

Pet Owner Education: Are We as Veterinarians Failing Our Clients and Undermining Our Businesses?

Article by Dr. Jason Nicholas, President and Chief Medical Officer, Preventive Vet



If you're a veterinarian, veterinary nurse or veterinary practice manager, the quote you're about to read is probably going to boil your blood and make you scream—and for good reason. This quote is an excerpt from a recent article (<https://bit.ly/2nfW5RG>) about marketing for pet shops. Take a look and see what you think, and note that I did not add the emphasis; it's in the article itself:

"Believe it or not, your pet shop is much more than a place for pet owners to pick up their favorite brand of dog food. It's a hub where customers can learn about all things related to their pet."

The article, written by the World Pet Association, is titled "How to Add Customer Value When You Can't Compete on Price" and goes on to say, "Ask yourself: Are you adding value through engaging and educational content? This technique encourages responsible pet ownership, creates customer loyalty and recognition through shared content, and promotes your store as a one-stop shop for both pet education and supplies."

Sharing engaging and educational content is one of the best ways to position your store as a thought leader and

central hub for all things 'pet.' It will ensure customers think of you first whenever they have questions and turn to you for guidance."

So, what do you think? Are pet shops where pet owners should go to learn about "all things pets?" Is it pet shops that pet owners should "think of first" and "turn to" whenever they have questions and need guidance about their pets?

The sad reality

Unfortunately, many pet owners do first think of and turn to their local pet shop for guidance and advice about their pets. And it's not just pet shops that they all-too-often trust and turn to. It's also their groomer, breeder, neighbor, friend at work, random people on Facebook, and good ol' "Dr. Google," to name just a few "expert" sources you and your practice are competing against.

It's no longer the case that pet owners think first of their veterinarian when they have questions or concerns about their pets—we are no longer the default, yet we are the very people they should be thinking about and turning

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

to when they have questions about the health, safety, comfort, nutrition and other aspects of their daily life with their pets. So why aren't they?

Do pet owners think that someone else knows more than we do? I doubt it. Do they think that someone else is better trained than we are? I certainly hope not! Sure, we're not always open and available to field questions or address medical concerns. But neither are pet shops.

And sure, there are times that the information, advice and recommendations we give them will involve a transaction—the purchase of a product or service from our hospital. But that's most often the case at pet shops, too. (And I'd argue that such transactional interactions are even more often the end result at pet shops!)

No, I very firmly believe that a big part of the reason why pet owners think of and turn to pet shops and all of these other "non-vet" (i.e., not you!) resources is because of exactly what the author of the quote cited above says...

"Sharing engaging and educational content is one of the best ways to position your store as a thought leader and central hub for all things 'pet.' It will ensure customers think of you first whenever they have questions and turn to you for guidance."

And many pet shops (and other competitors) are doing just that—and reaping the rewards of trust-based bonds and repeat business as a result.

What's your 'client education grade?'

So, time for a little test: Challenge yourself with the same question with which the author challenged their pet shop-owning readers. Ask yourself, "Am I *really* adding value to my clients through engaging and educational content and advice? Think about it honestly and from your client's perspective, not yours. Asking yourself these four sub-questions can help too:

1. Does the information and advice we're giving our clients (during the exam, in puppy/kitten packs, etc.) endear and bond them to us? The AAHA 2014 State of the Industry Report showed the importance of "bonds" on the health and growth of your practice!
2. Does what we're providing our clients with show them that we really care about them and their pets, "beyond the transactions?" Banfield's *Making Pet Care Personal*

report found that most pet owners view their interactions with their vet as "transactional"—and that often turns them away from their vet when they need advice and guidance.

3. Does the information demonstrate to them that we honor and want to help them protect the special relationship and bond that they have with their pets; and that we want to educate, empower and involve them in the process of nurturing and protecting that bond? The Human Animal Bond Research Institute, HABRI, www.habri.org, has tons of great information about the importance of the human-animal bond, and how you and your practice can benefit by helping your clients celebrate and protect it, including by providing them with the information, awareness and guidance that can help them prevent injuries, illnesses and worse.
4. Is the information and advice we're giving our clients easy for *them* to read and understand? Your clients are very busy. On top of the already hectic lives we're all living these days, they've just gotten a new puppy or kitten! And they don't have a veterinary medical degree and years of practice experience to give them the vocabulary and awareness to understand and know all the things we within the profession know and often take for granted.

So, what do you think? How are you and your team doing? Are you really providing your clients with the information, awareness and resources they want, need, understand and will help them best protect and care for their pets? Does what you're providing your clients with really help start them off on the right foot for a trust-based, collaborative, bonded relationship with you? Or, in their eyes (again, your client's point of view and perception is what matters most here) is what you're providing them with primarily designed and provided to help you market your practice and/or sell them products and services?

The importance of education to your clients and your practice

This chart on the next page is an important and eye-opening one. It's from an analysis of the 2011 Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study that Dr. Karen Felsted wrote for *Veterinary Economics*. Notice how the top two reasons that clients gave that would cause them to visit their veterinarian more often—the only two reasons that were

Reasons clients would visit the veterinarian more often

When asked what would cause them to visit a practice more often, here's what dog and cat owners said.

	Dog Owners	Cat Owners
I knew I could prevent problems and expensive treatments later	59%	56%
I was convinced it would help my pets live longer	59%	53%
Each visit was less expensive	47%	54%
I really believe my pet needed exams more often	44%	49%
It wasn't so stressful for me and my pet	22%	28%
My pet didn't dislike it so much	19%	26%
The clinic was more conveniently located	17%	17%
The visits didn't take so long	15%	17%
The clinic was a more pleasant place	13%	19%
The receptionist at the veterinary clinic was friendlier	12%	10%
The veterinarian was nicer	11%	11%

Source: Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study, 2011

cited by over 50 percent of the respondents in each of the dog and cat-owning categories—have to do with client education and awareness. And Dr. Felsted's article highlights this finding further (emphasis added):

“On a positive note, survey participants indicated that education can make a difference in the care they provide their pets. A large percentage of dog and cat owners said they would take their pet to the veterinarian more often if they really believed the pet needed exams more often, if it would help their pet live longer, and if they knew they could prevent problems and expensive treatment later.”

As you can see, education and tools that focus on prevention and raising awareness are what's appreciated by, and important, for your clients. All of which makes this type of education critically important to you and your practice. So, in terms of providing your clients with the education

that will “help their pets live longer” and “prevent problems and expensive treatments,” how are you doing?

Sadly, by looking at these statistics, I think it's safe to say that, at least as a profession, we're not doing so well:

- This study (<https://bit.ly/2vnEoEi>) of cat owners whose cats had suffered from lily toxicity found that only 27 percent of them were aware of the dangers that lilies posed to cats prior to their cats suffering from lily toxicity!
- Our Preventive Vet UO survey (<https://bit.ly/2AKXppf>) of cat owners whose cats had suffered from urethral obstruction showed that a paltry 28 percent of them were even just aware of UO (let alone its risk factors and preventive steps) prior to their cats suffering from it!
- Our GDV survey (<https://bit.ly/2Mpafe8>) showed that among the dog owners who had a dog suffer a bout of GDV, 9 percent of them first learned about the condition when it happened to their dog; 22 percent when it happened to a friend's dog; 13 percent from social media; 26 percent first learned of GDV from “Dr. Google.”
- Guess what percentage of people whose dogs suffered from GDV first heard of GDV from their vet? A profession-embarrassing 0 percent!

Clearly, it's time to change the way we within the veterinary profession define and deliver preventive client education. Our clients, patients and practices are depending on us doing so and our local pet shops are counting on us not. The choice is yours.



Dr. Jason Nicholas is President and Chief Medical Officer of Preventive Vet™, a content publishing and consulting company made up of a group of dedicated veterinarians, certified trainers, behaviorists, writers, creatives, educators and, above all, awesome pet-loving people.

He loves helping veterinary teams communicate the education, awareness, and advice their clients need to take the best care possible for their pets. It's why he founded Preventive Vet, and it's why he wrote the *101 Essential Tips* client education book series. Everything Preventive Vet does is about helping pets and supporting vets.

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