TITLE: Dealing with Behavior Issues –How to Start a Fight With a Client With Just 1 Sentence

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Them's Fightin Words

If you have ever attended a conference session on client service then you expect the material to be about what you should be doing to deliver great client service in your practice. The trouble is, all those ideas sound good at the seminar but just never seem to be implemented once you are back at work and being called to the front desk to settle a dispute with an irate client. Whatever happened to your plans to implement those great conference ideas? They ended up shoved in a desk drawer while you spent your time putting out fires.

Instead of telling the team what they SHOULD be doing, why not talk to the team about what they ARE doing – what they are doing to start the fights with the clients. Once the team STOPS doing the wrong behaviors, they can concentrate on all those great ideas of what they should be doing to kick up the service provided to clients.

The following are some common statements, many are unconscious, some are deliberate, but all of them kill your client service and make a client feel as if you are trying to make them angry and start a fight!

"Our Policy Is"

This is an easy way out of a sticky situation. Instead of trying to solve the issue at hand, it is far easier to fall back on some bureaucratic standard operating procedure (SOP). In reality, the team member saying this to a client either a) does not understand how to properly communicate procedures to a situation, or b) is ignoring the fact that the SOP does not apply to the situation.

What the client hears is "No, No, and No – I don't care what your problem is, I follow policies." How much better if the team member tells the client they understand the concern or issue (and reiterate the problem) and the practice has steps in place to provide the best care or service because it is for the health and/or safety of the pet or client. Instead, the team member jumps to "our policy is" instead of educating or informing the client. The client does not understand (they just hear "no") and a conflict ensues.

"We Have Been Really Busy"

The fighting words here – "We are not accessible or reachable." How many times have you heard a client tell the receptionist that no one ever called them back – only to hear your team jump to defend themselves and tell the client that their message was delivered but everyone has been really busy. What about a client attempting to make an appointment, but the practice is "really busy" and cannot see the pet. Perhaps the practice has some SOPs that are causing problems with getting back to clients – such as who receives reports, were medical notes properly documented to make it easier for another professional to speak with the client, or not having time set aside for the team to respond to client questions.

Check for barriers to your team for responding to clients on the spot, for barriers killing their ability to act upon a client service request. What other phrases can be used instead of "really busy" that is informative to the client while still making the client feel as though their concern is important? In the end, it does not matter how "busy" you are if you ignore the concerns of the pet owner. They will simply find someone not so busy.

"Press 1 for…Press 2 for…Repeat These Choices"

How easy is it for a client to do business with you? One metric to check this is called the Client Effort Score. It assesses how much effort a client must exert just to do business with you. How many hoops does the client have to jump through to get a medication refilled, make an appointment, or even get a copy of their pet's vaccine history? SOPs and technology are great, until they take common sense or human interaction out of the equation.

Be certain that your team is not over-relying on technology to the point of removing the human element from client interactions. Is the practice management software always correct and the client wrong? Check how the team sounds when they answer the phone or greet a client. When a client has an issue, does the receptionist sound like the phone message – you must do this, then that before we can see you. Does the team act as if the client is an interruption to their day, or is the team happy to see the client? Does the team sound mechanical? Or are they personable?

"That's Not My Job"

This statement is usually followed by, "I'll have to get….I'll see if someone is around who can…I'll leave a message for…." All the client hears is that their concern cannot be solved – and that you have incompetent people scheduled to work.

The first step to deal with this statement – is it really their job and they are simply trying to avoid doing it? Second step – is there an SOP dictating whose job it is and is that SOP making it difficult to service clients properly? Third – should it be this person's job (or everyone's job) and thus the training procedure needs reviewed and/or updated? Dealing with "not my job" involves looking at it from a couple of angles before making any changes.

It may also mean that it is time to look at your culture. If I client says there is poop on the front walk does the receptionist say, "It's not my job" and immediately calls the kennel – then ignores repeated reports because it is the kennel's job to clean up the outside walk? Culture can be killing client service and the perception of care your clients have about the practice every time they are faced with the "not my job" reply.

What Isn't Said – "I'm Sorry"

Why are we, in general, so afraid to say, "I'm sorry" or apologize for a service error? It seems as if an admission of guilt will open the door to some massive legal headache when it could easily open the door to service recovery. Rather than admitting guilt, we kill a relationship by arguing with a client and trying to put the blame everywhere and anywhere.

Apologies can reduce anger and improve communication with the client – which, in turn, may reduce the risk of legal claims. Teach the team the right way to apologize and how to offer corrections for errors, rather than excuses.

Recovering From Wrong Statements

Perception is about experience, the client's experience at your practice. Your practice should work at creating key impressions and experiences for your clients (Lee). Although you are a team, all it takes is for an individual on your team to fail to deliver to your client and a bad service report can easily surface on Yelp or Google

Turn around wrong statements by examining client interactions that went wrong. Tear the interaction apart into steps – steps just prior to the statement, during it and after it. Map out the steps and look for opportunities to create value, remove unnecessary steps (bureaucratic creep), re-sequence steps for convenience or educate the team on overlooked options (Bettencourt).

Schedule a brainstorming session with your team. Ask them to jot down statements they hear that seem to get clients riled up. Have the team come up with alternative statements. For instance: Instead of saying, "It's not my job," let the team discuss how to tell a client they are not the best person to take care of their request, and how they will redirect the request to the best person for a quick resolution. Instead of saying, "Our policy is" tell the client what you CAN do with an explanation. Your team most likely has discovered great ways of saying something and it would be beneficial to share those gems with everyone.

As you conduct your brainstorming sessions, consider these tips from the American Management Association (Everson) as your team develops great phrases:

- Keep your confidence (this is where roleplaying may help)
- Start with a phrase of regret (I'm sorry….")
- Then explain (Do not quote the policy, explain the reason. Tell the client why)
- Next, a positive phrase (Show enthusiasm with what you can do for the client)
- Offer empathy (Show the client you understand their position)
- Again, use a positive, helpful reply to solving the issue at hand
- Watch your body language and facial expression (confident, concerned, understanding)

In some cases, you may be able to develop your practice's own "Service Recover SOP" – identifying certain triggers, such as words or situations; and how the team can respond to the triggers, thus initiating an immediate service recovery rather than waiting to pass it off to a manager two days later.

References

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