

The 3-C's for Cat Care

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Of the estimated 85.8 million cats¹ in United States households, many of them have either never seen a veterinarian, or rarely see a veterinarian, due to the owner's perception of medical needs, the difficulties of transporting and examining, or personal financial concerns². These can be huge obstacles for a veterinary practice to overcome. How can your practice connect with cats in your community? How can you encourage feline veterinary visits? Just follow the simple 3 C's to improve Cat Care at your clinic –

- **C**at Compatible
- **C**lient Connection
- **C**hampions for Cats.

Cat Compatible

“A great way to cater to the cat client is to employ cat people and have them help your cat clients. The cat client experience delivered by a cat doctor or a cat tech is irreplicable and cannot be faked.”
(Paul Camilo, CVPM, Practice Administrator Hometown Animal Hospital, All Pets Dental, & 10 Lives Cat Clinic)

Face it; cats are not the same as dogs. We all know which of our clients are “dog people” and which are “cat people”. We can even identify team members who are dog or cat people. Some people we go so far as to lovingly refer to them as “crazy cat lady”. Moreover, we have all experienced the patient who just does not like the male tech or the female doctor for whatever reason in their animal psyche. When it comes to being compatible, never underestimate the intuition of a dog or cat person and/or animal to recognize friend or foe on your veterinary team. Use this knowledge to your advantage to prevent tension by forming compatible relationships between team members, patients, and clients.

Being cat compatible extends beyond your team members to include the physical attributes of the veterinary hospital and the services offered. Check out The Catalyst Council³ for helpful tips to make your veterinary practice cat-friendly.

Some things about the physical set up of a veterinary practice are not cat-friendly and cannot be faked. Having a few chairs facing a different direction and labeling them for cat clients does not work as well as having a separate waiting area. Having exam rooms that all species go into is not as cat-friendly as separate rooms or the use of feline pheromone diffusers to help keep cats calm.

Having cat compatible services includes everything from medical wellness plans to marketing a feline-friendly atmosphere. It is known that canines are seen more often than felines. This creates a barrier for simply getting information about feline health into the hands of cat clients. In an effort to overcome this barrier, Dr. Maureen McElhinny of Green Valley Veterinary Hospital, asks her canine clients if there are other pets in the home. “If cats are found to be present, owners are educated that routine veterinary care is equally important – if not more so- for cats, as it is for dogs.” Do not think that educating clients about allergic dermatitis (a #1 medical condition in dogs, but a #9 in cats)⁴ covers your bases when it comes to feline health. Your team should have medical condition lists that are specifically compatible to dog or cat patients.

Do not fake being cat-friendly. The American Association of Feline Practitioners⁵ has a plethora of information to assist a practice fine-tune their level of compatibility for cats. Cat Compatible practices not only have different physical features that cater to cats, they also have trained their team members to focus on the

different medical concerns associated with cats (rather than one disease fits all species), and they have developed certain techniques to put their feline patients at ease (rather than depending on a wrestling and scruffing match). Your cat clients will notice the difference.

Client Connection

“Let cat owners know that you’ve learned a new, more gentle way of handling felines called ‘Fear FreeSM Veterinary Visits.’ With these anxiety and stress busting protocols and procedures, cats (and their owners) don’t fear a trip to the vet.” (Dr. Marty Becker)

What would make cat owners happy? Removing one of the primary obstacles of veterinary visits – wrestling with a fearful, anxious, stressed-out cat. Doing so means that you have reduced the top 3 reasons for avoiding a veterinary visit by 1 – that difficulty of transporting and wrestling a feisty feline through a veterinary visit. According to the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study⁴ 38% of cat owners get stressed thinking about taking their cat to see the veterinarian and 58% of cat owners think their cat hates going to the veterinarian. Changing that perception is paramount to cats receiving the medical care they out to have. It all starts by connecting with the cat client.

Client connections are 3-prong. It means marketing your services to cat owners, building the perception of value in those services, and bonding with the clients. For marketing, consider first getting your team certified in Fear FreeSM techniques. In addition to gaining knowledge and tips, you now have an arsenal of communication ideas. Post videos on you website on how to acclimate the cat to their transport carrier, and how certain techniques will make an obvious difference in the cat exam experience (just to name a few). Get your team to talk a client through the visit process from transporting the cat to the veterinary office, handling the cat through the exam, and being prepared for the next visit.

Build the client’s value perception by changing the exam room experience, allowing the client to focus on the needs of the cat instead of wrestling with the cat, and showing how much better medical care can be. Clients will see the positive effects on their pet, and clients will feel the difference in themselves after having a great experience in the vet office. They will be able to focus on what you are saying and understand the importance of subsequent visits.

Bonding with your clients is so much easier when a calm cat rests comfortably with a relaxed owner and veterinary team. Of course, you need to communicate medical needs of the cat and that often means having an effective reminder system. Dr. Ned Caldwell, of Deerfield Veterinary Hospital, suggests developing a reminder system that, coupled with Fear FreeSM experience, is a great way to stay connected with your clients – and it affords you the opportunity to keep the bonds between you strong.

Take some time to look at some reports from your practice management software system. Look up the cats that are past due for medical care – perhaps those whose vaccine series was never completed, those who are past due on vaccine boosters, and those who did not return for follow-up testing or treatments. Dr. Stuart Dalton of White Bear Animal Hospital knows the challenges of getting cats to the hospital, and he knows that “reducing the cat’s stress also reduces the pet owner’s stress and makes it more likely that the client will be willing to bring the cat to the hospital for more than just crisis management”. After a few months, review those metrics and see how much they have improved.

Champions for Cats

“If we want to help more [cats] in veterinary practice, we have to address the #1 reason cat owners don’t bring them in – They don’t believe they need it. The majority of cat owners say they would bring their kitties in, however, if they were sick, injured, or acting strange.”
(Karyn Gavzer, KG Marketing & Training, Inc.)

Who are the Cat Champions in your practice? You know, the ones who will help cat owners recognize what their cat needs, who will gain the trust of the cat client and foster open dialogue about disease prevention. Give your cat champions a project they can promote – feline health and wellness. Considering the statistic that only 40% of cat owners took their cat to the veterinarian⁴. Your team has an opportunity to connect with another 60% of cat owners in your area. Encourage your team to develop enhanced communications with your cat clients about diseases, preventative measures, and Fear FreeSM techniques for easier veterinary visits, etc.

Your Cat Champions can take over some of the social media postings by claiming their 'cat communication' days (and give the dogs their own dog days too, as well exotics, rodents, etc.). Your team's "cat people" can champion the cat cause – campaigning everything from kitten to senior, transporting to medicine, and everything in between.

Take a look at your practice management software system and look up the various medical codes for the 10 most common feline diseases as listed by sources such as The Veterinary Pet Insurance Company and Nationwide Pet Insurance (just to name a few). Championing the cause to monitor cats for urinary tract disease, periodontitis, and diabetes will give your social media platform a boost when it comes to speaking to the cat owner. In addition to diseases, add to the list of causes to champion any behavior and nutrition topics in order to present a well-rounded view that will cover any of your feline patients.

Do not stop there with your practice management system. Investigate a little deeper to identify those patients who have the diagnostic code but have not continued to receive medical care. Target some well-constructed reminders, consider hosting a lunch & learn for clients with diabetic cats or hyperthyroid cats. Monitor those codes for ongoing care, get a feel for what keeps cat clients up at night by the questions they pose at the lunch & learns, and look at ways to improve how your team communicates medical needs. Something that Timothy Burns, Hospital Administrator at Roaring Brook Veterinary Hospital, has found extremely helpful is to have team members do third reminder calls. This enables your Cat Champions to do what they are passionate about – explaining the importance of feline health care to your cat clients.

Change Management

The 4th C inserted here is not Cat specific – it applies to any initiative your practice attempts to implement. An easy way to make sure you are hitting all the bases is to follow Kotter's 8 Steps of Change:

1. Create urgency – just show your team the numbers, the number of cats past due on vaccinations or failing to come back for follow up tests or care
2. Form a coalition – find those Cat Champions and put them to work identifying gaps in feline care at your practice and what can help fill those gaps
3. Develop a vision & strategy – become Cat Compatible, learn Fear FreeSM techniques, map out a plan to train the team.
4. Communicate the vision – communicate to the team, your clients, even vendors and others in the community
5. Empower action – remove barriers, barriers that the team experiences and barriers that clients experience
6. Get quick wins – take a moment at team meetings to tell success stories and show how some metrics related to feline care are changing
7. Build on the change – use the momentum from those early, quick wins to continue championing cat care
8. Embed in the culture – reward the team, encourage them to look for more ways to be cat compatible, continue to connect with clients, and champion cat care

There is a problem with cat care – most cats do not get it even when it is readily available. Taking some time to assess the 3 C's of Cat Care at your veterinary practice could open the door for more cats to receive medical care at your practice – care that can improve the health of the cat, care that can have a positive impact on the cat client, and care that can expand business success. The 3 C's can enable your team to change the way they deliver care to cats.

References and Resources

¹ <http://www.statista.com/statistics/198102/cats-in-the-united-states-since-2000/>

² The AVMA Pet Demographic Study & Partners for Healthy Pets. Available at <http://www.pjac.org/sites/default/files/images/speakers/DeHaven2013T2T.pdf>

³The Catalyst Council. Available at <http://www.catalystcouncil.org/help/>

⁴Nationwide Reveals the 10 Most Common Medical Conditions for Dogs and Cats. March 31, 2016.

⁵American Association of Feline Practitioners. Available at <http://www.catvets.com/>