

# Trends

magazine

A stylized illustration of a hand holding a silver tray. On the tray is a glass dome. Inside the dome, the words 'HIGH TOUCH' are written in a bold, teal, sans-serif font. The hand is yellow, and the tray is dark grey. The background is a solid red color.

## HIGH TOUCH

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# Highlighting High Touch





## High-touch customer service creates outstanding veterinary practices

by Jen Reeder

THE TEAM AT AAHA-ACCREDITED MACUNGIE ANIMAL HOSPITAL in Macungie, Pa., works hard to provide extraordinary customer service. When it's raining, client service representatives offer to towel-dry dogs or cat carriers and escort clients and pets to their cars under an umbrella. If a pet owner forgets his or her sunglasses or keys, a staff member will drive the item to the owner's house; the staff also uses the practice's delivery car to drop off pets, medication, food, and even cremains—free of charge. Everyone who walks into the “reception area” (specifically not a “waiting room”) is greeted and offered a bottle of water and a seat near a TV, where they can relax with their pet.

These are prime examples of how to provide “high-touch customer service” at an animal hospital, which can strengthen the client–practice bond, as well as your bottom line.

“High-touch practice means to me an elevated level of customer service—interacting, communicating, and, most importantly, respecting your clients,” said Nancy Soares, VMD, owner and medical director of Macungie Animal Hospital. “It's a value-added service to make their life a little more convenient in this crazy hustle-and-bustle world we live in.”



Soares said offering high-touch service has been critical to the success of the practice, which she opened on July 7, 2007. Back then, she was the practice's sole veterinarian, seeing patients for 12 hours a day and then making herself available after work to clients as well. Now she has a team of 29 employees, including four other veterinarians (one also performs canine acupuncture), a veterinary chiropractor, and a certified canine massage therapist.

"We're growing exponentially," Soares said. "Our new client numbers are off the charts."

One unusual high-touch service at Macungie Animal Hospital is the Sacred Star Pet Hospice Program. Soares is the medical director for the program, and she works with a hospice care nurse to help clients with terminal pets.

"We'll do assessments at home—sometimes it's a veterinarian, sometimes it's a nurse—and we guide them," Soares said. "It's key for them because end-of-life care is so often missed in veterinary medicine."

In one instance, a client called to schedule a euthanization for her golden retriever, who had stopped eating for two days. However, Soares and the hospice nurse went to the woman's home and discovered the dog's bowl was just too far away—the dog didn't want to walk all the way to the kitchen because of her arthritis. They moved the bowl next to the dog, and she inhaled her food. As a result, the dog lived for several more months.

"When you're so close to your pet, sometimes you just don't see the obvious," Soares said, adding that other adjustments can include adding rubber-backed throw rugs or changing a pet's bedding.

When clients need to come to Macungie Animal Hospital to discuss a terminal diagnosis or euthanize a pet, they meet with staff in Ginger's Rainbow Room. Often clients will bring an air mattress and sleep in the soothingly decorated room while their pet is hospitalized or return after the pet's death to drink a cup of coffee and read a magazine in the room as a way to feel close to their pet as they cope with their grief.

"That was an important part of real estate within my business that I needed to have for the comfort of clients and [for them] to express their gratitude for their bond that

they've had with their pet, to thank that pet for everything they've given to each other over their lives," Soares said. "It's a rather unique room."

She said the pet- and customer-centric philosophy of the practice undoubtedly contributed to Macungie Animal Hospital being named the 2013 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year.

"When you live by your culture and your philosophy and you carry that through, and you couple that with the exceptional standards of care that AAHA has provided us with, you can't miss," Soares said.

### **The wow factor**

Susan Solovic, bestselling author of *It's Your Biz*, said customers in any industry appreciate high-touch customer service with a wow factor.

"In today's marketplace, where you call and get an answering service and you have to listen to 15 different selections and hit the right button, and if you get sidetracked you have to start all over again, it's really just a wonderful feeling to have someone recognize you as an individual that they really care about and that they're taking time to do something special for," Solovic said.

She said a primary advantage to high-touch service is it creates loyal customers. For example, in the restaurant industry, it can be difficult for independently owned restaurants to compete with chains, so owners and managers can learn the names of regular customers, greet them by name, offer them a special table, anticipate their drink order, and send out the chef with a little treat to sample.

"When you have that kind of experience, you can go there one evening and have a bad experience—maybe the food was a little off or something—and it won't matter because you're a loyal customer. You're not going to give up that special VIP treatment," Solovic said. "All of us want to feel special—I don't care what stage of life you're in or what economic group you're in."

She said technology like customer relationship management (CRM) software can help keep track of a customer's name, likes and dislikes, birthdays, anniversaries, and other information to provide personalized customer service. And clients will value it.

“That extra little bit of work that you do to really massage and engage the customer is going to pay off tremendously to your bottom line,” Solovic said. “People will always pay more for what they value.”

While Solovic believes the advantages of offering high-touch service outweigh the disadvantages, she said there can be some risk involved with higher costs, and clients can start to expect a very high level of service that must be met to maintain the relationship. Still, she feels giving high-touch service is absolutely a potential benefit to veterinarians.

### Beyond the practice walls

Michelle Forgy, DVM, co-owns AAHA-accredited Pinnacle Animal Hospital (PAH) in San Jose, Calif., with Andrea Moore, DVM. Forgy said creating a positive customer experience through high-touch service was the driving force when they opened PAH in July of 2012.

“Our mission from the get-go was to create a hospital where both clients and patients feel welcome and taken care of,” Forgy said. “We know that no one looks forward to coming to the vet. Clients are worried about their pet’s health, and the costs associated with coming to the vet are also on their minds. We hoped that, at a minimum, clients would leave our practice feeling we did everything we could to make the experience as pleasant and stress-free as possible.”

That high-touch service extends beyond the practice’s walls as well. Forgy’s business partner Moore said all five PAH veterinarians make themselves available to clients outside of normal office hours via email, texting, Facebook messaging, or cell phone calls, depending on their personal preference.

“Health problems don’t stop at 8 p.m., so our clients appreciate having someone to contact for at least a few more hours in the evening,” Moore said.

To build on this, Moore said the practice is creating the position of a client care concierge. The job will be done by a staff member with a strong veterinary technician background who will oversee end-to-end client care and essentially be the point person between the client and the medical team (though veterinarians will still be available, as before).

“He will be able to call clients to let them know their pet is heading into surgery and even call during and right after surgery with updates. He can text pictures of pets as they recover or go out for their first post-op walk,” Moore said. “If a client needs to take their pet to a specialist or emergency clinic urgently, he can facilitate getting records there and call the client to make sure they have arrived. With a medical background, he will also be able to field those phone calls about medical questions that perhaps the client services staff wouldn’t feel comfortable answering.”



AAHA-accredited Pinnacle Animal Hospital co-owners Andrea Moore, DVM, (left) and Michelle Forgy, DVM, with hospital cat, Sheldon.



Andrea Moore, DVM, co-owner of AAHA-accredited Pinnacle Animal Hospital in San Jose, Calif., takes a picture of a patient, Katsu, to text to his owners on the day he is having surgery.



AAHA-accredited Macungie Animal Hospital's delivery car, which is used to deliver pet food, medications, or the pets themselves to clients.

She said this should have a huge impact on clients bonding with the practice. Co-owner Forgy agrees.

“Forming personal connections with clients is what makes our job so rewarding,” Forgy said. “We want clients to turn to us first when they have concerns because that is what bonds them to our practice.”

It's a smart move: The 2014 AAHA State of the Industry report, which distilled the results of a survey AAHA commissioned with IDEXX, showed that a strong client–practice bond is one of the key components to a successful veterinary practice. The comprehensive survey of animal hospitals found that “consistent outgrowers”—practices that achieved greater than 10 percent revenue growth for 2 consecutive years—worked to strengthen that bond as well as the one between the practice and the patient, the pet and the owner, and veterinarians and staff.

Mike Erickson, PhD, vice president and general manager for information management at IDEXX Laboratories Inc., said the four bonds are “mutually reinforcing.”

“This is the essential chemistry that really enables a hospital to be successful,” Erickson said. “The research brings evidence to a whole bunch of very tangible things that animal hospitals can do to separate good from great, if you will.”

For example, the survey found that consistent outgrowers are more likely to strengthen the client–practice bond by investing in community events to build their local

reputation, use outside client marketing software, offer care payment plans, share something after every visit to demonstrate value (such as a report card), forward book the next appointment (i.e., schedule the next preventive care visit before the client leaves the hospital), and follow up after a client visit via phone or email.

“At the end of the day, it's the client that has to bring the pet in, it's the client that has to open up their checkbook or take out their credit card. So that experience is incredibly important, and obviously when the experience really becomes a bond, then it sort of transcends ‘What does it cost?’”

Erickson said forward booking presents a \$1 billion opportunity to the veterinary industry because only about 5 percent of veterinary hospitals forward book (versus at least 80 percent of dental offices). He said simply asking clients to schedule their next appointment before they leave increases preventive care compliance, which in turn leads to additional appropriate treatment services.

“What's the worst thing that could happen? The client could say, ‘I don't want to book it now,’” Erickson said. “Any appointment that you're able to forward book is going to have much, much higher compliance than otherwise. So it's a very worthwhile thing to do.”

He said helping a client bond with his or her pet also increases the client–practice bond, because people want to be good pet parents. Thus, sharing reliable information on a practice website, such as free resources from AAHA or IDEXX's *PetHealthNetwork.com*, can help veterinarians edge out “Dr. Google.”

“It's a win-win—it really is,” Erickson said. “If you're helping your clients to be better pet parents and have stronger bonds with their pets, they will reward you for that.”

### **Talk is not cheap**

Naturally, communication is essential to growing the client–practice bond through high-touch customer service. Zack Mills, DVM and owner of AAHA-accredited Tiger Tails Animal Hospital in Duluth, Ga., learned this firsthand by spending about 15 years working in the industry for companies like Merial before returning to veterinary practice in 2012. He said he's seen a need for veterinarians to offer increased communication about what they're doing during exams.



“Every veterinarian can do a great exam in a minute and a half,” Mills said. “But if the clients do not know what we’re doing, all they know is, ‘It cost me \$200 for a rabies shot.’”

Therefore, Mills invested in additional employees so that when he does an exam he is joined in the room by a technician and an assistant. He can take his time and explain to the client what he’s checking—“Can I feel the margins of the liver? Can I palpate the kidneys without any discomfort?”—and while he’s updating the client, an assistant can enter the results and any client feedback in the pet’s medical record. That way, Mills never has to turn his back on a client to type data into a computer, and his clients see the value in what they’re paying for.

“You’re taking great care of the pet—that’s a given,” he said. “But high-touch practice to me means you’re also taking great care of the client, and you’re communicating with that client.”

Mills and his wife, Susan, who worked in corporate communications before they opened Tiger Tails, have largely hired support staff with excellent people skills rather than veterinary experience (apart from the medical team). Mills said hospital protocols can be learned, but it’s difficult to teach someone how to get along with people.

“When I interview people, I don’t want somebody who tells me, ‘I love animals.’ I know you love animals—you wouldn’t have done this job if you didn’t love animals,” he said. “I want you to tell me that you love working with people.”

To that end, they hired a former flight attendant first for reception and then as a community outreach coordinator. She arranges presentations, open houses, and a veterinary summer camp for kids, handles the practice’s participation in town festivals, and manages an active Facebook page with fun stuff like photos of puppies.

“I end up having more employees than your average clinic would have, but it’s more touch,” Mills said.

Tiger Tails offers wellness plans as well as daycare and boarding; clients can drop off pets at their convenience before a scheduled appointment.

“I’d much rather a dog be dropped off in the morning so we can start the treatment for vomiting and diarrhea than... waiting for the first appointment available that afternoon,” Mills said.

Mills said the practice is already successful thanks to offering high-touch customer service. Since his clients are happy, he’s having fun and is ready to keep going for another 20 years even though he’s a self-proclaimed “old guy” at 57.

“The more that you can spend time talking with that pet owner, the happier that pet owner’s going to be. And you know what? In the long run, the more you’re going to go back to liking and loving practice,” Mills said. “If you’re going to make changes, if you’re going to build a new practice, if you’re going to make improvements to the practice, now’s the time to do it.” ✱

## For More Information

- Macungie Animal Hospital: [macungieanimalhospital.com](http://macungieanimalhospital.com)
- Susan Solovic, THE Small Business Expert: [susansolovic.com](http://susansolovic.com)
- Pinnacle Animal Hospital: [pinnacleevets.com](http://pinnacleevets.com)
- AAHA 2014 State of the Industry FAQs: [aaha.org/public\\_documents/professional/resources/aaha\\_state\\_of\\_the\\_industry.pdf](http://aaha.org/public_documents/professional/resources/aaha_state_of_the_industry.pdf)
- AAHA pet-owner information: [aaha.org](http://aaha.org)
- IDEXX free resource for veterinarians: [pethealthnetwork.com](http://pethealthnetwork.com)
- Tiger Tails Animal Hospital: [tigertailsanimalhospital.com](http://tigertailsanimalhospital.com)



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is a proud member of both the Dog Writers Association of America and the Cat Writers' Association.