measures can remove points of friction and minimize pet owner stress. I suggest holding a team meeting to discuss client pain points, which might include long wait times, policies such as a 72-hour notice for prescription refills, and delays in returning phone messages or communicating lab results.

Consider how you might revise protocols. Perhaps you could assign job roles better so that your practice processes prescription refills and returns calls faster. You can also empower team members to problem-solve when pet owners aren't happy. For example, if someone is upset because of a delayed progress report, make it standard for a client service representative to determine the reason and update the pet owner.

Another way to keep a concern from escalating to anger is to thank clients in advance for their patience. You might say, "Ms. Jones, thank you for your patience. We appreciate your understanding."

## Recognize Early Signs of Anger

Body language that might indicate frustration includes frowning, a furrowed brow, crossed arms, hands on hips, a clenched jaw, and pacing. Check in with clients showing these signs to stave off increased agitation. Here are ways to gain clarity and show a desire to partner with a client:

- "I noticed your facial expression. How can I help?"
- "I can see you're upset. What information can I get for you?"
- "I sense you're frustrated. What questions do you have about Molly's treatment plan?"

## Calming Perturbed Clients

When pet owners are visibly angry, your priority should be to make them feel heard and not to solve the issue immediately. Three ways to accomplish it are to validate concerns, convey

## STORY ARCHIVE

For more advice on cutting ties with misbehaving clients, read “You’re Fired!” by Dr. Andy Roark at [go.navc.com/firing-clients-TVb](http://go.navc.com/firing-clients-TVb).



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a desire to help, and express empathy.

Let’s say a pet owner is unhappy about your practice’s fees being higher than expected. You might respond: “I understand your frustration. I’m sorry Jake’s been sick, and I know this is a stressful situation. Let me go find out some information for you.”

Likewise, if a client is angry about not being able to pick up a prescription by a specific time, you might say: “I hear you’re worried about Hannah. I’d be frustrated too in your situation. Let me see what I can do to speed up the process.”

Remember that a client might be angry about circumstances beyond anyone’s control, such as when a pet has a poor prognosis or needs a treatment that the owner can’t afford. In these situations, the best response is to express empathy.

### When Anger Escalates

When a client’s irritation intensifies, a team member might feel uneasy and say, “I need you to calm down,” not realizing that such a response often comes across as dismissive and fuels further frustration. To avoid this, respond calmly, using de-escalation techniques and boundary-setting.

Suppose a client suddenly engages in inflammatory or blaming language. This scenario might occur in an exam room when a dog owner accuses the doctor of failing to provide the best care. The first step is to take a deep breath, which can have a calming effect.

Another way to de-escalate is to pause the discussion. You might say: “I see our conversation is upsetting for both of us. I’m going to step out for a moment so that we can both collect our thoughts.” This approach gives everyone time to regain their composure and move forward collaboratively.

Calmness is a valuable de-escalation technique to use when a client’s behavior is unacceptable. The situation may involve yelling, derogatory remarks,

profanity, and threatening behavior. When it happens, verbally identify the unacceptable actions and request cooperation. Here’s an example: “Mr. Taylor, your yelling and derogatory comments are making me uncomfortable. I need you to lower your voice and stop any unkind remarks.”

Most people will comply with such a directive. If not, the next step is usually to fire the client.

### When to Part Ways

When your attempts to de-escalate an angry interaction fail, you might need to tell the owner that you are permanently terminating service. Here’s an example of what to say: “Our relationship is built on mutual trust and kindness. It appears we can’t continue to meet your needs and partner with you to care for Oscar. We’d be happy to send his records to the veterinary hospital of your choice.”

Role-playing what to say in tense situations is an integral part of training. Team members who practice specific communications are more likely to remember what to say when they face an angry client.

Being able to respond with compassion can help more pets get the care they deserve. **Tb**