

3 Tips to Keep Your Appointments Filled and the Front Door Swinging Open

By: Louise S. Dunn



Description: Scheduling appointments may seem like a “no brainer” – answer the phone, schedule the appointment. Yet the problem with this approach is that it is lacking direction, there is no plan for your unique business or the needs of your clients. Just by taking a strategic approach and noticing the three elements of your Circle of Care can ensure success in not only scheduling appointments, but also in reducing no shows and cancellations, and even in giving you insight into future trends at your practice.

Learning Objectives:

- Focus on just a few business tools to improve appointment occupancy rates
- Use some common tips about customers to increase appointment compliance with your clients
- Take advantage of unique pet needs to schedule appointments and promote healthier pets

What Are You Doing?

What are you doing to fill you appointment openings for next week, next month...next year? You set up the appointment book and highlight office hours. You schedule your team – receptionists, techs, doctors, even kennel personnel. Your team answers the phone, schedules appointments and tackles each day as it arrives. Is this all it takes to have a successful AND profitable veterinary practice? If you are expecting successful AND profitable you may want to consider changing your routine.

How many times have you thought you scheduled too many employees for the day’s appointments...or maybe the wrong team members for the type of appointments? How often do you have no shows, cancellations or just flat out refusals to schedule an appointment? At the end of day, how many openings are left on the book? These unfilled appointments are lost opportunities that you can never recapture – the utilities have been used, wages paid and inventory left on the shelf.

A solution is at hand – it is based on your Circle of Care. The Circle of Care is your business, your clients and your patients. By looking at each group in your circle you can easily focus on what will improve appointment scheduling success!

Business Elements That Will Help You Fill Appointment Openings

Certain business elements can directly affect your ability to fill your appointment slots. First, take a look at your current stats for Occupancy Rate. To calculate your Occupancy Rate.....

Now that you know where you are, you can monitor where you go when you implement certain actions for filling appointments.

Second, consider some tools already at your fingertips – computer keyboard fingertips that is! You most likely enter diagnostic codes into your practice management information software. Diagnostic codes can be a great tool if you use them! The codes give you the ability to track cases and compliance. It also enables you a quick and easy method for communicating with your clients regarding new treatment options (schedule an appointment to come in and discuss the new treatment for your pet’s condition). Other codes can help you send updates, tips and hints, or important reminders for optimizing pet health (time for that weight check and nutrition counseling). Utilizing information specific to your practice and patients helps you to focus time and money on services needed by your patients.

Third – B2B. Use the power of Business-2-Business connections to generate appointments. What other businesses can help you out? Breeders, Clubs (hunting), Specialty groups (therapy dogs) and others can provide connections to potential clients while they reap the rewards of your medical expertise. Being available for club meetings or showing a presence at their community functions is an easy way for you to meet potential appointments.

It isn’t all about money when the “business” aspect of your Circle of Care is involved in appointment scheduling. Rather, it is about your business mission and business activities that can make a difference between having unfilled appointments or a full day. But it doesn’t end there, your circle is broken unless you also consider the client.

Making Appointments Attractive to Clients

Recently, the ‘word on the street’ has been about veterinary practices becoming “client-centered.” This is a wonderful initiative that you can take a step further – become one with the client, become the client, get into the mind of your client!

Think about what problems your clients want you to solve. For example, think about the clients with pets that suffer seasonal allergies. You know the ones, they always call and need squeezed in at the end of your day because “Fluffy” has been scratching for a week and is now raw and bleeding. Sure, you solve the problem,

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but only after the client is exasperated, Fluffy is stressed and painful, and you are put on the spot. Why not solve the problem AND eliminate all the stress by contacting seasonal allergy sufferers before they suffer? Fill your skin/allergy appointments on your schedule and not the ASAP squeeze in!

Think about what makes you (AKA the client) not schedule an appointment or show up for an appointment. For many of us, we are a no show at doctor appointments due to emotions, perceived disrespect or a lack of understanding of the need to have the appointment (Lacy). Transfer this information to your clients.

- Emotions – hate to shove the cat in a carrier, too much hassle, too stressful on everyone
- Perceived Disrespect – long waits and their time is just as important, the team doesn't listen to the client's concerns, it is all about money and not about the client
- Lack of Understanding – confusion about the medical condition and long-term care, misunderstanding about testing and timing of the tests

You get the picture. Tackle what is holding your clients back from scheduling an appointment. It may mean adjusting your procedures or providing education...or simply taking the time to listen.

Think about the family, the client's human and animal "family." Take a little time to talk about other members of the household – both human and animal. You may discover pets that have not been seen by a veterinarian. You may learn about a hobby or lifestyle (i.e. hunting or traveling) for which you are able to provide services to ensure a healthy pet.

Focusing on your clients means truly bonding with them, understanding where they are coming from. Check your bonding rate stat then tackle some of the aforementioned tips and see what happens to your bonding rate.

Patients

To complete the circle you must not forget about the actual patient. After all, your appointments are about the health and welfare of the pets, since pets can't text or call (at least not yet), consider some actions you can take to make them healthier.

Map out a plan. Nothing speaks volumes about how considerate you are than providing a game plan for future medical needs of the client's unique pet. Create (or download from another resource) a table that details medical services the pet will need over its lifetime and when you want to schedule those appointments. This idea is for either wellness or chronic conditions.

Pay attention to the breed and lifestyle of the pet. Each breed has its own unique conditions and this talk should occur with the client...but not just talk, give the client an action plan and a schedule appointment for the next step.

It is easy to satisfy the patient element of your Circle of Care because it is something those of us in the industry connect with – it is, after all, why we entered this profession. The pet complete the circle.

Your Appointment Book Future

Your Circle of Care not only gives you a strategy for filling appointments tomorrow, next week or next month, it can also give you insight into future appointments. Think about the decisions you will be able to make about staffing levels, knowledge training and hiring based on the types of appointments being scheduled in the future. Think about the advertising and social media topics you will be able to do that are relevant and specific to your growing client base. Being cognizant of your Circle of Care and the impact it can have on your appointment scheduling does have a ripple effect into other areas of practice management.

So, what are you going to do to fill your appointment book today, tomorrow or in the future? As Adlin Sinclair (businessman and motivational speaker) said, "You are the embodiment of the information you choose to accept and act upon. To change your circumstances you need to change your thinking and subsequent actions." So take a moment to think about these 3 elements of your circle, how they affect your appointment book and what actions you can take to strengthen your circle and improve your appointment scheduling.

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