The Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study
What It Tells Us About Patient Visits
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You don’t have to talk to very many veterinarians to hear tales of woe about the poor condition of business. Many people associate stagnant or declining revenues with the Great Recession. The fact is, declines in patient visits began well before the recession, even when the U.S. economy was rosy. And new research—The Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study—has identified some endemic issues that veterinarians need to address. This issue of EVT will explain several of them and show how you can address them.

First, let’s look at the trends that led to the Bayer study.

Dog and cat populations have been rising for decades, thanks no doubt to the strengthening of the human–animal bond. For many years, increased use of veterinary services outpaced this growth, but a 2007 American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) report, the U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographic Sourcebook, suggested that pet visits to veterinarians were not keeping pace with pet populations (Figure 1). (The AVMA study is conducted every 5 years; the 2011 data will be published in 2012.)

Other studies corroborated the AVMA data. Financial & Productivity Pulsepoints, a publication by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), showed that active clients per veterinarian and new clients per veterinarian peaked in 2001 and have been declining since (Figures 2 and 3).

Intrigued and concerned by these trends, executives at Bayer Animal Health decided to look for answers—and solutions to the problem. In designing its study, Bayer collaborated with several experts, including the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (NCVEI) and Brakke Consulting, a management consulting firm specializing in animal health and pet care. Bayer, Brakke, and NCVEI also tapped into the expertise of university business specialists with veterinary market experience at Kansas State University, Southern Methodist University, and Texas Christian University.
THE STUDY

The Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study is composed of four components:

1. An extensive review of literature on pet visits and companion animal veterinary usage trends
2. In-depth interviews with veterinarians from across the country
3. Eight focus groups with dog and cat owners in four major U.S. cities
4. A national online survey of more than 2,000 dog and cat owners that was representative of the pet-owning population

The study identified six major factors that were contributing to declining pet visits. Three were called “environmental;” that is, trends or issues taking place in the overall marketplace:

- **The recession.** Although it didn’t start the trend, it made it worse.
- **Fragmentation of veterinary services.** More veterinarians are working in more types of practices than ever before. In the past 10 years there has been significant growth in the number of pet store practices, mobile vaccination practices, animal shelters and pet rescue operations, and specialty-referral clinics; thus, more competition. As a result, visits are spread over far more practices.
- **Growth in Internet use.** Increasingly, pet owners look first on the Internet when they have a pet health question or suspect their animal may not be well. This reduces the phone calls, and subsequent visits to, the veterinarian.

Three other client-based factors can more readily be addressed by individual veterinarians in their work with clients and potential clients:

- **Pet owners don’t understand the need for exams.** Many pet owners associate a trip to the veterinarian with “shots” and don’t appreciate the importance of routine exams in keeping pets healthy.
- **Sticker shock.** Many pet owners are keenly aware that the cost of veterinary care has been rising rapidly; 53% said veterinary costs are usually much higher than they expected.
- **The cat problem.** Although there are more cats than dogs in the U.S., 40% of them have not been to the veterinarian within the past year—in large part because the cats themselves resist so vehemently being put in a carrier and transported to the practice, where they encounter unfamiliar animals at the clinic. It’s stressful to the cats, and often more so to the cat owner.

The Bayer study authors concluded that there was good news in the research. Although the problems are serious, many of them can be addressed through client education and behavior changes at the veterinary clinic.

The goal of this issue is to give practical suggestions on how you can address many of these problems and consequently attract more pets to your practice more often. | EVT

See Aids & Resources, page 40, for references and suggested reading.