

How to Cater to Cats

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As members of the veterinary profession we are fortunate to live in a society that celebrates the poise, beauty and quirky personality of cats; with more than 93.6M owned in the United States, cats outrank dogs as the most widely owned pet by over 17%.ⁱ The big question then is why, with an increasing population, do cats represent an ever-shrinking portion of most general practices' active patients? Why does the average feline examination generate \$203.00 in comparison to \$225.00 for the average canine examination?ⁱⁱ It's as if cats are looked upon as second class citizens when it comes to veterinary care, and while the oft cited reason for this is their independent and stoic nature, as well as their tendency to mask pain and illness, this explanation fails to get to the root of the problem – a failure on the part of our industry to educate cat owners on the importance of wellness care. The unfortunate result for a large number of practices is that vaccines, rather than wellness and preventative care, have become the initiator for a feline veterinary visit.

There have been attempts to overcome this lack of knowledge and client education. For example, the AAFP (American Association of Feline Practitioners) has been offering feline standards of care since 1998, from senior care to pain management and everything in between. In 2010, greatly concerned by statistics showing cats being underserved by veterinarians, the AAFP, in conjunction with AAHA, published a Feline Life Stage Guidelines, providing recommendations for optimal care throughout a cat's lifetime. For whatever reason, these efforts received minimal attention at the clinic level, and many practices have watched their active feline patients dwindle; while they have suffered economically as a result, it is cats who have truly suffered the greatest consequences.

But major change is in the air. Since early 2011, several studies have been released, including the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study (BVCUS) and Banfield's State of the Industry Report, which have greatly increased awareness of the sad state of feline veterinary care. Data from the BVCUS determined the following to be true:

1. A decreasing feline patient base is one of the six greatest factors affecting an overall decline in veterinary visits
2. 'Friending' cats provides the greatest opportunity for growth in small animal practices on several fronts:
 - education and increased visits from current feline patients
 - discovering the 'missing' felines owned by clients who bring other pets to the practice
 - building a reputation as a cat friendly practice to attract new cat owning clients
3. Cat owners **are** willing to provide better care for their pets, but they currently are not aware of the value!

- 56% said they would bring their cats to the veterinarian more often if they knew it could prevent costly treatment later
- 53% said they would bring their cats to the veterinarian more often if they knew it would help their cat live longer
- 49% said they would bring their cat to the veterinarian more often if they really believed that he/she needed more frequent exams

So where should a practice wanting to make strides towards growing their feline business begin? If the goal is to develop a partnership with cat owners that will pave the way for a lifelong health care plan, the most logical and effectual place to start is with an educational training program for all team members. The program should include written protocols for everything from vaccines to diabetes management and should highlight the unique differences between feline and canine diagnoses, treatment and medications. Cat owners have specific concerns, and the responses team members provide should be scripted and rehearsed as part of any training program.

A crucial component of any feline-focused initiative is extensive training on proper restraint and handling. Cats are often viewed as “one person pets” and tend to be less trusting of physical contact with humans they don’t know. As a result, they have earned a reputation for having a short ‘fuse’, and one of the greatest training hurdles is eliminating the nervousness, and even fear, that many staff, and even doctors, display when handling felines. If cat owners do not currently perceive value in examinations, demonstrating the ability to handle cats goes a long way to gaining their trust and loyalty. In many practices the tendency to bring a cat to the ‘back’ to perform services, rather than doing them in the exam room with the owner present, is often seen as a solution for poor handling/restraint skills. Yet removing cats from the exam room, as well as from their owner, does absolutely nothing to build a trusting veterinary-client relationship; there is no way for an owner to know whether their pet was handled with care or actually received the full examination for which they are paying.

Beyond the lack of cat owners’ perception of value, the greatest barrier to feline visits is one of pure logistics - most cats simply don’t enjoy being outside their comfort zone. According to the BVCUS, 58.2% of owners stated that their cat hates going to the veterinarian, and 37.6% said that just thinking about taking their cat to the veterinarian is stressful. Interestingly, the process of bringing a cat to the veterinarian was found to be “where the opportunity for dissatisfaction is initiated” as well as “the area where suggested improvements were most common.”

So how do we go about removing this logistical barrier and improving the veterinary experience for cats and their owners? Here are a few strategies to consider:

- When calling to confirm appointments have receptionists ask cat owners if they are concerned with getting their cat into the carrier and transporting them to the clinic; if so, offer them scripted advice and email them specific material to assist with the process (can include a video)

- If the practice is large enough, reserve one or two exam rooms for feline patients and keep a pheromone diffuser plugged in at all times; ideally these would be furthest away from the louder areas of the hospital
- If you don't have designated cat rooms, make sure to note on the chart which room you've been using, as this will help keep things as familiar as possible
- Get cats out of the lobby and into an exam room as soon as possible, especially if there is a lot of commotion
- Offer to bring the carrier (with the cat) into and out of the practice for the client – carriers can be very unwieldy and difficult for clients to carry, especially if they are elderly; invite them to call or text you when they are in the parking lot and then send someone out to help
- Reserve specific times of day, or certain days, as 'cat only' to reduce the potential for commotion and noise – in truth, this can be a great tool for reducing owners' anxiety as much as the cats'
- Ask owners to complete a behavior questionnaire for each cat; this will not only help the examination go more smoothly, but will provide the opportunity to offer tailored preparation recommendations for future visits
- Let cats out of their carrier once in the exam room and let them roam around; keep the carrier door open even if they choose not to come out on their own; consider removing the carrier from the room until it is time to leave so that they cannot "hide"
- Suggest owners bring their cat for "meet and greet" visits to the practice prior to their scheduled appointment - the goal is to acclimate the cat to the carrier and car, as well as to the smells and noises of the practice; bring them into an exam room, let the cat out of the carrier to roam the room freely, and have team members spend time holding/petting the cat

While working to achieve a reputation as a practice with a strong affinity for felines takes time and effort, doing so brings significant rewards, both for practices and the feline pet population. As a starting point, veterinary teams must commit to a renewed understanding and respect for the unique challenges and attributes that both cats and their owners bring to the table. As the great French veterinarian, Fernand Mery once said, "with the qualities of cleanliness, affection, patience, dignity, and courage that cats have, how many of us, I ask you, would be capable of becoming cats?"

SIDE BOX

The following are a few of the excellent websites available that contain training and educational material for veterinarians, team members and pet owners:

1. **American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP)**, www.catvets.com
 - 12 written guidelines that represent standards of excellence in feline care, the most recent of which is titled *Cat Friendly Handling*
 - Educational information for cat owners
 - CE material and opportunities; both DVM and technician memberships available

- Membership includes being listed in the *Find a Feline Practitioner* directory
2. **CATalyst Council**, www.catalystcouncil.org
 - A website dedicated to improving the health and welfare of cats through education
 - Offers an informational video with tips on acclimating cats to the carrier and preparing for the veterinary visit
 - Free newsletter subscription
 3. **Feline Advisory Board**, www.fabcats.org
 - non-profit dedicated to offering education materials to both cat owners and veterinarians

ⁱ 2009-2010 National Pet Owners Survey, American Pet Products Association (APPA)

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