The decline in average annual client visits over the past 10 years is a great concern to both individual practices and the veterinary profession as a whole. It is easy to blame the bad economy and increased competition. But in fact, the veterinary hospital down the street, the big-box store selling veterinary drugs, and the local nonprofit clinic charging lower fees are not our most formidable barriers. Rather, the biggest competitive challenges we face today are pet owners who choose to wait and fail to contact us for help and advice.

First, we have to identify the barriers that keep our own clients, as well as prospective clients, from coming through the door. Anything that causes a client to hesitate in making an appointment increases the chance that we will never see them, resulting in a missed opportunity to provide services, sell products, create enduring client relationships, and grow our practices. We need to break down these barriers to client visits. Here are five time-tested strategies that can’t be overlooked. They can be customized for your own practice and become an important part of the discussion that occurs during team meetings and staff training sessions.
Traditionally, we have made initial contact with potential clients through the Yellow Pages, but today most customers use the Internet to shop for a new service. Even if potential clients have heard of you, they may want to know more about your practice before making the call. They will likely consult your website for additional information. As a result, the ability of your website to establish trust and rapport is a critical driving force for client engagement.

To be effective, your website must be attractive, client-centered, interactive, user-friendly, and fun. It’s not so much about what you do that draws clients in, they want to know who you are. When choosing a veterinarian, pet owners are often looking for answers to these questions:

- **What are the core values of your practice?**
- **How dedicated are you in answering client questions and providing trustworthy health information?**
- **How do you show compassionate care to your patients?**

Be sure the answers to these questions are readily visible when prospective clients visit your website. Often, this information can be portrayed in pictures.

Make your message personal by using a conversational style in explaining the services and products you provide for clients and their pets. Set clients’ minds at ease. Use language that instills confidence such as, “Our health care team is always here to help.” In discovering your practice, owners have found the best place to address ALL their pet health care needs!

Let Prospective Clients Know Who You Are

Make It Easy to Schedule an Appointment

When scheduling an appointment over the phone, the focus of the conversation needs to be centered on the clients’ concerns and questions. Take the time necessary to skillfully develop a rapport with clients, and be careful to listen for understanding. This will let them know that they have called the right practice to meet all their pet health care needs.

Owners often call for assurance that their pet’s signs are not concerning, hoping that a visit is unnecessary. However, because it is impossible to diagnose illness over the phone and we must keep the pet’s best health interests in mind, it is important that we do not allow a phone call to substitute for a needed hospital visit. Receptionists who take the time to listen to the clients’ descriptions of their pet’s condition, and then express genuine concern on behalf of the practice are more likely to schedule an appointment. “Even though this may not indicate a serious problem for Cindy today, the only way we will know for sure is a thorough exam to make sure something more serious is not present. I am happy to help you schedule an appointment.”

Some practices find it useful to provide online appointment scheduling for use outside normal office hours. Scheduling modules are available with most veterinary software programs or email requests can be acted on as soon as the practice reopens the next business day. In using either scheduling platform, clients must be encouraged to take action to make the appointment rather than waiting or seeking other options.
3 Keep Your Practice Visible

Many owners intend to make an appointment but just don’t get around to making the call. Increase the probability that clients will take action by keeping your practice and its services fresh in their minds. At least once each month, every client should receive some form of communication from your team that will elevate your practice’s services to a “top-of-the-mind” awareness level. We don’t want clients to feel overloaded with information, so it is best to take advantage of a variety of “client touch” strategies. Options include practice newsletters, follow-up phone calls, reminder postcards, Facebook postings, targeted “emailings” (with prior client consent), and media advertisements.

Our goal is to serve clients by providing important pet health care information, not simply to “sell” something. To create the desired impact, all client contacts should be short, simple, straightforward, and convey concern.

4 Provide Payment Options

A client’s hesitancy to schedule a veterinary visit can be rooted in their current inability to pay for the visit and anticipated cost of needed medical services. One way to surpass this barrier is to provide options for payment. Most practices accept major credit cards as well as specialized medical credit cards that offer a specified interest-free period. It is also possible to have your bank set up an automated clearing house (ACH) account that will automatically deduct payments from a client’s checking, credit card, or savings account. “Payment at the time of service” is always preferable, but knowing that there are other options and that a health care team is willing to offer them, will help clients break down their reluctance to seek health care for their pets. Any plan needs to be well executed, and follow-through with responsibility for implementation should be assigned to specific staff members.

5 Survey Clients to Identify Visit Barriers

Information gained by asking clients about their experience during their visits is foundational in refining and improving your service delivery. Surveys sent out to clients directly after a visit, as well as those tailored to former clients, can identify strengths and areas for improvement. Surveys can be given to clients via email, traditional mail, or via phone. Timing is important, as feedback will be more valuable and trustworthy if it is acquired soon after the client’s visit experience. To accurately track survey responses over time, use a numeric rating scale.

Your survey might include such questions as, “How would you rate your experience in making an appointment here at City Animal Hospital?” Or, “Was the receptionist courteous and helpful when you called for an appointment?” As client waiting time is always an important service indicator, you might ask, “Were our services provided in a timely manner during your recent visit?” Always provide clients with the opportunity to offer written comments with each question. If they take time to offer suggestions, make sure you take time to listen. You will be surprised at what you learn!

When we use these five strategies to break down barriers that keep clients away, opportunities to serve your clients and patients will increase, and your practice will be better positioned to weather economic fluctuations. Establish YOUR practice as the ultimate destination for pet health care! | EVT

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