5 strategies to get cats to return for care

By Wendy S. Myers, CVJ, President, Communication Solutions for Veterinarians

Indoor cat owners may assume their feline friends are perfectly protected inside, without risk of exposure to diseases and dangers. In a Vetstreet survey of 1,025 cat owners, 75 percent said they don’t let their cats roam outside. The average lifespan of indoor cats is 14 years, which is reduced to 4 years when cats are allowed outside, exposing them to hazards of outdoor life, according to Dr. Nicholas Dodman, Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, and a professor at Tufts University in North Grafton, Mass.

While indoor living is best, cats need to leave occasionally to visit your veterinary hospital. Here are easy-to-implement strategies to increase cat visits:

**Strategy 1: Ask about cats at home when clients schedule exams for dogs.**

Research shows 41 percent of dog owners have cats and 53 percent of cat owners have more than one cat. When a client calls to book an exam, check the status of all pets in the family in your practice-management software.

If you discover an overdue cat, guide the client to schedule an appointment now. Use benefit statements to explain why the cat needs a checkup. Offer the convenience of bringing two pets to the same appointment. Say, “Let’s schedule your dog’s preventive checkup. I see that your cat, <cat name>, is overdue for preventive care. Changes in your cat’s health can occur quickly. That’s why we recommend a preventive checkup at least once a year. The doctor will evaluate which vaccines, preventatives and tests that <cat name> needs to stay healthy. Catching changes early before they become serious often means they will be easier and less expensive to treat. You can bring <cat name> along with your dog to the same appointment. Let’s schedule their exams for this week. I have appointments available on Monday at 2 p.m. or Tuesday at 10 a.m. Which choice fits your schedule?” Use the two-yes-options technique to lead the client to accept care. This statement is results-oriented compared to “Do you want to make an appointment for your cat?”

**Did you know** that 83 percent of cats go the veterinarian during the first year of ownership but half of them never return? About 30 percent of pet owners don’t understand their pets are more likely to get sick without annual checkups, according to the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study. Veterinarians frequently see cats when they are young, and then cats disappear between ages 2 and 10. Veterinary visits return again during senior years when health problems arise.
Your hospital should strive to see every patient every year.

Strategy 2: Teach cat owners how to use carriers.
Suggest carriers that have openings at the front and top, which lets you remove the top and have the cat remain in the base during the exam. The carrier should be a pleasant place to visit and be accessible at home, not a stress trigger of “Oh, no! I’m going to the vet!” Place the carrier on the cat’s favorite chair or sofa at home, where it is elevated but secure. Leave the carrier top off or door open. Place a fleece or towel with the scent of a favorite person inside the carrier, or spritz it with a feline pheromone 30 minutes before traveling to the veterinary clinic. Put treats, toys or cat nip inside the carrier with reinforce with praise. Share the video, “Cats and Carriers: Friends Not Foes,” from the Catalyst Council on your clinic’s Facebook page and website (http://catalystcouncil.org/resources/health_welfare/cat_carrier_video/).

Strategy 3: Create a welcoming lobby.
Separate dog and cat waiting areas without major construction. The arrangement of chairs, a screen, bookcase, fish tank, floor mats or other dividers can provide privacy. Hang a sign that directs cat owners to your preferred seating for cats. Get photo tours of nine hospitals’ creative reception areas on the American Association of Feline Practitioners’ Cat-Friendly Practice® website at www.catvets.com/cfp/veterinary-professionals/solutions.

In the cat seating area, place a wicker basket filled with rolled towels that have been sprayed with Feliway®. Place a sign on the basket that says, “Please cover your cat’s carrier with our spa towels that have pheromones to calm and relax cats while we prepare for your exam.” Alternatively, you can put a sign on the basket that says, “Cover your cat’s carrier with our spa towels that have pheromones to calm and relax cats while we prepare for your exam.”

Strategy 4: Host feline exclusive hours.
Pick a day of the week and time of day when exams are more relaxed, avoiding the rush hour of the first and last two hours that your veterinary hospital is open. You might feature “Feline Fridays” from 1 to 3 p.m. as cat-exclusive exam hours. You would see dogs for emergencies during this time but reserve appointments for cats. Promote Feline Fridays on reminders, counter signs, social media and message on hold.

Strategy 5: Become certified as a Cat-Friendly Practice® and a Fear-Free® Certified Professional.
Learn skills, clinic environment enhancements and marketing strategies to encourage more frequent use of feline veterinary services. Get the steps to become at Cat-Friendly Practice® at www.catvets.com/cfp/veterinary-professionals/getting-started. Discover fear-free methods that reduce anxiety triggers to help create calmer patients and compliant clients at www.fearfreepets.com.

Your hospital should strive to see every patient every year. In addition to delivering more needed medical care to cats, your hospital could significantly boost revenue. A two-doctor hospital typically has 3,600 active patients, which includes 2,160 dogs (60 percent) and 1,440 cats (40 percent). If your current feline preventive exam compliance is 54%, 778 are receiving annual checkups. After implementing strategies to increase visits, you see an additional 156 cats. If the average cat owner spends $631 on preventive care (see Table 1), the revenue result is $98,436. Preventive care is just the starting point—you’ll likely uncover dental disease, obesity, thyroid conditions, arthritis and other health concerns that lead to more services and revenue.

What will your team do to encourage more cat owners to return? Get ideas in our Oct. 20 webinar on “10 Ways to Get More Cats to Return for Care” (www.csvets.com/cart/comunication-skills/10-ways-to-get-cats-to-return-for-care/).

Table 1: Adult cat checkup, age 1 to 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional service</th>
<th>Average fee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive physical exam</td>
<td>$44.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intestinal parasite screen</td>
<td>$23.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early detection blood screen (CBC with 8-12 chemistries)</td>
<td>$125.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urinalysis</td>
<td>$63.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FVRCP vaccine</td>
<td>$23.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feline Leukemia vaccine</td>
<td>$26.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-year rabies vaccine</td>
<td>$24.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional services subtotal</strong></td>
<td><strong>$331.41</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventatives (Average dose of $25, 12 months dispensed)</td>
<td><strong>$300.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total feline preventive care visit** $631.41

References:

About the Author
Wendy S. Myers, CVJ, owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Castle Pines, Colo. She helps teams improve client service, communication skills and compliance through consulting, seminars and monthly CE credit webinars. Wendy is a certified veterinary journalist and author of 101 Communication Skills for Veterinary Teams. Her “Callers Into New Clients Course” teaches receptionists how to turn price shoppers into new clients. You can reach her at wmyers@csvets.com or www.csvets.com.