

By Amanda L. Donnelly, DVM, MBA

“ALL YOU

Care About

Is the

MONEY!”

## Mrs. Smith is picking up her dog Bailey.

You expected her to be relieved—even grateful—that Bailey’s loose tooth has been successfully extracted and he is ready to head home. The reality, however, is that Mrs. Smith is furious over the \$400 invoice for diagnostic testing, anesthesia, fluids, dentistry, hospitalization, antibiotics, and pain medications. Mrs. Smith seemed fine with recommendations for Bailey’s treatment, but today she says she will never

return to your hospital again. “All you care about is the money.”

Needless to say, you are disheartened, offended, and wonder what went wrong. Why is Mrs. Smith angry when you provided exceptional patient care for Bailey?





Henry Moore, Washington State University

**Allow clients to vent their frustrations. Don't assume that you know why the client is angry. Is it really the bill?**

## Know Yourself

Does criticism from a client make you want to tune out and crawl under your desk? Or does your loyalty to your team members make you tend to snap back first and think “I wish I hadn’t said that” later? Knowing your personality type will help you understand why you respond the way you do. Try role playing with team members who know your personality to gain insight into better ways to handle intimidating or uncomfortable situations.

### Communicate Value

Even in good financial times, many clients will not purchase veterinary services unless they feel the services have value and they have a positive experience at the hospital. However, in light of the fact that today many clients face shrinking discretionary income, efforts by the entire veterinary health care team to communicate value and enhance client service have never been more important.

The best way for everyone to do this is to focus on two simple rules:

1. **Show you care.**
2. **Give clients information.**

Using the scenario above, let’s examine what various team members could have

done to ensure that Mrs. Smith is happy with your services and feels a strong, positive connection with your practice.

### Client Service Representatives

Staff members who answer the phone and greet clients set the stage for engaging clients and making them feel welcome. When Mrs. Smith calls to schedule an appointment, show you care by communicating with warmth and enthusiasm, making the client think “Wow, this person seems happy to talk to me.” When Mrs. Smith arrives for her appointment, smile, make eye contact, and greet her with a personal welcome.

Instead of simply asking Mrs. Smith to take a seat to wait, inquire how Bailey is doing. By making conversation, you may uncover facts about Mrs. Smith that are relevant for the team to better understand her emotions and decision making. She may volunteer that her husband is in jeopardy of losing his job, or she is afraid of having Bailey undergo anesthesia. Knowing this, you will be able to convey empathy to Mrs. Smith and alert the rest of the team that she is under stress. Acknowledge clients’ emotions with statements such as “I understand this is a difficult time for you. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?”

Another critical role for client service representatives is to reinforce messages from the rest of the health care team and to communicate the value of services. For example, team

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## Dealing with an Angry Client

Every team member who has contact with clients will eventually deal with someone who is upset or angry. Be prepared with these tips.

- 1 **Remain calm** and resist the temptation to be defensive.
- 2 **Allow clients to vent their frustrations.** Interrupting too quickly may exacerbate their anger.
- 3 **Listen with concern.** Pay attention to your body language as well as the other person's; an irritated expression or aggressive posture will not be successful in calming clients.
- 4 **Ask questions.** Don't assume that you know why the client is angry. Is it really the bill?
- 5 **Reflecting back to the client** with phrases such as, "I understand that you are upset about the wait time" or "I know this is an upsetting situation" demonstrates you are listening and validates the client's emotions.
- 6 **Take action to assist clients.** This may be by getting additional information or telling them what you can do to help them. For example, you may be able to offer third-party payment plans to clients with cost constraints.
- 7 **Ask the client how you can help.** Hearing "We value you as a client. What can I do to help you?" can go a long way toward assuaging anger.
- 8 **Set a hospital policy** to ensure that promises to patients are fulfilled. For example, if you told the client that either the veterinarian or technician will call following a procedure, make it routine to ensure that the call does in fact take place.
- 9 If the client's anger escalates, even with your best efforts to help them, politely **acknowledge the inappropriateness of the behavior.** Say, "I'd like to help you, but the level of your anger is making it difficult for us to work together to resolve this issue."

members might say, "Mrs. Smith, I know you're nervous about leaving Bailey, but he'll be more comfortable after having his tooth removed and Dr. Taylor will take great care of him. We have state-of-the-art equipment and offer the finest medical care. Jill, his technician, or Dr. Taylor will call you as soon as the dental work is completed."

### Technicians

To show you care, demonstrate compassion and interest for both Bailey and Mrs. Smith. One way to do this is to give compliments, such as "You are such a cute little guy," or "I'm sorry your tooth is bothering you, Bailey." You may be able to compliment Mrs. Smith on her attentiveness to Bailey's dental care.

Listen to Mrs. Smith when she is talking. Look for expressions or body language that may indicate fear, anger, or a lack of understanding about the value of medical recommendations. Ask open-ended questions to ensure the client understands the treatment plan. Paying attention to Mrs. Smith's demeanor may lead you to ask, "What questions do you have about what Dr. Taylor is planning to do about Bailey's tooth? Can you tell me what questions you may have about what it will cost?"

When Mrs. Smith picks Bailey up, a doctor or technician should meet with her in an exam room to review treatment and home-care instructions. This is an opportunity to reinforce the value of the medical services and talk over Mrs. Smith's concerns rather than leaving it to the CSR, who is not as well versed about Bailey's case, to deal with Mrs. Smith's potential concern or anger.

### Veterinarians

There will probably be a tendency to interrupt Mrs. Smith if she launches into what seems like a long-winded story about Bailey, but doing so tends to discount the client's feelings and may preclude gathering valuable information. Veterinarians should also maintain eye contact and engage clients as much as possible during consultations. Turning

away from Mrs. Smith to write in a medical record or type entries into the computer interferes with efforts to really connect with her. If you make notes in the exam room, alert the client to give you a few moments to do this and then give them your undivided attention again.

When giving clients medical information, clearly articulate what the pet needs and then communicate the value of all services. You know to tell Mrs. Smith that Bailey needs a dental cleaning and tooth extraction as you show her his periodontal disease and infected, loose tooth. Don't forget to tell her the medical benefits of diagnostic testing, fluid therapy, and monitoring during the procedure as well as the benefits of dentistry for Bailey and for her as a pet owner. For example, you might say "Mrs. Smith, in addition to preventing progression of periodontal disease, a dental cleaning and extractions will make Bailey more comfortable, eliminate bad breath, and keep him healthier."

Another way to show clients you care is to make them partners in making decisions for their pets. Rather than just making a medical recommendation and asking Mrs. Smith to schedule the appointment, engage her in dialog so you can assess her understanding of the value of the service. Addressing costs—as well as possible payment options if necessary—up-front will prevent clients from feeling blindsided when presented with a bill and keep them coming back to your practice. ●

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