

Puppies and kittens: bond early, bond for life

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Puppies and kittens are the lifeblood of any small animal practice and those crucial first encounters really can be make or break. Get it right and owners bond for the life of the pet; get it wrong and they will walk away for good.

The first visit to the vet with a new puppy or kitten is a big occasion for both the owner and the veterinary practice they have chosen.

This short window provides a golden opportunity to create bonded, compliant clients who will happily spend their pet pounds at your practice. But to reap these rewards, it is vital to have a tailored and consistent approach for both species.



PUPPIES

Kristie Faulkner is midlands operations manager at White Cross Vets. She holds a certificate in veterinary business management and, as an RVN with more than 18 years' experience in the veterinary sector, has clear views on how to bond with puppy owners.

"Who doesn't love a puppy? Well, if you gauge how well the veterinary profession treats those potential new clients over that initial enquiry telephone call and first visit, it may be not as many as you think," she said.

"If you are a pet owner yourself, think back to when you first got your new pup. How did you feel? Excited, totally in love, overwhelmed by the vast amount of information out there, let alone which was the correct information?"

"It is important to separate ourselves from the things that come naturally and take a long, hard look at how new pet parents feel when they first come into contact with our world."

But before you even start thinking about how to deal with these owners, it is important to ensure they want to bring their puppy to your practice in the first place.

"First you need to attract new pet parents," added Kristie. "For those without the luxury of a highly visible building, how hard are you marketing your practice and driving those all-important new babies through the door?"

"It is important to take a customer eye view of your external premises to ensure new puppy owners aren't worried to even enter. Dirty or untidy premises can put people off even considering making contact with an initial enquiry.

"The same goes for branding, colour schemes and online presence – what do these elements say about your practice?"

The next stage in maximising a practice's appeal to new owners is as simple as how the telephone is answered. People usually make first contact via telephone, even if it's only a speculative price-checking call.

"When a new pet owner contacts the surgery knowing he or she needs to get some vaccinations, how well do we get to know a little bit about the new addition to the family?" added Kristie.

"Unfortunately, this area can be lacking somewhat, with the resounding message that price checkers are just after the cheapest deal.

"They aren't, every customer on your database most probably contacted you with a price-related question because most need to know how much money they are taking about, but what they really need is an informed, interested and engaging person to talk to about their baby."

Of course, convincing clients to give your practice a try is only half the battle; all that effort could be wasted without a coordinated approach to ensure the client's expectations are met.

And, according to Kristie, pre-vaccination nurse appointments are a great way to start the process of bonding with clients for the life of their pet. She said: "Either scheduled as a welcome appointment, weigh and worm or timed to run just before the first vaccination appointment with the vet, the message and relationship with the entire team starts now.

"Continue to use your nursing team wisely, second vaccinations with the nurse enable the original messages to be cemented in the pet owner's mind as important ones, and those that must continue throughout the pet's life.

"New pet parents must feel they are valued as soon as they walk through the door and that means by a team who are expecting you, a team who acknowledge you immediately and a team who

seem genuinely interested in the new baby."

Health plans are a good way of ensuring puppy customers bond, but for someone to enter into a 12-month plan he or she has to feel your practice is worth committing to.

Kristie said: "Puppy parties are a fantastic way to continue the responsible pet ownership message, develop the nursing team relationship further and they make for great social media activity.

"Puppy packs are fine, but don't shove every leaflet produced by every Tom, Dick and Harry in there. Make the messages focused, timely and branded by your clinic, not various drug companies. This is also the stage to encourage insurance. Reducing barriers to care where possible and educating owners on the benefit of a reputable pet insurance company is key to ensuring they don't play the 'wait and see' game, especially in young susceptible puppies."

Kristie also recommends practices keep in touch with timely and relevant newsletters and use social media to make a fuss of any new pups that join your practice.

"But the best marketing is still word of mouth, so take a real, honest look at how your new puppy owners become aware of you, interact with you, and what help they have from you in becoming the very best pet owner they can be," she added.



KITTENS

Michael Edwards owns the Cardiff Cat Clinic where, for the past 13 years, he has built up a business that turns over more than £400,000pa. As a single species specialist, Michael only sees felines and believes many small animal vets are missing out by not putting a little extra thought into their approach to kittens and their owners.

"We are cat only, but for multi-species clinics wanting to get real about cats, they need to have a separate waiting room; I don't think a small barrier is enough. It is also preferable to have a separate entrance to the clinic for cats, a separate consulting room and a dedicated team for cats. Then you can share all the behind-house facilities such as ops and x-rays," he said.

The Cardiff Cat Clinic doesn't advertise, but, through recommendations, has grown to have more than 4,000 registered clients, with 1,800 of those active. Not bad for a one-man band operating from premises tucked away in the corner of a railway station car park on the outskirts of the city.

"Our growth is down to word of mouth, but as a result of cat owners recommending me, I am still registering four new clients every week."

Such a high rate of recommendations can be credited to Michael's meticulous approach to cats and their owners, based around his "six Cs": concierge, communication, caring, conscientious, competence and consistency.

Michael said: "The concierge element is all about the standard you have out front. In some cases owners may be a bit anxious, as it is their first pet, so it is important to set them at ease from the moment they step into the practice.

"This involves reception asking a few questions about the kitten, such as how long they have had it and where they got it from. That all happens before the client even comes to see me."

Unlike most practices, Michael offers 15-minute appointments to give clients the chance to ask any questions and to allow him to bond fully with the new owner.

He said: "The first five minutes of that first consult will be spent by me listening to them. That is the second C – communication.

"They come in and I ask them questions and I listen to their worries and concerns. At this stage the physical exam has not even started."

Once the exam starts, Michael moves on to the third C in his list by displaying his caring side.

"It starts with the handling; a lot of vets grab a cat by the scruff and drag it out of the basket, but I would never, ever do that," he said.

"We handle the cats well. This should be the most pleasurable consultation of the day, you have a lovely little kitten – it's not a pit bull. The kitten is weighed and we will talk about how long they have had it and I will confirm from its weight if I think the age is accurate.

"I will then do a complete physical exam; I won't miss a thing and then I will talk about worming, de-fleaing, vaccination, microchip, neutering and diet. We will go through the lot and that's the conscientious part – the fourth C."

Michael ensures he never misses anything out and doesn't rely on simply handing out leaflets or a pack before telling clients to go home and "read the literature".

He added: "I am there for them to ask those questions and give that advice – that is what the vet is for. I will also find something memorable to say about a kitten. For example, 'it's a ginger female and only 30 per cent are ginger'. There is always something to say a client will take away with them and remember.

"Competence about the way the exam is conducted is another C. You don't have to be brilliant, but

you have to be thorough."

For Michael, the final – and arguably most important C – is consistency. If a vet weighs a kitten once then it must be weighed every time it is brought in. This demonstrates the enthusiasm and a consistency of approach cat clients demand from their vet.

He added: "If you are examining a kitten at 6pm, then you have to be as enthusiastic, bright and perky as you are first thing in the mornings.

"That kitten could be with your practice for 15 years if you get this right. I want them to leave the consultation thinking, 'why would I go anywhere else?'"

For the Cardiff Cat Clinic, following this process is the foundation of its success. "If you haven't got those bonded clients you cannot just grow by putting prices up once a year," Michael added.

"You need fresh clients because you are going to lose clients through natural causes and, unless the population of your client base is dynamic, you are going to be in trouble.

"New clients are vital, and that means getting those consults right is vital too."