



Nonverbal Communication Speaks

VOLUMES

Building Better Client Relationships

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Dr. Suzie Slacker glanced at the puppy's adoption paperwork and new client sheet before she entered Exam 2. "Great, another free shelter exam," the veterinarian mumbled. Dr. Slacker placed the medical record and adoption papers on the exam table and began taking notes. Her history questions included "Any coughing, sneezing, vomiting, diarrhea?" and "Fleas, ticks, lumps, or bumps?" After a cursory exam, she said "You've got a healthy puppy. We'll see you again in a few weeks."

Chances are slim that this new client will return based on the ho-hum interaction. It is imperative for every member of the practice team to be an effective communicator to help ensure pets get the care they need and your practice thrives. Here's how to make the most of your body language and communication skills in four common situations:



1. Get Off to a Great Start

The quickest way to put your best face forward is to greet clients with a smile and a handshake, which signals professionalism, approachability, and confidence.¹ Establish credibility and authority with an engaging tone of voice. Break the ice with

questions that connect with clients and come from the heart. For example ask, "How did you choose your puppy's name?" Gladly accept puppy kisses and share stories about your pets. You'll bond with clients and establish a trusting rapport.

Offer a business card at the end of the visit, make eye contact, and say, "If you have questions before your next appointment, we're happy to provide answers."



2. In the Exam Room

To really connect with clients in exam rooms be aware of their body language and yours. Poor body language can be a symptom of dishonesty, nervousness, anger, defensiveness, embarrassment, fear, or boredom.²

When taking a patient's history, don't stand if the client is seated. An elevated

continues ►

position is one of authority, potentially causing clients to respond with answers they think you want to hear rather than the truth. Instead, kneel to get on the same eye level, removing the physical barrier of the exam table. If the client is standing, don't talk across the table, which may be considered confrontational body language. Stand at the end of the table so you form an "L" shape with the client. This communicates you're interested in what he or she has to say.

Your physical appearance also influences the outcome of client conversations. Wear a nametag that carries your title so clients know your role. A traditional white coat symbolizes knowledge, professionalism, and the science behind veterinary medicine. Tattered scrubs or not being able to distinguish a veterinarian from a receptionist only leaves clients confused.

At one California practice, doctors wear polo shirts, khaki pants, and zip-up consultation jackets. Technicians in scrubs and client service representatives in business casual attire of polo shirts embroidered with the clinic logo and khaki pants complete the team's style and project a professional image.



3. Presenting the Treatment Plan

Positive body language and convincing phrases let you confidently discuss finances. Have staff—not veterinarians—present estimates. Doctors make recommendations based on medical needs, so remove them from money conversations. Refer to the "treatment plan," not "estimate" to ensure the focus remains on patient care, not money.

When discussing treatments and finances, don't stand behind the exam table and talk across it to the client. This face-to-face posture might be perceived as challenging. Again, stand in an "L" formation with no physical barrier between you and the client. Even better: Stand on the same side of the exam table, shoulder-to-shoulder, which is collaborative rather than confrontational. Say, "Let's go over the treatment plan the doctor recommends for Bella."

Place your thumb over the price. The client needs to understand the procedure before seeing the total. Explain each item, pointing to the left column that lists medical services. Create a three-ring binder with labeled pictures for common procedures such as dental cleanings, spays, and neuters. You also can use slideshows on exam-room computers or digital photo frames. For example, show a photo of a technician running in-house blood work to illustrate preanesthetic testing. Images help clients understand procedures, and educated clients are more likely to comply with doctors' recommendations.

When finished presenting a treatment plan, the technician asks, "Is this the level of care you'd like for your pet?" When the client responds yes, say, "To get your permission to schedule/proceed with treatment, I need your signature." In an emergency, say, "To get your permission to begin emergency treatment of your pet, I need your signature and a prepayment of \$ ____." Many practices



Try This

Print a treatment plan from your veterinary software. Role-play conversations with colleagues and ask them to suggest improvements in your body language and phrases. With training, you'll become a confident communicator and get more patients the care they need.

require a 50% deposit for emergencies. Use the term "prepayment" instead of "deposit," which indicates the client may get money returned. You keep the signed treatment plan and give a copy to the client.

Review payment methods including cash, checks, credit cards, and third-party financing such as CareCredit. If financial limits exist, the team member says, "Let me get the doctor so he can recommend Plan B/options for a treatment plan that fits your budget." Often, a client will find a way to pay for needed care. If not, the doctor can revise the treatment plan based on the patient's medical needs as well as cost.



4. Explaining the Invoice

Present the invoice using a combination of confident body language and sales reinforcement techniques. Let's say that Mrs. Finamore visits with Rocky, a 2-year-old golden retriever, for wellness services. As she approaches the checkout counter, stand to greet her, smile, and make eye contact. Read the list of services and products off the computer screen, and then state the total. Don't say prices for each item, just the sum. Besides showing value, this allows the client to add extra items such as preventatives, medication refills, and food.

Always state the diseases that vaccines cover rather than confusing acronyms such as DHLPP or FVRCP. Likewise, use the term "intestinal parasite test" instead of fecal to show value for the additional diagnostics.

Asking the client's preferred payment method subtly tells her that payment is due when services are rendered. Once the transaction is complete, give the receipt to the client along with a smile that communicates "We appreciate your business."

One of the nonverbal indicators that a person is being truthful is that the palms of the hands will be exposed and fingers will be extended.³ Because you want to appear truthful during financial transactions, "present" the invoice using this gesture. If the client purchases food, has children accompanying her, or a Jack Russell "terrorist" tugging at the leash, step out from behind the counter and say, "Let me help you out to the car." Never ask, "Do you need any help?" because most clients will decline.

When your team focuses on improving body language and using positive phrases, you'll increase client service, practice revenue, and patient care. It's a guaranteed prescription for success. ●

References

1. **How to Connect in Business in 90 Seconds or Less.** Boothman N. Workman Publishing, 2002.
2. **Reading People: How to Understand People and Predict Their Behavior—Anytime, Anyplace.** Dimitrius J, Mazarrella WP. Ballantine Books, 2008.
3. **I Know What You're Thinking: Using the Four Codes of Reading People to Improve Your Life.** Glass L. John Wiley & Sons, 2002.



Take the quiz on page 5 to rate your team's communication skills.

Skillset addressed in this article: relational competencies

QUIZ: Rate Your Team's Communication Skills

Clients interact with every member of your health care team. Take this quiz to discover how well your team communicates. Circle the rating that best reflects your client education and service on a typical day. Total your points, and then find your score.

Rating: 5 = Always 4 = Most of the time 3 = Undecided/no opinion 2 = Occasionally 1 = Never

1. Staff and doctors use pets' names often in client conversations.	5	4	3	2	1
2. Client leaves the exam room with at least one written communication tool such as an exam report card, brochure, or handout.	5	4	3	2	1
3. Doctors and staff discuss the importance of parasite control and prevention with clients during visit.	5	4	3	2	1
4. We use senior care and/or puppy and kitten checklists to help create client awareness and to make sure we cover core topics.	5	4	3	2	1
5. We see senior pets twice a year for comprehensive exams.	5	4	3	2	1
6. Our veterinarians and staff use multiple teaching methods such as models, report cards, brochures, anatomical drawings, and x-rays in exam rooms when communicating with clients.	5	4	3	2	1
7. We review home-care instructions for dental and surgical patients with clients before bringing pets into exam rooms.	5	4	3	2	1
8. The doctor asks the client, "What questions can I answer?" before ending the exam.	5	4	3	2	1
9. Brochures are placed inside each exam room, where they are within easy reach for doctors and staff to give to clients.	5	4	3	2	1
10. Each exam room has framed educational posters.	5	4	3	2	1
11. Our hospital uses assistants and/or technicians in exam rooms for client education, animal restraint, and anticipation of veterinarians' needs.	5	4	3	2	1
12. Each exam room features educational models such as knee, hip, ear, or dental models.	5	4	3	2	1
13. Doctors and staff step out from behind exam tables to project positive body language and close-up interactions with clients and patients.	5	4	3	2	1
14. Each exam room has an x-ray view box or digital monitor.	5	4	3	2	1
15. When making recommendations to clients, team members and veterinarians use convincing phrases such as "Your pet needs a dental cleaning" or "Your pet needs year-round parasite protection."	5	4	3	2	1
16. Doctors use exam report cards to summarize their exam findings and recommendations and to help clients educate other family members at home.	5	4	3	2	1
17. We take digital pictures of patients during exams to include in exam report cards, track patient progress for an ongoing condition such as skin problems, or as part of home-care instructions.	5	4	3	2	1
18. We provide educational videos for in-clinic or home viewing.	5	4	3	2	1
19. We enter reminders in the computer for medical progress exams, callbacks, or needed follow-up care as soon as the client checks out.	5	4	3	2	1
20. All clients receive written home-care instructions following surgical or dental procedures.	5	4	3	2	1

TOTAL POINTS = _____

What Your Score Means

100-90: Clients appreciate your stellar communication skills, and every team member understands his or her role in client education. Make sure new staff members and veterinarians complete an orientation program on how to teach clients so exceptional communication and strong client compliance become part of your culture. Seek ongoing training to keep pace with the latest trends in communication techniques.

89-80: Your team delivers superior client education and seeks opportunities for improvement. Continue to grow your commitment to great client education with staff meetings at least monthly. Discuss an educational

issue during every session, such as ways to improve discharge appointments, client handouts, and what teaching tools you need to add. Discuss strategies to improve client compliance for heartworm testing and prevention, dental cleanings, senior screens, preanesthetic testing, vaccinations, and therapeutic diets.

79-70: You're ready to reinvigorate your team and renew your dedication to client education. Start with a staff meeting to discuss potential educational improvements, and consider a client satisfaction survey to check the effectiveness of your client education and communication.

69 or lower: Your team needs a vision of the level of client education possible at your hospital. To communicate your values, write a mission statement with your team. Then ask staff members to suggest ways to live the mission daily. Create a service award program that lets staff praise one another for positive results. For example, post a brag board where employees can write notes about a team member who they saw provide exceptional client education. Seek ongoing training on client education through seminars, websites, videos, books, and journal articles.