

Is Your Hand on Your Heart or Balled Into a Fist?

Using effective body language and phrases in client conversations

By Wendy S. Myers



Dr. Suzie Slacker glanced at the puppy's adoption paperwork and new client sheet before she entered Exam 2. "Great, another free shelter exam," the veterinarian mumbled. Dr. Slacker placed the medical record and adoption papers on the exam table and began taking notes. Her history questions included "Any coughing, sneezing, vomiting, diarrhea?" and "Fleas, ticks, lumps, or bumps?" After a cursory exam, she said "You've got a healthy puppy. We'll see you again in a few weeks."

Will these new clients come back? Chances are slim based on the ho-hum interaction. Dr. Slacker's attitude of indifference resulted in missed medical opportunities as well as an at-risk client relationship. Projecting a professional image and connecting with clients will help Dr. Slacker be a more effective communicator and in turn get pets the care they need. Here's how to make the most of your body language and communication skills in four common situations:

Getting off to a great start

Dr. Slacker should have greeted her new clients with a smile and offered a handshake. The quickest way to put your best face forward is with a smile, says author Nicholas Boothman in *How to Connect in Business in 90 Seconds or Less* (Workman Publishing, 2002). Smiles and handshakes signal professionalism, approachability, and confidence.

Establish credibility and authority with a helpful attitude and engaging tone of voice. Break the ice with questions that connect with clients and come from the heart such as "How did you choose your puppy's name?" Gladly accept puppy kisses and share stories about your pets. You'll bond with clients and establish a trusting rapport.

Offer a business card at the end of the visit, make eye contact, and say, "If you have questions before your next appointment, we're happy to provide answers."

Taking an accurate history

To really connect with clients in exam rooms be aware of their body language and yours. Poor body language can be a symptom of dishonesty, nervousness, anger, defensiveness, embarrassment, fear, or boredom, according to Jo-Ellan Dimitrius, Ph.D., and Wendy Patrick Mazzarella, authors of *Reading People: How to Understand People and Predict Their Behavior—Anytime, Anyplace* (Ballantine Books, 2008).

When taking a patient's history, don't stand if the client is seated. Your elevated position is one of authority, potentially causing the client to respond with answers you want rather than the truth. If you ask "What parasite preventative do you give, and what day of the month do you give it?" the client may respond with a well-known brand and the first of every month. Yet the medical record shows the last preventative purchase was two years ago.



Instead, kneel to get on the same eye level as the client, removing the physical barrier of the exam table. If the client is standing, don't talk across the exam table, which may be considered confrontational body language. Stand at the end of the exam table so you form "L" shaped body language. This communicates you're interested in what the client has to say.

Your physical appearance also influences the outcome of client conversations. Always wear a nametag with your name and title so clients know your role. Doctors can command respect with a lab coat. A traditional white coat symbolizes knowledge, professionalism, and the science behind veterinary medicine. Tattered scrubs or not being able to distinguish a female doctor from a receptionist only leaves clients confused.

Another benefit: If you want to get paid like a professional, you must look like one. Dress code often depends on the practice. At a New Jersey hospital with general, emergency, and specialty care, male doctors wear white lab coats and neckties while female veterinarians wear blouses with their jackets. At a California practice, doctors wear polo shirts, khaki pants, and zip-up consultation jackets. Both styles reflect the practices' personalities yet project a

professional image. Technicians in scrubs or receptionists in business casual attire of polo shirts embroidered with the clinic logo and khaki pants complete the team's style.

Presenting the treatment plan

Positive body language and convincing phrases let you confidently present finances. Have staff—not veterinarians—present estimates. Doctors make recommendations based on medical needs, so remove them from money conversations. Call the estimate a “treatment plan.” The term “estimate” focuses on money while “treatment plan” points to needed care.



When discussing treatments and finances, don't stand behind the exam table and talk across it to the client. This face-to-face posture might be perceived as challenging. Instead, stand at the end of the exam table, forming an “L” between you and the client. Even better: Stand on the same side of the exam table, shoulder-to-shoulder with the client. It's easier than reading the treatment plan upside down, and this body language is collaborative rather than

confrontational. The technician would say, “I want to go over the treatment plan the doctor recommends for your pet.”

Place your thumb over the price. The client needs to understand the procedure before seeing the total. Explain each item, pointing to the left column that lists medical services. Don't point to the right column—it has prices.

Create a three-ring binder with labeled pictures for common procedures such as dental cleanings, spays, and neuters. You also can use slideshows on exam-room computers or digital photo frames. Match the order of photos to your treatment plan template so you can flip pages as you describe services. For example, show a photo of a technician running in-house blood work to illustrate preanesthetic testing. Point to a picture of a pulse oximeter and EKG when describing monitoring. Images help clients understand procedures, and educated clients are more likely to comply with doctors' recommendations.

When finishing presenting the treatment plan, the technician asks, “Is this the level of care you'd like for your pet?” When the client responds yes, say, “To get your permission to

schedule/proceed with treatment, I need your signature on the treatment plan.” In an emergency, say, “To get your permission to begin emergency treatment of your pet, I need your signature and a prepayment of \$ ____.” Many practices require a 50 percent deposit for emergencies. Use the term “prepayment” instead of “deposit,” which indicates the client may get money returned. You keep the signed treatment plan and give a copy to the client.



Review payment methods including cash, checks, credit cards, and third-party financing such as CareCredit. If financial limits exist, the team member says, “Let me get the doctor so he can recommend Plan B/options for a treatment plan that fits your budget.” Oftentimes, the client will find a way to pay for needed care. If not, the doctor can revise the treatment plan based on the patient’s medical needs rather than cost.

To practice this skill, print a treatment plan from your veterinary software. Role-play conversations with staff and ask them to suggest improvements in your body language and phrases. With training, you’ll become a confident communicator and get more patients the care they need.

Explaining the invoice

Instead of having clients respond with “It’s how much?!!!” at checkout, present the invoice using a combination of confident body language and sales reinforcement techniques. Let’s say that Mrs. Finamore visits with Rocky, a 2-year-old Golden Retriever, for wellness services. As Mrs. Finamore approaches the checkout counter, stand to greet her, smile, and make eye contact. Read the list of services and products off the computer screen, and then state the total. Don’t say prices for each item, just the sum. Besides showing value, this allows the client to add extra items such as preventatives, medication refills, and food.

“Mrs. Finamore, today Rocky had a comprehensive physical exam, heartworm and intestinal parasite tests, and vaccines to protect him from canine distemper, adenovirus, parainfluenza, parvovirus, rabies, kennel cough, and leptospirosis. You also have Rocky’s prescription for 12 months of parasite protection. Does Rocky need any medication refills or

food?” After the client responds, say “Your total is \$____. Which payment method are you using today?”

Always state the diseases that vaccines cover rather than confusing acronyms such as DHLPP or FVRCP. Likewise, use the term “intestinal parasite test” instead of “fecal.” If you test for tick-borne diseases in addition to heartworms, call your test a “blood parasite test” or “heartworm/tick test” to show value for the additional diagnostics.

Asking the client’s preferred payment method subtly tells her that payment is due when services are rendered. For new clients add which payments you take such as, “We accept cash, checks, and all major credit cards.” Once the transaction is complete, give the receipt to the client along with a smile that communicates “We appreciate your business.”



When a person is being truthful, the palms of the hands will be exposed and fingers will be extended, according to *I Know What You’re Thinking: Using the Four Codes of Reading People to Improve Your Life* by Lillian Glass, Ph.D. (John Wiley & Sons, 2002). Because you want to appear truthful during financial transactions, “present” the invoice rather than shove it at the client. If the client purchases food, has children accompanying her, or a Jack Russell terrorist tugging at the leash, step out from behind the counter and say, “Let me help you out to the car.” Never ask “Do you need any help?” because most clients will decline.

When your team focuses on improving body language and using positive phrases, you’ll increase client service, practice revenue, and patient care. It’s a guaranteed prescription for success.



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Communication Quiz:

How Would Clients Rate Your Team’s Communication Skills?

Clients interact with every member of your healthcare team. Take this quiz to discover your team’s communication score. Circle the rating that best reflects your client education and service on a typical day. Total your points, and then find your score.

5 = Always 4 = Most of the time 3 = Undecided/no opinion 2 = Occasionally 1 = Never

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Staff and doctors use pets’ names often in client conversations. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. Every client leaves the exam room with at least one written communication tool such as an exam report card, brochure, or handout. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. Doctors and staff discuss the importance of parasite control and prevention with clients during every visit. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. We use senior care and/or puppy and kitten checklists to help create client awareness and to make sure we cover core topics. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. We see senior pets twice a year for comprehensive exams. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. Our veterinarians and staff use multiple teaching methods in exam rooms when communicating with clients such as models, report cards, brochures, anatomical drawings, and x-rays. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. We review home-care instructions for dental and surgical patients with clients before bringing pets into exam rooms. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. The doctor always asks the client, “What questions can I answer?” before ending the exam. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. Brochures are located inside each exam room, where they are easily within reach for doctors and staff to give to clients. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10. Each exam room has framed educational posters. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |



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11. Our hospital uses assistants and/or technicians in exam rooms for client education, animal restraint, and anticipation of veterinarians' needs. 5 4 3 2 1

12. Each exam room features educational models such as knee, hip, ear, or dental models. 5 4 3 2 1

13. Doctors and staff often step out from behind exam tables to have positive body language and close-up interactions with clients and patients. 5 4 3 2 1

14. Each exam room has an x-ray view box or digital monitor. 5 4 3 2 1

15. When making recommendations to clients, team members and veterinarians use convincing phrases such as "Your pet needs a dental cleaning" or "Your pet needs year-round parasite protection." 5 4 3 2 1

16. Doctors use exam report cards to summarize their exam findings and recommendations as well as to help clients educate other family members at home. 5 4 3 2 1

17. We take digital pictures of patients during exams to include in exam report cards, track patient progress for an ongoing condition such as skin problems, or as part of home-care instructions. 5 4 3 2 1

18. We provide educational videos for in-clinic or home viewing. 5 4 3 2 1

19. We enter reminders in the computer for medical progress exams, callbacks, or needed follow-up care as soon as the client checks out. 5 4 3 2 1

20. All clients receive written home-care instructions following surgical or dental procedures. 5 4 3 2 1

TOTAL POINTS = _____

Find Your Communication Score

Score of 100-90: Clients appreciate your stellar communication skills, and every team member understands his or her role in client education. Make sure new staff members and veterinarians complete an orientation program on how to teach clients so exceptional

communication and strong client compliance becomes part of your culture. Seek ongoing training to keep pace with the latest trends in communication techniques.

Score of 89-80: Your team delivers superior client education and seeks opportunities for improvement. Continue to grow your commitment to great client education with staff meetings at least monthly. Discuss an educational issue during every session, such as ways to improve discharge appointments, client handouts, and what teaching tools you need to add. Discuss strategies to improve client compliance for heartworm testing and prevention, dental cleanings, senior screens, preanesthetic testing, vaccinations, and therapeutic diets.

Score of 79-70: You're ready to reinvigorate your team and renew your dedication to client education. Start with a staff meeting to discuss potential educational improvements, and consider a client satisfaction survey to check the effectiveness of your client education and communication.

Score of 69 or lower: Your team needs a vision of the level of client education possible at your hospital. To communicate your values, write a mission statement with your team. Then ask staff members to suggest ways to live the mission daily. Create a service award program that lets staff praise each other for positive results. For example, post a brag board where employees can write notes about a team member who they saw provide exceptional client education. Seek ongoing training on client education through seminars, websites, videos, books, and journal articles.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver, Colorado. Her consulting firm helps practice owners and teams improve compliance, client service and hospital management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training for more than 1,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center (www.ahscvets.com), an 11-doctor, referral hospital in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. Serving Denver for more than 30 years, the AAHA-accredited hospital offers internal medicine, surgery, oncology, acupuncture, and emergency care to Denver's best friends 24 hours, 365 days a year. Wendy is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' monthly e-newsletter at www.csvets.com.