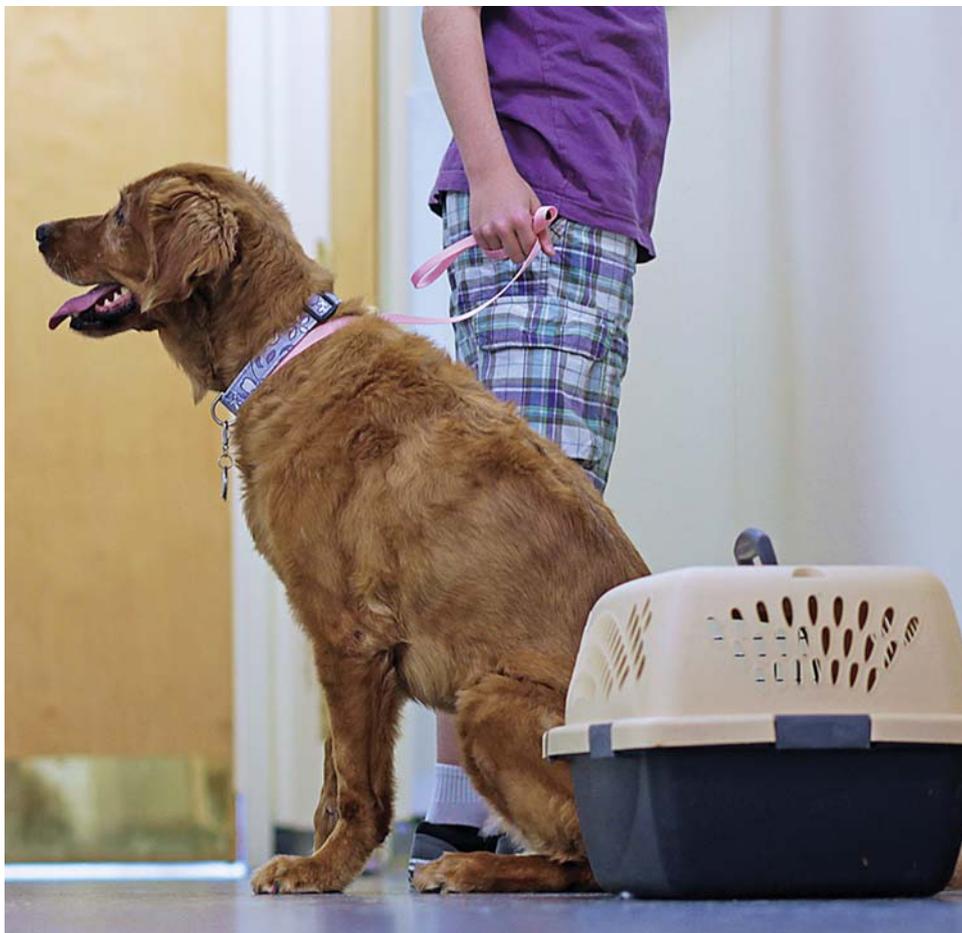




Bringing Back the Dogs & Cats: *What Will It Take?*



Although the number of pet visits is beginning to increase, most veterinary practices still have not rebounded to prerecession visit levels, and the climb back seems agonizingly slow and unpredictable.

What will it take to bring back the dogs and cats? From a marketing perspective, some indicators point the way to recovery and growth. According to the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study, the fact that veterinary practices are failing to make a solid value proposition constitutes 3 of the 6 reasons practice visits are down¹:

- 1 Lack of pet owner understanding of the need for preventive healthcare:** Think about it—it is hard to see the value of something you do not understand or do not believe your pet needs.
- 2 “Sticker shock” at the cost of veterinary care:** An annual wellness visit with preventive products and laboratory tests can easily cost \$300 to \$500 for a dog or cat.
- 3 Increased competition:** Online and brick-and-mortar competitors do better than individual practices marketing what appear to be the same products and services at better prices.

Practice visits had been declining for more than a decade before most veterinarians began to notice. The 2008 recession, however, put the decline large on the radar. Many practices saw pet visits abruptly drop from 6% growth to -2% growth in the first 2 years following the recession, according to the IDEXX Cornerstone Users Report on Patient Visits 2008-2012.² Most practices also found it difficult to increase their fees in the face of a price-sensitive consumer mindset, which remains to this day. It seems clear that if practices want to bring back the dogs and cats, they will have to communicate the value proposition in new and better ways.



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Change the traditional client education approach

It is usually more effective to engage pet owners in learning than it is to lecture them. Try sharing stories to show them the problems you can solve or help them avoid. For instance, many pet owners do not understand the value of vaccinations and heartworm protection. But then, most clients have never seen a sick puppy suffering with parvovirus or the treatment a heartworm-positive dog has to endure. To make the value proposition, share the stories of these sick pets and their treatments. This will help engage clients emotionally and help them better understand the need to protect their pets. *People learn through stories*, which engage and add meaning. Clients may not remember statistics, but they seldom forget the story about the sick puppy you treated. Make sure you share these stories with your team members so they can share them with clients.



Make your point with pictures and humor

Are fleas a problem? Show a cartoon of a dog or cat scratching. The picture may be funny, but clients with itchy pets will relate! Caption the cartoon to make the value proposition. Tell them, “If your pet is scratching, he is miserable!” Invite them to work with you to solve their pet’s problem and help the pet feel better.



Two visits are better than one

“Sticker shock” is a self-inflicted problem because most practices still try to do everything in a single visit. We can do so much more for patients now than we did 25 years ago. It is hard to even talk about everything a healthy pet needs in a 20-minute appointment. How much can clients be expected to remember and pay for in one visit?

Try splitting the annual pet examination into 2 visits. You will have twice the opportunity to educate clients and they will have twice the chance to say *yes* to needed care. Two visits also reduce sticker shock because clients pay less at each visit.



Bring back the dogs and cats to your practice by helping their owners understand the value of preventive care.

Develop meaningful client relationships

The Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study clearly shows that clients like to see the same veterinarian at every visit, which helps build a trusting, rewarding relationship.¹ Don’t you like to see the same doctor at each visit? Your clients are no different. How can you ensure your clients see the same veterinarian every time? How can you give the veterinarian more time with clients?

Bring back the dogs and cats to your practice by helping their owners understand the value of preventive care. Use stories, pictures, affordable visits, and a chance to see the same veterinarian each time to make the value proposition. ■

**See Aids & Resources, back page,
for references & suggested reading.**