

# It's all about U. Understanding



Clare Butler,  
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Communications,  
sums up why  
you – the  
receptionists –  
can be the most  
important asset  
to your practice

HOW hard can it be, summing up what makes for a great practice? Well, pretty hard, as it turns out. With pet-owners increasingly equipped with the Internet, an enquiring brain and a hand firmly on the purse strings, keeping your customers impressed is no mean feat for the modern vet practice, as you no doubt know all too well.

I started to think about what it would look like to be at the very heart of a successful practice from the client's perspective. So, as a pet owner, I take for granted that you're making money, and are fully staffed, because these are the results of doing everything else right. But just what is "everything else"?

As a client, I have pretty high standards, and I expect a lot of my vet practice, because I figure that I'm paying a lot to get this kind of stuff right.

My personal checklist for a good practice goes a bit like this...

### *Friendly, cheery staff*

Now, I've sold ice creams for eight hours a day, with a fixed-on smile, and I've answered phones to disgruntled catalogue customers on 10-hour shifts, so I know this is not an easy one. We all have bad days, but our customers don't need to know.

When I'm standing in front of you with a poorly cat, I don't care if you've just reversed into the head vet's car. Sorry, but I don't. If you smile at me, listen to me and acknowledge my pet, then you can charge me what you want. I'm yours.

### *Open and honest discussion*

Let's face it – vet's bills can be pretty hefty, and always come at

the same time as the MOT or the boiler's demise.

If I've got a monster bill coming, I'd much rather know in advance. If there are different drug options, with costs and efficacy implications, I'd quite like to know. If my animal has a poor prognosis, I'd definitely want to know (you might need some tissues handy, but I still want to know).

Having managed a fair few people over the years, I know they can be surprisingly awkward, but I figure honesty is always the best policy. How you broach the subject is up to you, and the way in which you deliver bad news will necessarily vary from person to person, but don't assume to know how people feel, and how they will react. Be led by your clients – if you ask for their questions, you can judge how much they want to know.

### *Sensitivity*

My first cat had to be put down when he was only four months old, after contracting FIV and deteriorating rapidly. It was clearly awful, but I can still remember how fantastic the staff were, and the vet in particular.

On the morning we brought Floyd in, we were given time to settle him, talk about what would happen, and we were encouraged to hold him whilst the injection was given, to avoid stressing him further. Afterwards, we were left alone for a few moments whilst I composed myself to face the waiting room with puffy eyes. The bill was posted out to us later, not foisted on us in reception, and we never received reminder cards telling us it was time for his booster – as friends of mine have after the event. It's all simple stuff, but it made such a difference at such a horrible time.



### *Clean, bright, accessible premises*

Call me fussy, but I like to be able to park within sight of the building, and be able to get my fractious cat in its urine-soaked box through the door in one easy movement; without tipping it sideways all over me and any other unfortunate nearby.

Once I'm in, I like to be able to sit and wait on chairs that don't smell and haven't been chewed by anxious customers. Whilst I'm waiting, I'm not keen on reading curled up antique copies of the *Reader's Digest* with handy macramé tips – maybe it's just me, but this is not saying to me, welcome to our lovely modern, forward-thinking practice.

Whilst I'm on the subject, can my daughters please have some books that don't pre-date me? It's a small thing, but thinking about your clients' needs speaks volumes about your practice and doesn't cost the earth to deliver.

“ If you smile at me, listen to me and acknowledge my pet, then you can charge me what you want. I'm yours ”

### *Technology*

It might surprise you to see that I haven't mentioned technology or swanky kit at all. This isn't important for me – I don't mind if your stethoscope was your dad's as long as it works. I kind of wonder if I'm paying you too much when everything still has that “fresh-out-of-the-box” polystyrene smell. For me, a great practice is about how my pet and I are treated, in the non-medical sense. I want to feel that I'm a person, and not a patient number. I like it when the staff remember me and my pet, and when I see the same faces behind the desk from one visit to another.

First names are fine for me, but I understand that some clients will always be Mrs – it's nice to be asked. Having free drinks in the waiting area is great, having a bowl of water for your canine customers is even better.

Really, it's all about the feel of the place – old premises and small practices don't have to be fusty and old-fashioned, some of the best vet practices I've seen have been in the same family (and the same building) for years. Somewhere to hang your coat, comfy chairs, clean toilets (with soap and plentiful toilet paper please, not a lot to ask) and a warm, personal welcome appeal to everyone; funky wallpaper and minimalist Perspex benches just don't.

### *So, that's it*

I started this article saying it's all about “U” – understanding what I want. All of the factors I've mentioned above are different, but get them right and they combine to give your practice its own positive identity. Once you understand what your clients are looking for from your business, in order for them to see (and, let's not forget, recommend) it as a truly great one, you are halfway to delivering. In the end, the heart of a great vet practice looks very similar to the heart of any good service industry – great customer service stemming from a true understanding of what your customers really want.

See? It's simple!

- *Onswitch* provides market research, training and mystery shopping for veterinary practices and has a unique insight into what the client wants and how the practice can provide it. Each month, Clare Butler will be providing some golden tips to make your practice great.