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WHAT CLIENTS EXPECT IN COMMUNICATION FROM THE HOSPITAL

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Client communication is not a new topic in veterinary medicine.

Several articles, presentations and books highlight the importance of communication in improving compliance and pet owner acceptance of veterinarian’s recommendations. The commonly stated goals of a good communication strategy between veterinarians and clients include improvement of client compliance (or adherence to patient treatment), overall client satisfaction (driving client loyalty and retention), and the creation of business value through better medicine.

Despite being a frequently discussed topic, most information on the impact of client communication on client satisfaction and loyalty in veterinary medicine is anecdotal, based on expert opinions or basic quantitative and qualitative market research (survey, focus group). Unfortunately veterinary medicine lacks the depth of resources and attention required for the type of research pursued in the human health world.

The field of pediatrics was of particular interest to us given the striking strengthening of the pet owner bond with their pets in the past decade and some of the existing literature in that field.

Between 1995 and 2001, the number of pet owners referring to themselves as ‘mummy’ or ‘daddy’ grew from 55% to 83% (1). Over 6% of pet owners in the US ‘provide for their pets in their will’ and more than 30% already made arrangements so someone would take care of their pets in case of their death (2). The AVMA research on the strength of the pet bond confirms that the relationship between owners and their pets is indeed strong, with over 40% of pet owners considering their pets as their child. Even for those that do not approach pet ownership with such a passion, the elements of the ‘care provider relationship’ for a ‘loved one that is not able to decide for themselves’ makes the parallel relevant enough for the purpose of this presentation.

As early as 1968, articles in the pediatric field explored the gaps in doctor-patients (parent) communications. Interestingly in a study performed over 40 years ago the 24% dissatisfied parents visiting a pediatric care facility cited the ‘lack of warmth and friendliness’, the ‘failure to take the patients (child) concerns into account’, and the lack of ‘clear cut explanation concerning diagnosis and causation of illness’ (3), as the main reasons for their dissatisfaction.

A more subtle and modern research in the same field (of pediatrics in 2005) distinguishes priority outcomes and satisfaction measures. Not surprising the most important priority for parents was ‘finding out what is wrong with the child’, with equal importance as ‘taking care of the child’s pain’.

Even though the clinical outcome was the utmost priority, the measures that ranked the highest for the parents’ satisfaction referred to elements impacted directly from the experience with the doctor and the support staff. Key elements of satisfaction noted were ‘the nurse was kind’, ‘we understood the nurse’s information’ and the ‘our experience was taken seriously’. (4).

In our field, pet owners surveyed on their expectations about veterinary web sites stated that they were very interested in:
- Useful tips and health related information
- Being able to communicate with the veterinarian
- Being able to check appointment availability
- Receive product or disease related alerts
- Access information about products and services
- Get information about hospitalized pets
- And many more… (6).

Such a wide list of services, added to the traditional communications a hospital usually sends (reminder cards, phone calls, sometimes emails) makes for a comprehensive wish-list, and certainly for a set of communication tools that could quickly become unpractical to maintain, as well as costly to manage and keep up to date.

Our own research (online focus groups), highlights similar factors about criteria clients use to judge ‘their choice of veterinarians’. Friendliness, compassion and attitude towards their pets come as the most critical
In another exercise we analyzed and scored 888 reviews, for over 100 hospitals (yelp.com). We found that new, and returning clients both, would use terms such as ‘friendly’ and ‘compassionate’ more often than ‘knowledgeable’ to describe a good veterinary hospital! This doesn’t mean that clients don’t value ‘knowledge’, they simply expect it and it is not a significant differentiating factor. To gain trust over time, and improve client loyalty, delivering above and beyond their initial expectations is necessary, on criteria they can evaluate for themselves.

‘Standard’ communication tools used by veterinarians encompass in-hospital hand-outs, phone calls, reminder cards, newsletters and website presence (from very simple to very sophisticated). Some hospitals also communicate with their clients through email, and a few are playing with some text messaging communication. We also expect to see some more experimentation in the areas of social networks, blogs, and other more informal ways of information sharing.

In this regards we are still evaluating the correlation of ‘client stated preferences’ to ‘their actual behavior’ (response to communications). We will share more information during our presentation and highlight our latest results as to which services clients truly value (might pay for them, respond to them, request them when available).

The most important fact to keep in mind is not about what tools you could use, but about keeping your approach to the tools simple and aligned to the expressed needs of your clients:

• Friendly and compassionate contact
• Clear and concise medical information
• Relevant and timely information.

In the end, ‘meeting client’s expectations’ is not all that difficult. Exceeding those expectations is much harder, as it requires the element of positive surprise. If you can surprise them and delight them – the experience will be unforgettable and you will create long term loyalty. Communication is only a piece of that equation, although a very important one, that is worth revisiting and refreshing from time to time.

References