It has become a well-known fact that the number of routine veterinary visits continues to drop even as consumer spending on pets in general remains robust. Reversing the trend depends on effectively communicating with pet owners on the importance of regular wellness care.

Anne Huffham (TargetBase) and Alexis Nahama, DVM (VCA Animal Hospitals)
A recent study conducted by VCA Animal Hospitals identified 2 client groups who are willing to spend more than other consumers to prolong their pets’ lives:

- Clients with senior pets
- Clients whose pets had a recent major medical event

Tailoring marketing efforts to these 2 groups can increase the number of regular healthcare visits and therefore have a positive impact on practice revenue.

**Clients with Senior Pets**

Clients with senior/geriatric pets are a key target for increasing hospital revenue, as clients are highly knowledgeable about their pets’ age-related needs, are more likely to be concerned about health risks for their pets, and are more likely to spend more on their pets’ health. In addition to veterinary visits, the majority of clients with senior/geriatric pets are informed about their pets’ age-related needs, as compared with

---

**Survey Method**

- Email invitations were sent to 40,000 clients who had visited VCA Animal Hospitals in the 15 months ending June 30, 2011. Clients with dogs or cats of unknown age or weight were excluded from the sample.
- The sample contained clients across 11 cells as defined by characteristics of the pet, such as species, age, and weight. Enough clients were contacted in each cell to ensure representativity of responses for both the weighted group (all respondents) and each individual cell surveyed.
- Respondents completed a 12-question survey focused on the health of the pet and knowledge of pet health and age-related issues; no incentive was offered in exchange for completing the survey.
- 2,894 surveys were completed (7.2% response rate). Enough responses were obtained for each individual group (cell) to be analyzed and weighted.
- Above-average survey response was from clients with dogs 10 years of age and older or with dogs weighing 20 pounds or more. Below-average survey response was from owners of dogs 6 years of age and younger or of dogs weighing less than 20 pounds.
- A secondary data source was used for interactions between involvement in pet healthcare and pet owner characteristics, including demographics, information about pet ownership, and level of agreement with health attitudes.
- Raw data were collected and analyzed by a third-party statistical researcher at the data analytics agency (TargetBase) and appropriate statistical methodology applied for testing significance.
- Results were segmented into 4 categories (Figure 1):
  1. Low Involvement: Low visits, low revenue
  2. Medium Involvement, Visits driven: Medium/high visits, low revenue
  3. Medium Involvement, Revenue driven: Low visits, medium/high revenue
  4. High Involvement: Very high visits or revenue

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past 15-Month Behavior</th>
<th>Low Involvement (n = 1,101)</th>
<th>Medium Visits Driven (n = 595)</th>
<th>Medium Revenue Driven (n = 375)</th>
<th>High Involvement (n = 769)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean visits</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean revenue</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean revenue/visit</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1**
owners of young or adult pets (Figure 2). Nearly 80% of those with senior pets and nearly 90% of those with geriatric pets believe their pet is at risk for 1 or more diseases in the next 3 years (Figure 3).

In addition, the reported amount a client is willing to spend to prolong a pet’s life in a hypothetical scenario is higher among owners of a senior/geriatric pet. Thirty-seven percent report being willing to spend $500 or more to buy an imaginary product to add a year to their pets’ lives, compared with 29% of those with young or adult pets (Figure 4).

**Client Demographics & Attitudes**

Syndicated survey data were analyzed and found that senior pet owner demographics and health attitudes did not substantially impact pet health involvement in terms of veterinary visits and revenue.

- Number of visits over the past 12 months did not vary substantially across pet owner age groups. A slight skew was found toward fewer visits among pet owners with children than those without.
- It was hypothesized that a client’s attitudes toward personal health might have an impact on his or her pet health involvement. To explore this, respondents’ level of agreement with a battery of health attitudes was compared among pet owners with 0, 1, 2, and 3 or more veterinary visits in the preceding year. Substantial dif-
Regardless of the age of the pet, owners whose pet experienced a serious health issue were more involved with their pets’ healthcare over the past 15 months.

**Clients with Sick Pets**

Clients with pets that had a major medical event are another key target for increasing hospital revenue. Regardless of the age of the pet, owners of pets with a serious health issue were more involved with their pets’ healthcare over the past 15 months (Figure 6).

Nearly half of those with sick pets also believed the animal to be at risk for additional health issues in the next 3 years, while around one-third of those with healthy pets shared this concern.
Veterinary Healthcare Marketing Insights

1. Keep in mind that owners of senior pets are receptive to placing a priority on their pets’ healthcare.

2. Ensure very active outreach, including appointment reminders, follow-ups, and thank you communications in addition to proactive wellness initiatives, and health maintenance plans. Use educational materials and handouts (see The Practical Approach to Drug Monitoring chart on page 9) to explain the importance of follow-up care to clients.

3. Take the opportunity to increase client knowledge about future age-related concerns throughout pets’ lives rather than waiting until they are already “senior” to provide an opportunity for earlier pet-health involvement and early disease detection. See the client handout A Lifetime of Canine Wellness on page 10 for an example.

4. Among clients with pets that had a major illness or injury, engage in active follow-up as a way of building long-term trust.

5. Owners of pets that had a major medical event are likely to be receptive to communications regarding annual checkups, regular blood work, age-related initiatives, and specific disease maintenance.

Greater concern with disease and reported willingness to spend on treatment may indicate openness to communications and treatments proposed by the veterinarian to those clients whose pets have been sick.

Similar to the pattern seen among clients with senior/geriatric pets, the reported amount owners were willing to spend to buy an imaginary product to add a year to their pet’s life in a hypothetical scenario was higher among clients who had a sick pet in the past 2 years (Figure 7).

Willing to Spend $500+ for Fountain of Youth

28% Healthy
42% Sick

FIGURE 7

Health of Pet in Past 2 Years

See Aids & Resources, page 63, for references and suggested reading.