Waiting Room Style: Making Clients & Patients Feel More Welcome

When clients are in your waiting room, ask yourself: Are they simply waiting to be seen, or are they being waited on and made to feel important? Are they just sitting there, expecting that something will happen at some point, or are they receiving white-glove service and know what will happen next?

When I visited the University of Florida Veterinary Teaching Hospital recently, I sensed as soon as I walked into the lobby that the clients, who likely were more stressed than most because their pets had potentially serious issues referred by their primary veterinarian, were experiencing exceptional waiting room treatment. This was my first, quick impression:

- The waiting area was welcoming, relaxed, purposeful, and peaceful.
- It smelled fresh and clean.
- The reception desk was centrally located, very accessible, and phone free. Team members behind
the desk were smiling, attentive, responsive, and focused.

- It was quiet and calm, with beautiful pictures of Florida scenery, large picture windows, and plants. No televisions blaring. No one loudly calling the next patient’s name.
- Client liaisons quietly attended to each client.

Clients were clearly being waited on, with deliberate attention to each client to reduce his or her stress level and to make pets calm and comfortable. Relieving stress and providing client-centered service are the keys to creating a welcoming, memorable waiting room. How would your clients rate your waiting room culture? Consider these changes to improve their assessment:

1. **Personalize each visit**

   - Welcome clients (including children) and pets by name, warmly and sincerely.
   - Have all paperwork ready.
   - Have a technician or assistant introduce him- or herself, offer to carry items, and escort the client and pet to the examination room.

“Without changing our footprint or adding square footage, we were able to totally change the atmosphere and overall impression of our hospital by ‘refreshing’ our reception area. Adding a beverage center, new lighting, window treatments, and a warm wall color transformed the space from functional to high end, yet homey. Clients can’t believe the difference, especially as we transformed the space in two weekends.

“Although it has only been a month, we have seen our food and retail items increase as clients are more apt to browse the display shelving that mimics what you would find in a home. Even the small touches like adding convenient eye hooks for pet leashes while checking out seem to solicit words of appreciation from our patrons.”

—Lisa A. Yackel, CVPM, PHR, Case Veterinary Hospital, Savannah, Georgia
2 **Make the waiting environment comfortable and inviting**

- The waiting room must *smell* clean and pleasant. At Haines Road Animal Hospital in St. Petersburg, Florida, clients are greeted with the fragrance of fresh-baked cookies available in the checkout area.
- The waiting room must also *be* clean. Watch out for carpets and area rugs, upholstered furniture, pillows, or fabric seat cushions, which can stain and trap odors that stress animals, even if people cannot smell them.
- Chairs should be comfortable and arranged in groups so patients have space between them.
- Create separate waiting areas for cats and dogs.
- Consider taking clients and patients straight to an examination room upon arrival. (This is especially helpful in emergencies and when euthanasia is necessary.)
- Provide a separate entrance for emergency cases. Seeing an animal in severe condition can disturb other clients.
- Make a play area for children.
- Tune any televisions in the waiting area to educational media, not news or daytime programs. Keep the volume at a moderate level. Feature animal photos interspersed with informative material. Avoid any sales content.
- Move phones away from the front desk. A ringing phone is an intrusion on the conversation between a team member and a client.
- Provide natural lighting, relaxing paint colors, and furnishings that reflect a home environment.
- Case Veterinary Hospital in Savannah, Georgia, and Tiger Tails Animal Hospital in Duluth, Georgia, provide refreshment stations with coffee, tea, soft drinks, water, and juice.

3 **Respect the client’s time**

- Update clients about schedule delays. Offer to reschedule their appointment or give them an added benefit (eg, complimentary boarding for a day) in return for the wait.
- Do not let work-in (formerly known as walk-in) clients derail the schedule and impact clients who have appointments.

4 **Avoid surprises at the front desk**

- Few things are more unpleasant for clients than someone loudly unhappy with his or her bill. Always discuss a patient’s treatment plan with clients before a procedure (even for wellness checks) and review invoices before they leave the examination room. If there is a problem, the veterinarian or a technician who has experience and credibility with the client should discuss the need for a charge.
- Clients are often anxious when picking up their pet after a procedure, and discharging the patient in the waiting room adds to their stress. Discharges should always be conducted in a private area, which allows time for reviewing any questions about the procedure or home-care instructions, as well as the bill. Ideally, the veterinarian would conduct this appointment or at least drop by to thank the client.
- Consider mobile credit card processors, which can make it easy for the client to pay in the examination room.

5 **Lend a hand**

- Open doors for clients.
- Offer to carry any bags, or indicate where they can be hung.
- Hand clients their coats, umbrellas, and other items.

Personalizing service and creating a space where clients feel waited on decreases the stress of a veterinary visit. Clients, their pets, and your team will thank you for providing a welcoming waiting room.