

# Client Conversations: Keeping Clients through Nutritional Questions

Julie Churchill, DVM, PhD, DACVN  
University of Minnesota  
St. Paul, MN

We are all familiar with the ‘good news’ about preventive care: it saves lives, improves health and quality of life. Nutrition is an integral and essential component of providing optimal preventive health care for pets. Yet the bad news is that many veterinary patients are not receiving the preventive care they deserve. Recent studies document a decline in preventive veterinary care. Veterinary professionals tend to view following their recommendations or “compliance”, especially when it comes to nutrition, as the responsibility of the client. A common misconception is that clients heedlessly ignore the veterinary team’s recommendations, but in reality there are many factors contributing to non-compliance. Employing great communication skills can be a key way in which the veterinary team can take an active and important role in helping clients care for their pets. This will support clients’ understanding, trust and remembering the nutritional care plan, thus improving compliance, adherence and ultimately the pet’s care.

Veterinarian professionals may lack concrete tools to assess the clients’ understanding, receptiveness or readiness for change. Through carefully worded questions when taking a medical and diet history, the veterinary professional can identify the client’s receptiveness and readiness for change. Based on this knowledge, they can better identify the appropriate way and time to implement a nutritional plan. If a client is not yet ready, they can instead help clients explore obstacles and overcome barriers to sustainable change. For example, the best predictors of adherence to a weight loss program are the veterinary professional’s interviewing skills and qualities of the veterinary-client interaction. In order to improve adherence, it is essential to establish an atmosphere of trust and demonstrate concern for both the patient and the client’s well-being.

The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) has developed a practical acronym for veterinary staff to use to remember techniques to increase client compliance. The CRAFT formula: **C**ompliance = **R**ecommendation, **A**cceptance, and **F**ollow **T**hrough. Compliance is thought to be optimal once the veterinary team member has made a specific recommendation to the client; the client accepts the recommendation *and* follows through with the care plan. CRAFT depends on the abilities of the veterinary staff to communicate effectively with the client using an intentional approach to communication known as ‘relationship-centered’ care. This style of communication and care has been associated with improved adherence. Using relationship centered communication, the veterinary professional shares information with the client in ways that they understand what is happening with their pet and share in decision-making.

## **Recommendation**

The Nutritional recommendation should provide the client with specific, concise recommendation and a rationale describing the benefits for the pet. The selection should provide complete and balanced nutrition, be acceptable to the owner, enjoyed by the pet and maintain stable and healthy ideal body weight to prevent many health risks.

The way the recommendation is delivered is also important. Below are some tips to making a clear recommendation:

- Avoid distractions from the conversation. Discuss in the exam room, rather than a noisy lobby.
- Organize the recommendation: specific brand, amount, frequency, monitoring plan.
- Give information in short pieces if information and check for understanding by the client.
- Use lay person language.
- Use ‘props’ such as pet food labels, portion sizes, measuring cups etc.
- Summarize the discussion to repeat important points.
- Provide written instructions to go home.

## **Definitions**

### **Compliance**

The extent to which a pet receives a treatment, screening or procedure in accordance with accepted veterinary health care practices. Compliance involves both veterinary staff performing and recommending this treatment, screening or care, as well as client follow through.

### **Adherence**

The extent to which patients take medications prescribed, involving the pet owner in: filling/refilling prescriptions; administering correct dose; timing and use and completing the prescribed course. Adherence is generally a term applied to medication rather than recommendations for wellness checks or diagnostic screenings.

AAHA 2009

## Acceptance

When the client receives the recommendation and understands and agrees to the plan, this is 'acceptance'. Although this step seems dependent only on the client, the veterinary team can significantly influence client acceptance by:

- Observing the client for verbal/nonverbal cues of non-acceptance.
- Acknowledging these signs and invite concerns or worries they might have. "it seems like you may be worried about changing foods, can you tell me about your thoughts?"
- Active listening through verbal and nonverbal cues (maintain eye contact, allow pauses for clients to speak, encourage them to 'go on').

## Follow through

Non-compliance most often happens due to a failure of follow through. It is very important even after the client has left the veterinary clinic to receive support from the veterinary team to follow through with the agreed upon plan. Veterinary clients may find it difficult to remember all that is said during the consultation. There are a variety of ways to support clients and follow through after the client and pet return home:

- Provide written instructions that include
  - trouble shooting ideas or adverse events to watch for
  - ways to contact you if they have questions.
- Schedule recheck appointments before the client leaves the clinic
- Verify contact information and ask for preferred choice of reminder contact
- Call/email client to check in 2-3 days after the visit to see if there are challenges to following the treatment plan
- Use a reminder system to assist with follow up appointments

## Team approach

The veterinary support staff plays a vital role in all parts of CRAFT and it is important that all members share a consistent message. Review the clinic protocol at staff meetings, and periodically evaluate/refine the protocol. There are helpful resources available for team training. Suggestions and resources for incorporating nutrition in the care of each patient is available at:

[www.everypeteverytime.com](http://www.everypeteverytime.com).

The partnership for Healthy Pets Initiative (<http://www.partnersforhealthypets.org>) has the goal of helping veterinary professionals gain the tools needed to insure a healthy, long life for the pet and to communicate the importance of preventive care for the lifelong health of the patient. There are tools and resources available specifically aimed at improving communication skills; "words that work": (<http://www.partnersforhealthypets.org/communications.aspx> )

## Check-in

- Client fills out nutrition history/update form
- Weigh in
- **Front desk staff** places nutrition history/update form in patient's records

## Exam room

- **Veterinary technician** records history using nutrition history form to help ask questions and initiate discussion
- **Veterinarian** performs a physical exam and nutritional assessment, makes a specific nutrition recommendation and documents the recommendation in patient's records
- **Veterinary technician** asks client if there are any questions and reinforces the recommendation, dispenses tools (measuring cups, literature about nutrition, information packet) and sends patient home with an information packet even if they don't purchase recommended food

## Check out

- **Front desk staff** asks client again if there are any questions, dispenses food and reinforces recommendation, schedules a callback in 2-7 days if recommendation is for a new food and enters reminder code for re-purchase of food two weeks before food will run out

## Techniques of using relationship-centered communication to develop a health care plan.

### Explore the clients' perspective

Check in with the client to get their specific concerns, beliefs, goals and expectations, to better understand the client's perceived value of each treatment option. For example: "Ms Gray, there are several great food choices that will meet Spike's needs. What are your concerns about what he is eating now? What are your biggest goals for feeding Spike?"

### **Share veterinary thinking**

When appropriate, discuss your findings and reasoning out loud. This shows the client your ‘work’ and allows them to follow the thought process or problems you face and can encourage their input. For example: “we wanted a food Spike really enjoyed, but he is only eating a small amount yet gained almost 15% in the last month”.....”yes, it’s such a little amount and he’s still always hungry and started stealing food from the kids. Is there anything we can do?”

### **Encourage the client to participate**

Let the client help with suggestions or solutions that work for them. “Maybe a different food would help, and I can have the kids put food away when they finish snacks”.

### **Incorporate the client’s individual concerns. Partner in care**

Relate the treatment choice to a concern or comment the client made so they make the connection between care and benefit.

“You mention you want Spike to enjoy his meals, but unhealthy weight gain is related to many health risks and a shorter lifespan. We can try some foods that are really tasty, higher in protein and lower in calories so he can eat more food and feel more satisfied.”

### **Recommended reading**

1. American Animal Hospital Association. The path to high quality care: practical tips for improving compliance. In. Lakewood, CO; 2003.
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9. Abood SK. Increasing adherence in practice: making your clients partners in care. Vet Clin Small Anim. 2007;37:151-164.