TALK THE TALK

The Metrics of Better Conversations

Your team's communication directly impacts your bottom line. Learn the KPIs to track and goals to set for 2027.

BY AMANDA L. DONNELLY, DVM, MBA

EXPERT COMMENTARY



Veterinary practice leaders can become so focused on the daily demands of hospital operations that they lose sight of what's ahead. A practice's future growth doesn't happen by chance; it requires clear goals, a plan for achieving them, and a team committed to taking specific actions.

One way to drive practice growth is to set goals for enhancing client communications. Strategic, consistent communication can help increase patient visits, improve compliance, and build client loyalty. An annual communication plan, with regular monthly or quarterly progress reviews, can keep these priorities on track.

Let's look at how to set client communication goals and implement specific strategies that support stronger client relationships and position the practice for continued growth.

Evaluate KPIs

Before setting goals, consider how well the team is doing with client communication. What is the level of client satisfaction? Are pet owners coming in for preventive care when it's due? Are they saying yes to treatment plans?

To help answer these questions, here are key performance indicators (KPIs) every practice should track monthly:

- New clients: Every practice needs to acquire new clients each month to account for normal client attrition. The goal is 25 to 30 new clients per month for each full-time-equivalent veterinarian.
- Client retention: Client retention reveals how bonded pet owners are to the practice. If retention is low, this may indicate that the practice needs to improve client experiences.
- Patient visits: If visits are declining, this might indicate that pet owners are deferring care or declining treatment recommendations.
- Client compliance: Calculating compliance rates can help indicate how effectively the team communicates the importance of preventive care and presents treatment plans. For example, you can compare the number of fecal exams, heartworm tests, and lab profiles performed with the number of annual preventive care visits.

Set Goals to Improve

Decide which client communication goals will be most beneficial based on your hospital data. Do your KPIs indicate that your practice's greatest opportunity is to acquire new clients, increase patient visits, or improve compliance? Let's explore how team members can communicate better with clients to meet some of your goals.

GOAL #1

Acquire New Clients

One of the best ways to attract new clients is to use phone skills that convert more calls into appointments. When callers feel welcomed and confident in your care, they are more likely to schedule. You might set a goal of adding 10 new clients per month. Client service representatives can use these skills to engage potential clients:

- Bookend calls with a friendly opening and closing: After callers share the reason for their call, say, "I'd be happy to help you." Close with, "We look forward to seeing you and Bella soon," or "We'd love to care for Bear. Please call us back if you'd like to schedule an appointment."
- Use at least one engaging comment: Make a personal connection with a compliment about the pet's name, an empathy statement such as, "I'm so sorry to hear Duke isn't feeling well," or reassurance such as, "I'm confident having Dr. Taylor examine Chloe will give you peace of mind."

GOAL #2

Increase Patient Visits

Effective forward booking is a must. Make it a standard for the veterinarian to tell each client the value of their next appointment and to schedule before leaving. Then at checkout, a team member should say, "Dr. Taylor wants to see Bella back on [date] so that she can [state value of visit]. We can schedule her appointment [offer two times]. Which is best for you?" Avoid a closed-ended question such as "Did you want to schedule Bella's next visit?" as this might lead to a "no" response.

Another opportunity to increase visits is to focus on feline care. Cats hide signs of illness, and people often think their cat doesn't need regular visits, so it's important to promote the benefits of annual preventive care. Emphasize the value of the physical exam, consultation, and lab work rather than the need for vaccines. It's also critical to implement best practices to promote a cat-friendly environment for feline appointments and to send clients resources on carrier training to reduce the stress of car rides. Make it a standard for team members to ask all clients if they have any cats at home that the hospital hasn't seen. This helps identify unserved pets who can benefit from care.

GOAL #3

Improve Compliance

Don't assume a pet owner understands the value of a service or product. Asking, "Did you want to do the wellness lab panel today?" assumes knowledge the client may not have. Similarly, saying, "We recommend routine lab work for Chloe," without explaining the benefits doesn't help the client understand why the service is needed and may make it feel like a sales pitch. Likewise, asking, "Do you need any heartworm preventive?" invites a simple "no," which can shut down the conversation.

Here's a better approach:

- Assess knowledge: Ask, "How familiar are you with the tests included in our wellness lab panel?" or "What questions do you have about heartworm disease and using preventives?"
- Focus on benefits: "I'd like to assess Chloe's lab values as part of her preventive care exam. Let me share with you the information the test will give us and the benefits." Inform the client that a comprehensive profile evaluates internal organ function. Explain the value of data trends and being able to identify early indicators of disease before clinical signs appear, which leads to better outcomes and less expensive treatment. For heartworm prevention, use the brand name and explain how it protects the pet from life-threatening disease.
- Check in: Ask, "What questions do you have about the lab panel?" or "What questions do you have about [brand name product]?"

Monitor Progress

Monitor your team's progress with communication skills and adjust training and protocols as needed. Consistent communication can strengthen client relationships, improve compliance, and help more pets get the care they deserve. ■



Dr. Amanda L. Donnelly
The Talk the Talk columnist is a speaker, business consultant, and second-generation veterinarian. She is the author of "Leading and Managing Veterinary Teams: The Definitive Guide to Veterinary Practice Management." Learn more at amandadonnellydvm.com.

Open Up

Are you giving pet owners the space to share the full story? Veterinary communication research by Dr. Jane Shaw reveals that, on average, practitioners ask 13 closed-ended questions but only two open-ended questions per consultation. And in about 10% of appointments, veterinarians ask no open-ended questions. Shifting this ratio to prioritize open-ended inquiry helps uncover the underlying concerns that drive better client compliance.

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