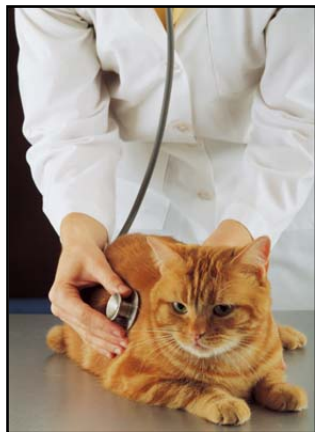


## Are You an Effective Listener?

Find out how to read clients' body language and choose the right approach to get your message across.

By Wendy S. Myers



When you enter the exam room, Mrs. Impatient is stroking her cat nervously and glancing at her watch. Her cat vomited twice this morning and Mrs. Impatient called your clinic at 7 a.m. to see if she could bring in her cat on the way to work. As you perform your exam and recommend diagnostic tests that will reveal the reason for the cat's vomiting, Mrs. Impatient again looks at her watch and rapidly responds to your questions.

How can you persuade Mrs. Impatient to accept your recommendations and provide the best medical care for her cat?

Your ability to listen, interpret body language, and respond appropriately will make this visit a success—or failure. “You know real quick if a client has other places to be and you need to get the job done to the best of your ability,” says Jim Guenther, DVM, MBA, CVPM, a consultant with Brakke Consulting Inc. and co-owner of Regional Emergency Animal Care Hospital in Asheville, N.C.

Whether a client is in a hurry or wants an extended appointment for a new puppy exam, you need to adjust your communication style so both visits result in high-quality patient care and client service. Follow this advice to be a more effective listener and communicator.

**1. Know your objective.** Ask yourself, “What do I want to achieve during this appointment?” Going into the exam room with a game plan will help you prioritize key messages. A client with a senior or sick pet may feel bombarded with information if you address too many subjects.

Jeff Rothstein, DVM, MBA, and his staff use report cards and questionnaires at Progressive Pet Animal Hospitals, a group of five hospitals in southeast Michigan. At multi-doctor hospitals, consistency in patient care is critical. Clients receive a “Questions for the Doctor” checklist upon arrival to help them organize thoughts before entering the exam

room. Doctors use report cards to summarize findings and list what owners need to do for preventive care. “If you use a report card in the exam room and then review it with the client, you’ll build consistency,” Dr. Rothstein says. “A report card forces you to cover all the areas and never assume that the client doesn’t want a service.”

The report cards also list preventive services such as annual blood and urine screenings, heartworm testing and prevention, dental care, parasite control, diet, and vaccinations. “At my hospitals, we recommend annual blood and urine screenings regardless of the pet’s age,” Dr. Rothstein says. “When we do an annual heartworm test, about 75 percent of clients also agree to a mini blood screen that we’ve packaged in our wellness services.”

At Town & Country Veterinary Clinic in Marietta, Ga., Michael Good, DVM, gives clients with puppies and kittens a Purina book and kit on providing a lifetime of wellness. The book features a toll-free number that clients can call to talk with a behaviorist or trainer. “I have a brochure for every product that I talk about,” Dr. Good says. “It’s absolutely essential that people leave with a brochure because they’re going to forget 90 percent of what you say.”

**2. Know your listener.** Before entering the exam room, know as many facts as possible about the client and patient. In addition to assessing clinical information, consider ways to connect with the client. What is her job? Is she the pet’s primary caregiver? Will she need to reiterate your recommendations to other family members and how can you help her succeed? Is she concerned about a specific health issue?

**3. Know your approach.** Once you’ve identified your objective and the needs of your



listener, you can create a tailored approach. Ask yourself:

- What is the heart of what I want to say?
- What’s the single best statement that will lead the client to accept my recommendation?
- How will I relate to the needs and interests of the client?

You may want to develop a “hook,” an attention-grabbing statement that makes the topic interesting and exciting. When discussing preventive dental care, you might say, “Did you know that research indicates routine dental care can add as much as five years to a pet’s life? That’s why I include a dental exam with every physical. Let’s look at your pet’s teeth and gums, and I’ll explain how a dental cleaning and home care can enhance your pet’s health and longevity.”

Tell clients about your personal experiences with products so they’ll see how their pets can benefit, too. For example, say, “I have three cats and I use FRONTLINE Plus on Ollie, Tabby, and Sunflower. FRONTLINE Plus kills adult fleas, eggs, and larvae as well as ticks. Because your cat goes outdoors, this product will prevent re-infestation from the environment. You’ll apply FRONTLINE Plus once a month and it’s gentle enough to use on kittens 8 weeks or older. You’ll see results within 24 hours.”

Visual hooks also can educate and entice clients. Use point-of-purchase displays, exam-room posters, wall-mounted brochure racks, models, teaching radiographs, and more. “Posters in exam rooms are a must,” Dr. Good says. “Make sure they’re framed and look professional. I also use displays with manufacturer tear-off coupons that let clients try a free dose or sample of a product.”

When you use exam-room displays, focus on a few key messages to avoid cluttering countertops and walls. At TenderCare Veterinary Medical Center in Greenwood Village, Colo., each of the six exam rooms features a bulletin board. Each month, staff members change posters to match hospital promotions. For example, bulletin boards featured body-scoring charts in January as part of the hospital’s obesity awareness program. A framed poster of the four stages of periodontal disease hangs next to each bulletin board. Doctors can point to bulletin boards or framed posters while explaining key points to clients.



**4. Know how to interpret body language.** Noticing clients’ facial expressions, eye contact, posture, gestures, and actions will help you adapt your communication style. A client’s posture and body movements can speak volumes about her feelings toward her pet as well as give you instant feedback your communication

style. Is the client smiling or does she look tense? Are her arms crossed? Is she petting the animal or clutching it anxiously? Is she looking at her watch? Is she crying? Is she speaking quickly or slowly?

“Be in tune with clients’ body language and mimic it,” Dr. Rothstein advises. “Respect their style but be careful not to assume what clients want. Always recommend the most thorough treatment.”

**5. Know ways to involve your team.** Research shows that staff members strongly influence clients’ decisions on heartworm preventives, flea and tick products, pet food, vaccines, and shampoos. By taking a team approach to educating clients, you’ll achieve better client compliance for preventive products. “Discussion by support staff is the No. 1 issue because they’re on the front line,” Dr. Guenther says. “Clients are more informed because drug companies advertise their products to consumers. Clients are aware of the different heartworm and flea products out there and your staff needs to recommend a specific one.”

When a client checks in at the front desk, the receptionist should confirm what services or products might be needed today. If the pet will get a heartworm test as part of the visit, it’s the perfect time to recommend a heartworm preventive. The technician and doctor will echo and reinforce the need for testing and prevention in the exam room. Getting a consistent message from three people at your hospital significantly increases the chance of client compliance. As a rule of thumb in advertising, a consumer needs a minimum of three exposures for a message to be effective.

“There’s a fine line between practicing good medicine and selling products,” Dr. Good says. “You have to believe in the products that you recommend. If you and your staff work as a team, you won’t have a problem with product sales.”

### **Overcoming objections**

How should you react if a client becomes upset after you recommend a product? First, determine the reason for the objection, and then offer alternatives or restate your recommendations with a different approach.

For example:

- If price is the issue, you may be able to suggest a smaller quantity, such as a 6-month supply of monthly heartworm preventives rather than 12 doses.
- If diagnostic tests are needed, explain how this information will help you get an accurate diagnosis the first time, rather than trying various treatment options and potentially costing the client more in the long run.
- Empower the client with information. Restate your recommendations in terms the client will understand. Medical jargon and “veterinarianese” may confuse or even anger a client. Provide vendor brochures, use anatomical drawings and models, and review an exam report card to clarify your diagnosis and recommendations.
- Use an analogy the client will understand. You might say, “If we run this senior pet profile now and discover that Molly has any early signs of disease, we will have more treatment options. Preventive care and routine screenings help you keep your pet healthy and let you spend your healthcare dollars wisely. For example, if you change the oil in your car every 3,000 miles, your engine runs smoother. But if you wait until 10,000 miles, you may face expensive repairs. Preventive healthcare offers similar benefits.”

### Try These Resources to Improve Your Communication Skills



- “First Impressions That Last: Retaining Clients With Great Customer Service” video and workbook by Cecelia J. Soares, DVM (AAHA Press, 2000)
- “Essentials of Client Service,” a CD-ROM staff training series (Lifelearn)
- *Connecting With Clients: Practical Communication Techniques for 15 Common Situations* by Laurel Lagoni, MS, and Dana Durrance, MA (AAHA Press, 1998)
- *Educating Your Clients From A to Z: What to Say and How to Say It* by Nan Boss, DVM (AAHA Press, 1999)



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- *Client Satisfaction Pays* by Carin A. Smith, DVM (AAHA Press, 1998)
- *The Art of Speed Reading People* by Paul D. Tieger (Little Brown & Co., 1999)

### About the Author:

Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver, Colorado. Her



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