

# How DVMs Drive Clients Crazy- and How to Avoid It

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## **Avoiding the DVM detour**

We, as veterinarians, do so many great things in practice. We are surgeons, internists, dermatologists, ophthalmologists, and so much more. To most of our clients, I am sure we are seen as perfect; however, there are many areas outside of the medical or surgical aspect of practice that we must remain aware of in order to maintain this “perfection.” We can all be the greatest surgeon or internist but if we don't remain aware of our client's needs, then many clients will be taking a DVM detour and looking for a vet who will. In order to avoid this detour, and for the sake of not adding any more pimples to our pretty practice face, every veterinarian must portray the following:

### **Communication is key**

Congratulations, you are a doctor, but please don't talk like a doctor. We must remember to talk in normal, everyday language so that our clients can understand what is going on. Our clients already know that we are smart, we don't have to use big medical terms to prove it. I'm not saying that we don't need to use the correct terms, we just need to state the medical terminology and then explain what it means in client friendly language. It doesn't matter how smart or skilled you are, if you cannot communicate with clients, they will swerve off the main road and take that detour that will be so detrimental to your practice.

### **Know thy client**

A veterinarian should always introduce himself by name to the client and call the pet by name upon entering the exam room. If you are seeing a client whom you have already met, you should still shake their hand and welcome them to your hospital. Please do not walk into an exam room and say “so Fluffy is here for itchy skin, let's get started.” You may treat and fix the itchy skin and do a great job medically speaking, but how in the world is the client going to remember which fantastic vet to come back to if you never mentioned your name. Even worse, how is that client going to recommend you to others if he or she does not know your name? Word of mouth is one of your best practice builders, so wouldn't it be good to have a DVM name to go along with your client's success story?

### **Discuss the physical examination**

Always be vocal and keep open communication during your examination. Explain what is being examined (and why) and make sure to thoroughly discuss any abnormalities. During the course of my examination, I prefer to explain each step as I go along and then discuss any abnormalities and recommended treatments. If the client presents with a certain health complaint for the patient, you need to perform a thorough physical examination, while being vocal through each step, but always return to the area of concern. By this, you need to discuss all abnormalities or concerns during the examination but always focus on the presenting complaint during the final stages of the examination.

### **What's the plan**

Following a thorough physical examination, the veterinarian needs to sit down with the client and personally discuss all diagnostic results and treatment plan. We need to make sure to cover each aspect of the blood work, not just the abnormalities, and discuss what our treatment goals are. At the end of the discussion, we need to make sure the client has an understanding of what the issue is and how it is going to be treated. We need to make sure to give the client a handout that further discusses the health issue and then decide on a recheck evaluation before finishing the conversation. The use of a good, thorough handout discussing the disease will allow the veterinarian to briefly discuss the issue, send the client home to read over the handout, and then follow up with the veterinarian to discuss it in more detail if needed.

### **Offer the best!!**

Our job as veterinarians is to keep our client's pets as healthy as possible. Our job is not to be a psychic and try to guess how much money our client is willing to spend. This is where we mess up all the time. We must learn to never pre-judge what our clients are willing to do for their pets. This is the most dangerous thing a DVM can do, not only financially for the practice, but it can also lead to numerous misdiagnosed cases.

### **Avoid the sticker shock**

The best way to prevent from pre-judging clients is to provide an estimate for the best diagnostic and treatment plan for each individual pet. Some clients will tell you that cost is no object, but giving estimates is a good habit to get into. When it comes time to pay the bill, some “sticker shock” clients will complain, but most will just pay the bill and then never come back. Having an estimate ahead of time allows the client to make the best financial decisions. If the client cannot afford to take on the best diagnostic and treatment plans, then that is the time to discuss secondary options.

### **Take time to listen**

We should all allow ourselves a couple of minutes to give each and every client our undivided attention. By doing this, we have gained the respect of our clients as well as proven to them that we are completely in tune to what is going on with their pet. During

these couple of minutes, I recommend holding the pet or playing on the floor with the pet while maintaining eye contact with the client.

### **Knowledgeable on nutrition**

We, as veterinarians, all need to be educated on nutrition for our patients. Most of us see a large percentage of overweight pets on a daily basis and often times we try to avoid the nutrition and exercise talk. By doing this, we are helping no one. Nutrition is an area in practice that can become a unique niche. By taking a couple of minutes to discuss individual nutritional plans, offer healthy treat lists, and discuss supplements, we will prove to every client that we care. Many veterinarians hate to embark on the nutrition journey with clients and it can be very difficult at times; however, in the long run, it proves to our clients that we truly care.

### **Handouts**

As veterinarians, we can spend all day discussing and explaining to clients the specifics of a disease that their pet may be dealing with (heartworm disease, thyroid disease, kidney insufficiency, diabetes, etc.), but when that client leaves the hospital (unless the client has a medical background), he or she will still be overwhelmed and probably confused by what this disease means in their pet and how it must be treated. This is where a very detailed handout will come into play. Veterinarians, as client educators, should have handouts describing the most common diseases that are seen in our patients, or at least take the time to photocopy a brief, simplistic description of the disease process for the client. I send home many handouts every day, and for my chronic disease patients or long term medication users, I have formulated a handout describing the follow up examination and testing protocols that are needed. This not only provides useful information for the client, but also reduces the amount of confusion the client may feel.

### **Blame causes hostility**

There are always times when we, as veterinarians, have tough days. We may be dealing with some very sick patients and mind-boggling cases, performed a number of euthanasias in one day, or just feel as if we are constantly chasing our tail. You have to admit that seeing a patient chase its tail is very humorous, but when we as doctors do it just to keep up, it can become frustrating. During these stressful times, it is so easy to allow our emotions to determine our actions, but we must strive not to do this. It seems that when we have great days, nothing can go wrong, but when we have frustrating and emotional days, the whole veterinary world turns upside down. It never fails that this will be the day when you have Tucker the train wreck coming in for a recheck examination. Tucker is that patient that you know you have diagnosed correctly but the client is not complying with the treatment recommendations and frustrations are at an all-time high and patience is running out. It would be so easy to blame the client for not being compliant and that is why Tucker is tumbling down the quality of life drain. At any time in life, whether it be in veterinary medicine or not, blame causes a feeling of hostility. It is human nature to feel embarrassed or belittled when you are blamed for something. Blame achieves nothing and it only causes negativity for the doctor-client-patient relationship. When this situation occurs we must remember to listen to the client first. Take notes on what the client is doing at home to care for Tucker. We must also obtain a detailed history of Tucker's condition and any improvements or declines in his status. By doing this, we are taking a step back and making sure that we and the client are on the same page. We need to also review the diagnosis and treatment plan that has already been put into effect so that we can find any misunderstandings. Finally, if the client is still not comfortable with the diagnosis or treatment plan and he or she continues to be non-compliant with your recommendations, don't be afraid to offer a second opinion. Also, remind the client that you will always offer the best standard of care for Tucker no matter what treatment the client selects. By taking these few easy steps during the situation, you have not blamed the client for lack of care, you have maintained a trusting relationship and an open road of communication, and you have re-assured the client that your main concern is Tucker's comfort and quality of life.

We, as veterinarians, are in the driver's seat when it comes to keeping our clients happy. We set the tone when we enter the exam room, during the exam, and before the client and patient are discharged. If we see each client and patient as just another number walking in the clinic door, then we might as well head out to the road and put up the detour sign because you are in need of some serious construction. However, if we see each client and patient as an opportunity to educate, listen to, and offer the best standard of care, we will never lose.