

Published in Veterinary Practice News, June 2011

Convenience-Based Services: Are They The Right Choice for Your Practice?

Jessica G. Lee, CVPM

When evaluating additional services as a means to generate revenue, it is important to look beyond veterinary medicine and take advantage of opportunities to meet the needs of pet owners in other ways. In today's world, convenience is the name of the game, and finding new avenues of revenue that make your practice a "one stop shop" for pet owners can be an excellent decision. While the obvious and immediate benefits include increased revenue and visits, it is the potential long-term client loyalty, resulting from additional interaction with your practice, which truly provides the greatest value.

Below are some of the more common convenience-based services that many veterinary hospitals currently offer. It is important to remember, though, that every practice is unique, and not all options are a good fit and/or practical to implement. And for those of you that currently offer some or all of these services, a bit of "revitalization", followed by a new marketing campaign, can bring improved earning potential to an existing revenue stream.

Luxury Boarding

While the majority of clinics offer boarding of some sort, the current demand is for upscale facilities that cater to four-legged family members – *family* being the key word. Admittedly many of these physical improvements are really for the benefit of pet-owners seeking ways to alleviate the guilt associated with leaving their beloved pet behind; after all, it's doubtful a dog cares whether the gate to his kennel is hand-tooled wrought iron or stainless steel! But regardless of whose needs are being met, the overall effect can lead to fully booked accommodations on a regular basis. Large "rooms" that allow families of dogs to stay together, beds, lights and TVs are all amenities offered by large, luxury boarding facilities against which your practice must compete.

Keep in mind...

- Whether your upscale accommodations are new or remodeled, make sure to let the public know about them! Offer tours and grand-opening coupons, and make sure to have lots of photos showing happy pets on your website.
- A "boarding only" marketing campaign can be a great way to attract new clients that weren't in the market for a new veterinarian. Wow them with your customer service and state-of-the-art accommodations, and before you know it they will be requesting their pets' medical records be transferred to your practice (another example that convenience can be far more important to some clients than loyalty or continuity of care).
- Clients love extras! Take-home report cards, email or text updates and photos and scarves are just a few of the ways to show how much you care.

- A pet should ALWAYS look and smell better when they go home than when they arrive! They should never be returned to their parents without being brushed, checked for eye discharge and feces, and lightly “spritzed” with a fresh, clean scent!
- Dependable, committed, full-time boarding staff members are not easy to come by, so when you do, make sure to compensate and recognize them accordingly. While high school students can be great part-time employees, they should only be counted on as such.
- Staff should be trained to notice any physical or behavioral changes and encouraged to notify a doctor when unsure; doctors should make rounds of the facility at least twice a day, and one should be designated on-call whenever the practice is not open.
- Fleas, kennel cough and bad odors can ruin your reputation!! Enforce strict boarding requirements, teach staff to do a thorough flea check on admission, and implement and monitor strict cleaning protocols.

Daycare

- Doggie Daycare can be extremely profitable, but it requires a large amount of square footage, both indoors and outdoors, which is something many clinics just don’t have available. On the other hand, if you are building a new facility, or planning an expansion, adding square footage for indoor and outdoor play areas is an important consideration. If possible a separate building that also includes a small reception area is the best choice for operating a successful daycare program. This keeps the “chaos” and noise away from the hospital environment, thus minimizing stress for pets, owners and staff.

Keep in Mind...

- Do not to confuse daycare with day boarding, and make sure that clients understand the difference. Daycare involves exercise and interactive play with a group of other dogs. An owner that expects to pick up a happy, yet exhausted, dog on their way home from work will not be pleased to learn that their pet spent the majority of the day alone in a run.
- Liability is always a concern, and one way to minimize risk is to require that each pet undergo an initial behavioral assessment. A mandatory spay/neuter policy is also another way to limit the potential for aggressive behavior. Along with flea prevention and vaccine requirements, consider the benefits of a prophylactic de-worming policy.
- Be creative! Amenities can include separated small and large dog playrooms, swimming pools, fountains, jungle gyms, agility courses and specially designated nap areas.
- Offer daily pricing, especially for newcomers, but the ultimate goal is to add incentives that encourage the purchase of multi-session packages.

Grooming/Bathing

This can be a somewhat “controversial” service, and many owners have strong opinions, frequently based on past experience, on whether or not to offer it in their hospital. As always, the best approach is to keep an open mind and weigh the potential frustrations against the clients’ desire for convenience and the accompanying benefits for the practice.

Keep in Mind...

- Grooming provides endless opportunities to uncover and treat pet health issues (skin and ears are the biggies) that may otherwise have gone untreated. Make sure that groomers are trained to recognize all conditions that should be brought to the attention of a doctor.
- It is important to recognize that pet grooming is a highly specialized skill. Top notch groomers are hard to find and even harder to replace. When hiring, always require several try-out sessions with different breeds; this provides an opportunity to assess both skill and animal handling technique.
- Due to noise, odor and “mess” it is a good idea for grooming to be as far from the main hospital area as possible. If feasible, a separate ventilation system is a great idea.
- Groomer compensation format can be tricky; employee versus independent contractor status and hourly wage versus percentage of production are major considerations with varying associated pluses and minuses. While many practice owners prefer not to offer full-time employment status due to the associated costs, extending this benefit can go a long way towards keeping a high-quality groomer in your practice.

Pickup/Delivery Service

Transportation services can be multi-faceted, and although not a huge profit center when viewed in isolation, their value is as a facilitator for other areas of the practice, both medical and non-medical. Pickup and delivery can be as simple as offering door-to-door food and medication, or, in the right demographics, can cater to clients by offering a “school bus” service for appointments, daycare, grooming and boarding.

Keep In Mind...

- Feline transportation services can have a significant positive impact on medical compliance, especially when it comes to cats with older owners. Go the extra mile and offer to retrieve the cat and put her in the carrier – your kindness will not be forgotten.
- A vehicle is the perfect billboard for your practice – use it as an opportunity to be noticed!
- Don’t hesitate to adjust pricing based on fuel charges – it’s a standard business practice. A maximum service distance from the hospital should be clearly stated and should not exceed 10 miles.
- Safety is an important concern when transporting pets; while some dogs can be seatbelt trained, most will need an individual kennel or carrier. To minimize stress, try not to transport cats and dogs at the same time, unless they are from the same family.