



9.1.3. BRINGING PET FOOD AND NUTRITION BACK INTO YOUR CLINIC: WHY YOU SHOULD DISCUSS PET FOOD IN (NEARLY) EVERY EXAM!

Ernie Ward, DVM, CVFT

E3 Management, LLC

Ocean Isle, North Carolina USA

Consistency creates credibility. Those three words pack a powerful punch that can propel your success in pet nutrition and beyond.

When something is logical and dependable, it becomes more believable and trustworthy. In other words, repeatedly showing up and delivering what you promise builds staff and client loyalty. I forged a large part of my veterinary practice philosophy around this principle. For over twenty years, I've encouraged colleagues to follow this simple tenet to elevate their clinical practice. I've applied it to staff training, education, patient care, client services, personal habits, and more.

When applied to pet nutrition, having a consistent message allows your team and clients to clearly understand your feeding philosophy and promotes compliance. Without uniform pet food principles, your staff and clients are left to hack together impulsive suggestions that may differ from visit to visit, if they happen at all. That certainly doesn't create credibility or trust. It also doesn't help enhance the quality of life for the pets we serve.

Clinical consistency is constructed by developing a pet food philosophy, gaining consensus, training your team to assess patients and educate clients, and motivating staff to pursue advanced knowledge and expertise.

Step #1: Developing your Feeding Philosophy

Developing a pet food philosophy can be as simple or complicated as you like, but it's something you need to do. Promoting a healthy diet is essential for our profession's continued success and domain authority, and I believe being proactive in recommending pet food is an opportunity to remain relevant in a variety of pet care sectors. Unfortunately, few practices give their feeding philosophy much thought and fail to succeed in pet nutrition, leaving them vulnerable to losing a variety of opportunities to online retailers.

As pet parents seek help choosing pet food, they inevitably find answers online. When veterinarians ignore pet food and impart little guidance, any information is more than



their vet provided. Regardless of the veracity of internet information, these searches can lead to habits that are hard to break.

Online retailers understand this, and once they secure the first pet food order, it's incredibly easy to add monthly flea and tick preventives, supplements, supplies, and prescription medications. As I've warned over the past 15 years, pet food is the gateway to all pet product sales. If you're wondering where your pharmacy sales have gone, "chew on" the "amazing" sites that sell pet food.

Veterinarians need to develop a feeding philosophy that transcends brands. For the past 50 years, most vets settled on supporting two or three major brands and called it gospel. Today there are hundreds of brands and scores producing excellent foods. Modern pet parents want more than just a brand recommendation (although they need that, too) and demand the principles behind our suggestions.

For example, let's say you believe higher protein kibble is the best way to feed your patients. Instead of leading with a brand recommendation ("You should feed Gracie Brand X."), explain to pet parents your position and let the brand follow organically. "For my patients and personal pets, I've found a higher-protein, lower-calorie formulation to provide the most health benefits, especially in promoting lean muscle mass. I also prefer a dry kibble because of its convenience, reasonable cost, and my two dogs love it. For Gracie, I believe the best diet for her age, breed, and condition would be Brand X. What do you think?" You'll come across less "sales-y" and more "doctor-y" by framing your advice in science and evidence. Whatever feeding philosophy you choose, just choose one and promote it to your team and clients.

Step #2: Gaining Consensus

The most successful and happy practice teams share a few common traits. The first is they share the same vision and mission. When it comes to pet nutrition, they agree that certain foundational principles are preferred. Some teams may prefer higher protein and fiber formulations of dry kibble, others prefer lower protein canned diets, and some may support fresh or home-prepared meals. The specifics matter, but the common denominator is the commitment to educate clients about their unified feeding philosophy. It's one thing to have consensus, but the attribute that tips these teams toward greatness is acting on their shared standards. Veterinary teams should be committed to educating every pet parent about the best diet for their dog or cat during nearly every visit.

Another trait of successful teams is civility and desire to collaborate. Consensus is earned not by defeating an adversary's idea, but by merging competing concepts into a blend of the best. This process needs to be respectful, thoughtful, and guided by the leadership. It is up to the practice owners and leaders to determine the ultimate protocol or policy and shepherd it into acceptance. When teams lack clarity in purpose and



consensus in policies, poor or undefined leadership is often to blame. That forces pet parents to ask the internet what to feed their pet.

Not everyone is expected to agree with everything all of the time; however, team members are expected to promote clinic policies consistently. If you have an employee unwilling to collaborate or support your consensus views and their ideas fail to change them, then you have to ask if this person is a good fit with your mission and vision.

Willingness to change and iterate is another characteristic of collaborative and unified teams. Consensus is an infinitely dynamic process, always open to exploring progress and improvement. This is especially pertinent to pet nutrition. I appreciate colleagues who offer opposing opinions and are willing to courteously discuss differences. If their ideas improve a policy or procedure, that's progress. If they fail to shift our position, they must be willing to support team solidarity.

Passion is the final feature of unified workplaces. Once consensus is gained, the team enthusiastically shares the concept or policy. In fact, if your team isn't excited to share something as important to pet health as diet, then you probably aren't unified on it. Passion is key, because lukewarm recommendations fail to inspire staff or clients. Your team wants leaders to "be on fire" with fervor for their beliefs. Pet parents want your team to "really feel it" if you're advising them to follow along, especially with pet food. Enthusiasm generally signals authenticity, authenticity emanates from consistency, and the flywheel of trust keeps spinning.

If you're struggling to gain consensus, try this exercise. Begin by writing down your desired policy, procedure, or vision. Writing forces you to critically evaluate your idea, and helps refine the message. Next, ask a couple of trusted colleagues to review it. After revision, take it to your team. Give them a few days to process the information. Ask for feedback to accommodate those more comfortable writing than speaking publicly.

Hold a team meeting and begin by inviting any opening thoughts, then be quiet. Be careful not to jump in too soon, potentially limiting an open discussion. If your team isn't giving you much insight, ask them to rate the idea on a scale of 1 to 10. Few will give it a "10," so when they say "8," ask what it would take to get it to "10." Be supportive of all suggestions, but don't hesitate to politely point out differences. Send out a final version for approval and consider another brief meeting before moving to training.

Step #3: Staff Training

Once you've established your clinic's pet food philosophy and earned consensus, it's time to train. Begin by organizing the evidence behind your choices. Staff members need to understand the science behind your recommendations, so teach them the details.



Next, script out common client questions and scenarios. You're building a toolkit that will guide conversations and address major concerns. Don't hesitate to incorporate resources from brands or companies that support your feeding philosophy. After all, you need to give clients specific brands that align with your beliefs. I encourage you to personalize these materials so the messages reflect your practice personality and don't come off as "company-speak." Be sure to enlist eager employees to help you craft these staff training tools to encourage ownership of the program.

Next, teach your team to use the body condition score (BCS) during each visit. Using visual charts can help pet parents understand that obesity is more than a number on a scale. Body fat assessment and muscle condition score (MCS) are also useful in convincing clients a diet change is needed. Offer to provide copies or email BCS or food information. Many pet parents will want to fact check your info, so be proactive and steer them toward reputable online resources. While you're at it, remind them you offer online food sales and home delivery. If you don't, now is perhaps the last-most-excellent time to begin.

Train your staff to quickly calculate basic daily caloric recommendations (see sidebar). Computing calories not only aids clients in more precise feeding, but also demonstrates your team's expertise and experience in nutrition, inspiring trust.

Staff training is arguably the most time-consuming - and important - step in pet nutrition success. It takes effort to produce instructional resources and drive to teach staff the knowledge and communication skills needed to succeed. It also requires persistence and grit, because any change is accompanied by challenge. Stick with it. This process applies to nearly every aspect of practice, so as you hone your skills in one area, everything else lifts. In no time you'll have a proven template you can apply to any new product or service.

Follow these three steps and you'll discover that as your recommendations become consistent, creating credibility and trust, your compliance increases. Pet nutrition is too important to our pet patient's health for veterinary professionals to ignore. Pet parents depend on us to help them provide long, healthy, happy lives for the dogs and cats they love, and that often begins at the food bowl. We won't let them down.

Calculating Resting Energy Requirements (RER):

Calculating a pet's estimated daily caloric needs isn't hard. There are two formulas commonly used, and one doesn't require any fancy math. I'll let you in on a secret: You'll



quickly memorize the common sizes you see and won't have to fire up the calculator much of the time! You may then reduce these Resting Energy Requirements (RER) daily caloric estimates by 70% to 90%, depending on the pet's needs. You can also visit www.PetObesityPrevention.org for detailed lists of caloric requirements.

Caloric Calculation #1: This simplified formula works great on most pets except very small (less than 5 lbs) and large dogs (over 60 lbs) when it may overestimate calories.

Resting Energy Requirements (RER) in kcal/day: $30 \times (\text{ideal body weight in kilograms}) + 70$

Caloric Calculation #2: The more precise "exponential" calculation. Works great in all sizes, shapes, and breeds.

RER in kcal/day = $(\text{ideal weight in kg} ^{0.75}) \times 70$

or $(\text{ideal weight in kg}) \text{ to the } 3/4 \text{ power} \times 70$