



The Art of Attracting and Retaining New Clients

Turning a New Client into a Loyal Client Has Myriad Benefits—Including Financial Ones

by Jen Reeder

AS A DOG TRAINER FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS, Annie Phenix, CPDT-KA, has high standards when it comes to her pets' healthcare. So when the bestselling author of *The Midnight Dog Walkers* moved with her husband and three dogs from Colorado to Utah, she prioritized finding a top-notch animal hospital for their animals, which proved to be quite stressful.

"I'm extremely picky," she said. "I want my veterinarian to be my partner—my dogs' partner—in their healthcare."

She started her search online, scanning for credentials and accreditations like AAHA. When her new community didn't offer promising prospects, she looked farther away to Park City for a practice that would meet her criteria. She wanted to find a veterinary practice with a nonchaotic lobby and veterinarians who would listen to her concerns if she noticed a change in her pets' behavior, be accessible, and allow her to stay with her senior dogs for vaccinations and other routine procedures to reduce their stress.

After visiting two practices that failed to impress, she started to worry that she wouldn't find an animal hospital where she'd feel comfortable taking her dogs. Luckily, she then visited AAHA-accredited White Pine Veterinary Clinic in Park City, Utah, where she said she "grilled" Magali Lequient, DVM, who listened to her concerns and validated them. It was a perfect fit.

"I adore her," Phenix said. "She's one of the smartest vets I've ever gone to."

Soon after the move, Phenix's senior border collie, Echo, developed mobility issues that didn't go away. Rather than dismissing the issue as old dog vestibular syndrome, Lequient recommended a computerized tomography (CT) scan that revealed a brain tumor—and referred Phenix to specialists who saved the dog's life.

Now Phenix has nothing but praise for Lequient and the team at White Pine Veterinary Clinic and refers her dog training clients to the hospital "all the time."

Make the Effort

Putting in initial effort to make new clients feel comfortable at your practice can be well worth your time when they become loyal clients. These "VIPs" don't just come in every year or so for vaccinations but

follow recommendations for preventive care, nutrition, surgeries, and pain management, ultimately helping pets as well as your practice's bottom line.

Lequient said she loves building relationships with people like Phenix who want the best for their pets. She said the first step before meeting a new client is to review medical records if possible.

"While discussing the medical history, the client will often refer to previous experiences at veterinary clinics. That is always a good time to inquire about what they liked and didn't like, so we can tailor our care and communication," she said.

When meeting new-to-the-area clients, the team shares information about health hazards particular to the region—such as rattlesnakes and porcupines—and suggestions for local groomers, trainers, boarding and daycare facilities (including their own), dog recreation areas, hiking trails, and even ski runs. They do all they can to build trust with pet owners, which is rewarded by clients who are diligent about their pets' health and wellbeing.

In fact, the practice's owner, Dave McDonald, DVM, has found the "80/20" rule applies to the clientele.

"VIP clients may only be 20% of our client base, but they may provide as much as 80% of our revenue, so anything we can reasonably do to help them provide for their pets will significantly help increase revenue," he said. "If a client is comfortable in your practice and passionate about their pet's healthcare, they will follow through on the veterinarian's recommendations."

He added that his team strives to make visits as stress free as possible for both humans and animals because then they are more likely to come in earlier with health concerns instead of waiting until the pet's condition worsens. The entire staff works to make clients feel comfortable and welcome.

"Many of our clients develop a relationship with the reception staff so that they are happy to come in to buy refill prescriptions or food even without their pet, and [they are] less likely to seek those items online," he said, noting, "Even in this digital age with websites, Google

The Power of Word-of-Mouth Advertising

Dana Ellis, practice manager at AAHA-Accredited Neartown Animal Clinic in Houston, Texas, said the practice gets twice as many online referrals as those referred by a loyal client, but client referrals stay longer and spend more.

"As of January 2019, we have retained 45% of the client referrals from 2014 and only about 20% of the online referred clients. In addition, the average spent in the clinic from 2014 is about 18% more with the client referrals than the online referrals," she said. "The trust we build with a loyal client seems to transfer to their referral."

reviews, Yelp, etc., word of mouth is hands down our number one source of new clients.”

Heather Loenser, DVM, senior veterinary officer for AAHA, said it’s “completely natural” for people who consider their pets to be family members to feel nervous about finding a new animal hospital when they move. In fact, if a new client seems anxious because they want high-quality care for their pet, odds are good they have the potential to become a VIP.

“They aren’t afraid to invest in their pets’ health, which obviously benefits the pet as well as the veterinarian, who has the chance to practice best medicine,” she said. “From a financial standpoint, it’s clearly beneficial as well.”

Pay It Forward

She noted that referrals go both ways: If a loyal client is moving to a new area, suggest they start their search with the AAHA-Accredited Hospital Locator, an online tool for finding AAHA-accredited practices. When the new practice requests the pet’s veterinary records, she recommends calling the practice manager and mentioning something along the lines of, “This is a VIP client,” or “This client wants the best for their pet.”

“As hard as it is to see my VIP clients move away, I do get a lot of satisfaction in contacting the new hospital, speaking to the practice manager, and mentioning how fantastic these people are. It’s good for the client to feel like they’ve been carefully transitioned to another hospital, and it’s a great way to build collegiality across the country when one veterinary team takes the time to touch base with another,” she said. “Knowing a client will want the top level of care for their pet will help make communication as smooth as possible. Some clients can become confused when they’re offered several courses of treatment. Suggesting the best course of action—and framing it as such—won’t scare off a potential VIP, even if it’s expensive. Rather, they’ll feel comforted that their pet can receive top-notch care.”

Will Draper, DVM, co-owner of The Village Vets, which has three locations in metropolitan Atlanta, said whenever clients ask, “Where are we going to find someone like you when we move?” he always advises, “Your first step is to find an AAHA-accredited practice.”



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He and his wife/practice co-owner, Fran Tyler, DVM, have built quite a reputation for their brand. The Village Vets boasts more than 100 longtime employees, including 23 veterinarians, and more than 20,000 Facebook followers. Draper said the key to their success is inspired by his wife’s mantra, “Always put yourself in their shoes,” and his favorite Booker T. Washington quote, “Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way.”

One uncommon policy of The Village Vets is to not charge extra for late-night emergency room (ER) visits. After witnessing a woman in the emergency room debating whether to treat her dog immediately or to wait until the morning when the prices dropped, Draper told her there would be no extra charge and immediately enacted the new policy. When the practice sent an email to their clients announcing the change, some people thought there was a catch. Once assured there wasn’t, word-of-mouth spread, and the ER experienced an influx of patients at night.

The couple also decided early on not to charge long-term clients for euthanasia. During the partial government shutdown earlier this year, they offered a 30% discount on veterinary services to furloughed government employees. They also spend money on paying their staff well, which encourages them to go the extra mile for clients, and on high-end equipment.

But what comes around goes around. As Draper quipped, “Anybody who walks into a Village Vets practice can tell we’re not starving.”

Build Loyalty Your Way

Michael Hargrove, DVM, MBA, CVA, owner of AAHA-accredited North Shore Veterinary Hospital in Duluth, Minnesota, and consultant for Summit Veterinary Advisors, has invested heavily in his practice. Recently, he remodeled the hospital to incorporate Fear FreeSM tenets, including eliminating the waiting room and adding exam rooms with sound insulation, designating rooms for cats with big windows and overlooking cubbies, and creating a spa-like atmosphere (there's a fireplace at the front entrance, for starters!). Everyone at the practice is Fear Free certified.



“Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way.”

—BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

Five years ago, Hargrove purchased a custom truck and began offering mobile veterinary services, including at-home euthanasia. The only additional fee is a \$40 local driving fee, or \$55 for clients who are farther afield. While house calls constitute a small portion of revenue, they are greatly appreciated by people with skittish or injured animals who are difficult to move, and the truck is essentially a giant billboard for the practice. Since September 2013, North Shore Veterinary Hospital has grown from a \$1.8 million per year practice to \$2.8 million per year.

“I want our brand to count for something,” he said. “I want people to say, ‘No matter who I see when I go there, I have a positive experience.’ It’s bonding clients to the practice, not just [to] individual doctors or staff members but to the practice as a whole . . . that creates a much stronger business and a better long-term outcome because we have more loyal clients.”

Summer Burke-Irmiter, MBA, hospital administrator and owner of AAHA-accredited Adobe Animal Hospital, which has two locations, in Los Altos and Los Gatos, California, said offering tours of the practices helps set potential new clients at ease, which is important with so many people moving to the Bay Area. In fact, Adobe is an “open hospital,” which means clients are allowed to go wherever their pets go, even to the back to watch surgeries. The hospital experience manager (who is also a certified veterinary technician) leads clients on tours and helps keep them company when they observe procedures being performed on their pets.

“Things that owners can imagine are 10 times worse than what could ever happen,” she said. “The owner can see everything that we do and the work that goes into their pet’s treatments, and they can feel like they’re a part of the hospital in the process.”

She said the 24-hour practice in Los Altos sees about 300 new patients each month, and she attributes a lot of that to the overwhelmingly positive reputation of the brand’s open hospital policy. While prices are higher because more time is spent with patients, clients see the value, whether understanding why dentals cost what they do—one dentist was delighted to see staff using the same equipment on his dog that he uses on human patients—or witnessing the skills of the team during surgery.



Adobe is an open hospital, which means clients are allowed to go wherever their pets go, even to the back to watch surgeries.

“You bond totally differently with a client when they’ve been sitting in your ICU literally for 10 hours straight,” she said. “You get a different type of loyalty.”

Dana Ellis, practice manager at AAHA-accredited Neartown Animal Clinic in Houston, Texas, said the hospital is in a competitive area experiencing growth, so the team tries to acquire as many new clients as possible. When new apartment complexes crop up nearby, Neartown gives landlords information packets about the practice to share with tenants with pets. They also partner with local animal shelters like the Houston SPCA to offer a free first exam and parasite screening to people who adopt a pet.

The practice shares links to trusted veterinary websites like AAHA on its website to build trust with clients and help get them in the door instead of turning to Dr. Google. Ellis said the goal for the first impression is that the practice is “sparkling and odor free.”

“The ultimate goal is for a new client to become a loyal or lifelong client,” she said. “Retaining clients is where the magic happens.”

They try to create that magic with extra touches, such as submitting rebates on behalf of clients for medications like NexGard, Frontline, Heartgard, and Previcox to help save them time and money.

Margaret Nathurst, office manager of AAHA-accredited Small Animal Hospital in Fort Myers, Florida, said the city—one of the fastest growing in America—sees a lot of “snowbirds” who migrate from colder states to Florida for the winter. The practice offers \$1 nose-to-tail exams for new clients and sends welcome cards after the initial visit—and retains around 80% of new clients.

She attributes that success to low staff turnover—a kennel manager recently retired after 50 years there—and a team that feels genuine compassion for pet owners, which can be particularly important with so many elderly clients. The practice offers a dropoff service for busy professionals and tries not to keep anyone waiting for appointments. But ultimately, Nathurst said, there’s a tried-and-true way the team cultivates loyalty in clients: “We treat people like family.” ✧



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder used the AAHA-Accredited Hospital Locator when she and her family moved from southwest Colorado to Denver last year.



**AAHA-ACCREDITED
HOSPITAL LOCATOR**

When a long-time client is moving away, be sure to suggest they use the AAHA-Accredited Hospital Locator tool (aaha.org/locate) to help find a new practice. It’s a good way to discuss AAHA accreditation and gives them a sound place to begin their search, according to Heather Loenser, DVM, senior veterinary officer for AAHA.