

At your service

Good customer service is the lifeblood of any business. And, while you may believe that you are already providing this, it is always important to review the entire practice's approach to customer service to ensure that your customer always comes back to you



Understanding the importance of good customer service is essential for any veterinary practice in creating new customers, keeping existing customers, and attracting potential customers.

Here, we offer some practical advice towards providing a quality service, which will help you to keep striving for excellence in customer care.

START AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON

First impressions last. Good customer service begins at the very initial greeting, whether that is in person, on the phone or via email. Ensure that your reception area is inviting and that your 'front of house' staff are pleasant and courteous to customers. If a customer is not acknowledged and greeted with a smile on their arrival to the practice they will feel ignored and unimportant.

Remember also that this attitude needs to be reflected from the top down. Creating a positive, friendly environment within the practice between employers and employees will help to ensure that this courteous approach is, in turn,

delivered to the customer.

In all of these situations, good people skills will increase the chances for a positive first impression.

Review your waiting room area and see if there are any ways you can create a more inviting atmosphere – welcome brochures about your practice, colourful posters on the walls and comfortable chairs will help to create this environment. Finally, make sure that phones are always answered during practice opening hours. Getting customers to leave messages on voice mail is not ideal and may result in the customer being unsatisfied with the length of time they are left waiting before their call is returned.

LISTEN

In order to know what your customer wants, or what issues they may have with the service you provide, you need to listen to them. Ask yourself: how often do you take the time to ask your customers what they think about your service? It is a proactive way to manage your business, and will help to avoid complaints in the future. Simply asking a pet owner as

they are leaving your practice if they were happy with your service will make the customer feel valued and will give you a real insight into the strengths - and the shortcomings - of your business. If they found something unsatisfactory, you will be able to attempt to rectify it immediately rather than having a customer leave with a bad impression.

In addition, don't forget to listen to your staff and colleagues as well. The people working alongside you in your practice can give you a great insight into how the practice is being run and you're your customer base. Involve everyone in decisions regarding customer care within the business, in an effort to keep motivation up and to ensure that there is a cohesive approach throughout the practice.

WORD OF MOUTH

Word of mouth is one of the most powerful forms of human communication, and so it should be considered in every business strategy. The importance of word of mouth when it comes to bringing new business into your practice, or alternatively keeping potential business away, cannot be underestimated. And with social media such as Facebook and Twitter facilitating this 'word of mouth' exchange between people, everybody's voice is getting heard today, everybody's voice is louder and their opinions are being broadcast on an extremely large platform. Remember, dissatisfied clients are more likely to relay their bad experience with others. However, there are ways to

encourage people who have had a positive experience at your practice to go home and spread the good word. Rewarding customers who bring in new customers is one way – maybe by offering discounts to clients that recommend you to a friend – or surprise loyal customers with an added service, such as a complimentary pet accessory product. Also, if you have created an interactive website or Facebook page that regular clients can post on, you can prompt positive feedback by asking people to recount their best experiences with your business.

Essentially, though, the basis of all positive word-of-mouth advertising is in the provision of good quality services, so make sure they have something good to talk about.

DEAL WITH COMPLAINTS

Dealing with complaints promptly is essential when running any kind of business. If a customer is made to feel that their complaint is being taken seriously and that you are making an effort to rectify any problems in a quick and efficient manner, their negative experience may be turned on its head into a very positive one, and you may end up demonstrating to them the excellent customer service that your practice offers.

Ensure that customers are given the opportunity to complain – you want to hear about any negative feedback before other potential customers do so that you can address it. Leave feedback and comment forms at reception and encourage your reception staff to ask the customer if they were happy with the service before they pay up.

View complaints as an opportunity to improve your service and your practice overall. Complaints are a great way to learn about what your customers are thinking and feeling and they will help you to come up with new ideas for the practice and for your customer.

STAY TRUE TO YOUR WORD

Building trust is very important when it comes to customer service. And for vets, there is an added emotional investment between you and the customer compared to many other businesses, as you are operating in a caring environment and dealing with customers who are entrusting you to look after their pet.

So, staying true to your word is vital in order to gain the trust of your customer. Before your performance is even evaluated by the customer, they will judge you on your word.

Don't make promises you are not completely positive you can keep. This applies to right down to the small promises, like appointment times and lengths. If, for whatever reason, you are unable to keep a promise, be sure to contact your customer as soon as possible to explain and to offer a solution. Every time you tell a customer that you will do something and you do not follow through, your relationship with that customer is damaged. An unmet expectation is your worst enemy. Always set up a reasonable expectation in the mind of your customer from the outset – and, if possible, you will be able to not only meet their expectations but over-deliver on your promise.



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