

Practical Guide to Veterinary Hospital Management

Front Office Procedures Part I

Veterinary staff members may have chosen their career because they enjoy working with animals, but the success of a veterinary hospital depends largely on the staff's skill in serving the needs of people. The hospital manager must therefore ensure the following:

- Telephone calls are being handled in a courteous, efficient, and professional manner.
- Appointments are scheduled so that clients can be served promptly when they arrive at the facility.
- Clients are treated courteously by the staff at the hospital.
- The waiting area is as pleasant as possible.
- The staff and the clients understand hospital policies.

This article will discuss methods of communication and how to handle difficult situations.

Telephone Use

The telephone is unquestionable the most important instrument in the hospital. It is the source of nearly all of the facility's business and is the first contact that clients have with the hospital. Uncontrolled, the telephone can be the facilities worst enemy and the most serious single cause of client dissatisfaction. The hospital manager must therefore pay careful attention to how the staff uses the telephone.

Telephone Equipment

Reducing Busy Signals

The facility must have enough incoming telephone lines; and the telephone system should be set up so that if one line is busy, the incoming call will automatically be connected with an unused line. If the phones seem to be busy most of the time, ask the telephone company to prepare a report of the facility's telephone usage. The telephone company can measure telephone usage and how many callers receive busy signals. If many callers receive busy signals, the hospital management should consider installing one or more additional incoming lines. To determine whether the facility can make better use of its phone lines by directing certain types of calls (e.g., owners checking on hospital patients) to certain time periods in the day, the hospital staff can measure telephone usage by maintaining a log of incoming and outgoing calls for a test period.

A telephone line that is not publicized to clients can be used for outgoing calls. This line would eliminate tying up incoming lines for outgoing calls.

Never have more telephone lines than the person responsible for answering them can handle. No client appreciates a continual busy signal, but a busy signal may be preferable to getting no answer. If heavy incoming calls occur only a certain times, it may be possible to use the facilities outside answering service (if it has one) for those times. Of course, the alternative

is to assign more staff to answer the telephones.

Location of Phones

The location of the telephones is an important consideration. Telephones should be located near the appointment books. Telephones should also be installed in areas where the veterinarians and staff can talk without excessive noise or interruption. The veterinarians should decide whether telephones should be installed in examination rooms. I believe that telephones should be close to the examination rooms but not in them.

Other Equipment

Many sophisticated and automated telephone instruments and services are available from telephone companies and other sources. Many of them, such as intercoms, should be a part of the telephone installation in most animal hospital. Do not, however, allow the system to become so automated that the personal contact with the client making the incoming call is lost. Study carefully what is available, determine what the hospital's needs and policies will be, and purchase or rent only what is required.

Answering the Telephone

Who Should Answer?

The staff members who answer the telephone should be carefully chosen. A pleasant, confident, and understandable voice on the telephone can be an excellent way to gain new clients and keep the old clients satisfied. When choosing staff members for positions that involve answering the telephone, the hospital manager should

consider each staff member's ability to project an appropriate image.

How Should the Phone Be Answered?

When possible, the telephone should be answered by the third ring. Answerers should identify the hospital and themselves as follows: "This is the ABC Animal Hospital, Mary speaking, may I help you?" The personal identification is extremely important; after it is given, the client is speaking to a person and not a hospital. This gives the client an immediate relationship with the staff.

Putting Clients on Hold

When the staff must answer multiple lines that have hold buttons, some simple but important rules must be made and followed. First, *never* put clients on hold before they have had a chance to mention their problem. If the problem is an emergency, it should be dealt with promptly. Second, *never* leave anyone on hold for longer than 30 seconds. To train new staff members, you may want to place a timer near the telephone to prevent longer waits. And third, the staff member should write down the name of the caller when putting him or her on hold. That way, the staff member will be less likely to forget about the call and will be able to remember the caller's name.

Office Telephone Answering Policy

Routine Calls

The hospital manager should establish a list of pertinent details pertaining to how to answer the telephone, what information to get, how to record it, and whatever other

information is deemed important. The manager should also develop a policy on how certain calls (e.g., emergencies, personal calls, pet health questions, progress reports, and business calls) are to be handled.

What Not to Say

Many times the same thing said in different ways conveys different meaning to the caller. In one of her *Telephone Doctor* series of videotapes on proper telephone use, Nancy Friedman talks of the five forbidden phrases and how to avoid them. The forbidden phrases are as follows:

- I don't know.
- We don't do that.
- You'll have to...
- Just a second.
- No we don't.

Ms Friedman suggests that the following phrases be substituted for the forbidden phrases:

- Let's find out.
- Here's what you do.
- You'll need to...
- That may take a few minutes.
- Any positive alternative to "No we don't."

Emergency Telephone Service

The hospital may have an answering service or an automatic answering machine to answer the telephone when the hospital is closed. Before hiring an answering service, the hospital manager should seek recommendations from other users of the service.

The manager should periodically call the hospital number and check the responses that clients are receiving.

The results may not be satisfying. The hospital manager should expect the service to render the same telephone service and courtesy that are given by the hospital staff. If the manager is dissatisfied with the answering service's performance, he or she may try to improve it by speaking to the manager of the service or (if necessary) change services.

Many automatic answering machines are sophisticated and will become more so. If the hospital uses an answering machine, the manager should ensure that the message the client hears is understandable. The caller must be given the same options that he or she would have if the call were being answered by the hospital staff. For example, instructions on how to obtain emergency treatment must be given.

Implementing Telephone Policies

The facility manager has a right to expect that the staff members follow the rules and policies developed for the hospital - especially the rules and policies pertaining to telephone use. The manager should develop the policies, publish them in the hospital's policies and procedures manual, and monitor the staff members' telephone conversations periodically. The hospital manager should occasionally call the hospital number to find out how calls are being handled. In addition, questions about telephone answering and etiquette should be included in client satisfaction surveys.

APPOINTMENT SCHEDULING

The difference between a controlled and efficient practice and a chaotic one lies in the execution of a smooth appointment system. The key to providing a smooth appointment system will be the appointment book and how it is used. Some practices may use a computer for appointment scheduling. The same principles should apply whether the appointment scheduling is done manually or by computer.

Choosing an Appointment Book

I recommend that each hospital develop its own schedule forms based on the number of doctors and the time to be allotted to each patient. An appointment schedule should achieve the following objective:

- Organize appointments realistically
- Keep clients from having to wait
- Leave room for emergencies
- Identify special requests or circumstances
- Be large enough to write in
- Show when the veterinarian will be available (in the case of a hospital with more than one veterinarian, it should show when each is available)
- Provide for efficient use of personnel and facilities by not allowing too much nonproductive time
- Be located near the telephone as well as the client reception area.

Making the Appointment

When scheduling an appointment, the staff member should write down the caller's name and telephone number and the name of the patient. This information enables the staff member to find the patient's record if the animal has been to the facility. If the patient is new, the staff member

should get enough information to prepare a record card.

The staff member should find out what service is being requested and estimate how much time will be required. Is the appointment for a new puppy or kitten or for a bird or exotic animal? These patients typically require more than the usual amount of time. Has the caller requested a particular veterinarian." Can a technician perform the requested service?

Appointment Problems

The following problems often complicate scheduling:

- *No-shows*. These clients are usually habitual offenders. The staff should keep a notation on the files of these clients and make a reminder call on the day of the appointment.
- *Walk-ins*. Clients without appointments should never be served before a waiting client who has an appointment. Try not to turn unscheduled clients away, but do not upset the appointment schedule to accommodate them. Ask them politely to make an appointment for their next visit.
- *Early arrivals*. Clients may arrive early because they had to wait for their appointment during a previous visit. An unusually large number of established clients showing up early for their appointments may indicate an appointment scheduling problem.
- *Clients dropping off or picking up patients*. If these clients must talk to the doctor, they should be given regular appointments ahead of time or spaces should be left in the appointment schedule to accommodate them.

The appointment schedule should be reviewed at least daily, and the staff should try to correct potential difficulties before problems arise. The hospital manager should review the scheduling format periodically and make changes as required. The staff should not have to learn to live with a bad system.

RECEPTION OF CLIENTS & PATIENTS

Without clients, the hospital has no patients and therefore no business. In most small animal practices, the clients' first contact with the practice will be with the receptionist. A new client will make some preliminary conclusions about the practice within the first two to five minutes of contact with the reception area. The manager's success in the choice and training of the receptionist and the effectiveness of the materials provided to explain hospital services and policies to the client in the reception area largely determine how successful those few minutes are.

A client who has been to the hospital before returns because he or she was content with the service provided during previous visits. Although the first impression is not as important to an established client, it is no less important that this client be treated with the same courtesy and concern as is a new client; otherwise, he or she may decide to make this visit the last.

Owner and Pet Registration Form

Each new client should be asked to provide information required by the hospital to complete its records. This information should include at least the following:

- Name and address

- Spouse's name
- Telephone numbers (home & business)
- Occupation
- Information on all owned pets (species, breed, sex, age, neutering and vaccination history, and significant previous medical history).

This registration form may also be used to ask new clients how they chose the hospital. If the hospital is computerized, other information may be requested. Registration forms are available from several sources, including the American Animal Hospital Association.

Reception Area and Waiting Time

Good appointment scheduling eliminates most of the waiting time, but it is unlikely that there will be none. The manager must therefore ensure that this time is used effectively.

Making the Wait More Pleasant

The reception area of the hospital should maintain an atmosphere that makes waiting as pleasant as possible. The following can be done to accomplish this objective:

- A videotape machine with tapes on common problems relating to health care of animals.
- A play corner for children or a fish tank
- Bulletin boards with information on animal health care and community information pertaining to pets (e.g., obedience training classes)
- A bulletin board with informal pictures of clients and patients of the hospital with an open invitation for clients to add their own favorite pictures.

The waiting area should be spacious enough to accommodate fractious animals without necessitating contact between them. Clients should be made to understand that pets must be on leashes or in carrying cases while in the reception area.

Staff Courtesy and Concern

The courtesy and concern demonstrated by staff members together represent the single most important factor in making the first minutes successful. A smiling, helpful, knowledgeable, neatly attired and concerned receptionist is the key. Smoking by staff members in the reception area should not be tolerated, and a hospital policy prohibiting smoking by clients in the reception area is perfectly acceptable and may even be required by local ordinance.