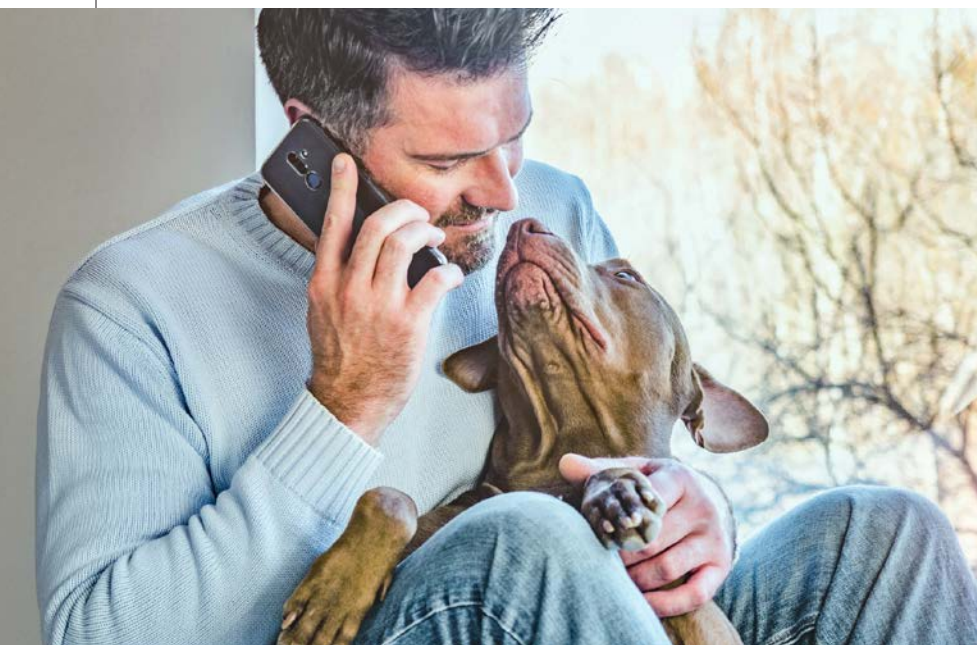


TALK THE TALK

Answer the Call

Simple communication standards and targeted CSR training can transform routine phone calls into meaningful client relationships.

BY AMANDA L. DONNELLY, DVM, MBA



Identify Areas of Friction

Consider how pet owners might feel when they call your practice. If you record incoming calls, listen to calls for different times of the day and for each client service representative. Identify any pain points that arise during calls. You can also partner with a mystery shopper. Assess the following:

- Is your team's tone welcoming and friendly?
- Do team members sound rushed or abrupt?
- Do team members enthusiastically express a desire to help callers?
- Does your team calmly respond to angry callers?
- Are clients able to get appointments at their desired time?
- What concerns do callers express about hospital communications?

Another way to ask clients about their phone experience is through surveys or in-person conversations. Ask if they received the assistance they needed and if the team was friendly. It's also helpful to ask, "What is one way we could improve our phone communication?"

Gain Team Buy-In

Leaders often tell their teams that they "need to be more service-oriented" and might give them access to training if they identify problems with phone skills. But the success of a new training program might be limited if the team doesn't understand the benefits of using new communication skills.

Before meeting with the team, determine your desired outcome. If you want clients to trust the team and feel cared about, what would that sound like? What are your team's must-have skills to create stronger client connections?

During a team meeting, create a vision for the team of your desired outcomes and give them an overview of the opportunity to improve phone skills to enhance the client experience.

Discuss the value of using specific communication skills. Rather than just telling the team what to do, engage them in a conversation so they feel heard and have an opportunity to offer feedback about their challenges.

The goal is to help everyone see that the benefits of connecting with callers are enhanced client loyalty and patient care. Moreover, the benefits for the team include increased efficiency and greater job satisfaction.

Implement Training Based on the Team's Needs

Focus your training on what your team needs to eliminate friction with clients. Perhaps they need to do a better job creating positive connections with pet owners, so phone calls don't sound transactional. The key to achieving this goal is to match communication training to the desired outcomes. For example, team members might need to learn to project a positive voice tone, use reassuring statements, actively convey a desire to help, engage callers with positive comments, respond to complaints without being defensive, or use other communication techniques.

To achieve success, team members should practice gaining proficiency with one or two new skills at a time, bearing in mind that it can take weeks or even months to form new habits. Establish short weekly or biweekly meetings to discuss team members' progress.

Your training program may need to include systems changes if clients are unhappy with certain protocols or delays in communication. For instance, you might need to evaluate your prescription refill policy or how you can increase the timeliness of calling clients about lab results if CSRs are regularly responding to these concerns.

Set Phone Standards

The use of specific phone skills may become a "hit or miss" situation without

established standards. Setting measurable standards is the best way to achieve consistency and a higher level of client service. Standards also make onboarding new hires easier by establishing clear job expectations.

Start by implementing a few standards at a time, and then add standards once the team achieves proficiency. Here are standards that help team members show they care about clients and their pets:

- Use a friendly opening line after the caller identifies the reason for their call. Saying, "I'd be happy to help you," sets a positive tone and conveys an immediate desire to help.
- Personalize calls by using the pet's name rather than generic phrases such as "your pet."
- Convey one positive comment during the call. Examples include, "Sophie is such a beautiful name," "I love dachshunds," "I'm so sorry Max isn't feeling well," and "Our team will take great care of Bella." This skill doesn't delay calls, and it helps to connect with clients.

Assign Roles

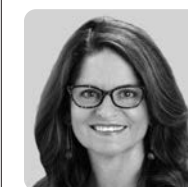
Training might be less effective if you don't address the reality of your practice's workflow and staffing. One of the biggest challenges CSRs face is juggling multiple phone lines while trying to assist clients at the front desk. As a result, clients may not feel a welcoming presence, and interactions might feel more like business transactions.

To improve the client service experience for pet owners on the phone and in the building, create a dedicated space to answer phones. Answering phones in a separate room increases efficiency because it minimizes distractions and allows CSRs to focus solely on helping callers.

If you don't have another place to answer phone calls, assign daily job roles for CSRs working at the front desk. Designate one CSR as the primary team member to handle phone calls while others are assigned to check clients in and out. You may also be able to hire a remote CSR or partner with an outside company to manage some of the call volume.

Providing exceptional service during phone calls is a proven strategy to increase patient visits and grow your practice. Being intentional about training programs that help your team build better client connections ultimately helps more pets get the care they deserve. **TVB**

Providing exceptional service during phone calls is a proven strategy to increase patient visits and grow your practice.



DR. AMANDA L. DONNELLY

The Talk the Talk columnist is a speaker, business consultant, and second-generation veterinarian. She combines her practice experience and business expertise to help veterinarians communicate better with their teams and clients. She is the author of "Leading and Managing Veterinary Teams: The Definitive Guide to Veterinary Practice Management." Learn more at amandadonnellydvm.com.

CSR SUPPORT

The North American Association of Veterinary Receptionists offers support, resources, and education specifically for veterinary client service representatives. Visit naavr.org.