



Making the Holidays Special for Clients

Creative Ways to Show Your Appreciation

By Wendy S. Myers, Communication Solutions for Veterinarians Inc.

When clients walk into your hospital during the holidays, welcome them with warm smiles and touches that show you appreciate their business. Caring attitudes can help erase holiday stress and encourage client retention. Here are creative ways to tell clients "We appreciate you!"

Surprise top clients with gifts. Run reports to identify the top 10 spenders as well as those who referred the greatest number of new clients. Send them gift certificates for services at your hospital or holiday gift baskets. Most practices have a handful of top-dog clients, so show appreciation for their support of your business.

Send holiday e-cards. Skip the postal mail and send e-cards through your veterinary software company or vendors such as Pet Portals (www.petportals.com). Feature a photo of staff with their pets in your e-greeting, or some vendors offer animated e-cards. This "green" greeting saves the expense of stamps, cards, and staff labor. Another bonus: E-cards could generate traffic to your website.

Take pets' photos with Santa. At Winslow Animal Hospital in Sicklerville, New Jersey, clients line up to get their pets photographed with Santa and Elwood, winner of an ugliest dog contest. The hospital provides one free photograph while clients can purchase additional prints from the photographer. Photos with Santa are scheduled on a Saturday from 12 to 4 p.m. after appointment hours are over. Post favorite images on your home page to encourage visits to your website.

Provide tempting refreshments in the lobby. Add flavored coffees such as gingerbread spice, chocolate cherry, and toasted almond. Try assorted teas and spiced cider.

Confirm boarding reservations. Holiday travels put enough stress on families without worrying if Fido has a place to stay. Confirm holiday boarders one week before the reservation with a phone call or e-mail. "This is Wendy calling from Myers Veterinary Hospital to confirm Mason's boarding reservation for December 23

to 27. Mason needs to be current on his vaccines, an intestinal parasite test, and monthly parasite preventatives. We look forward to having Mason spend the holidays with us. If you have questions or changes to your boarding reservation, please call us at 555-555-5555." Confirmation calls also let you collect deposits for holiday boarding if required.

Put pets' names on a "Welcome!" board. At The Animal Center in Zachary, Louisiana, team members write names of pets arriving for veterinary appointments and boarding on a chalk board in the reception area. Use colorful chalk and artistic handwriting. This personal touch shows that you value client relationships.

Provide complimentary baths for dogs staying three or more nights. You want reunions between pets and families to be happy, not smelly. Note the pick-up time and date during check-in so boarding staff know when to have the pet bathed and ready to go home.

Apply a flea treatment during boarding check-in. Maintain your reputation as a flea-free facility. Give every dog and cat a flea treatment at check-in. Include this service in your boarding fee, or confirm the last date when the client gave her pet a flea preventative.

Send e-mails from boarding pets. Add "Would you like to receive e-mails from your pet?" to your boarding check-in form. Have staff e-mail short messages to clients each day. Address e-mails to "Dear Mom and Dad" and sign the pet's name. E-mails should always share happy news such as "I enjoyed my three walks today and look forward to seeing you tomorrow!" rather than "I had diarrhea today." Have a signature line such as "This e-mail was sent by Myers Veterinary Hospital on your pet's behalf. Visit us at www.yourwebsite.com." This signature line will drive traffic to your website.

Tie holiday bows on grooming pets. Clients want gorgeous pets for holiday photos. Use holiday-themed bows and bandannas to celebrate the season. Groomers also could provide goodie bags for favorite clients.

Sponsor a pet food drive for area shelters. Ask animal shelters in your county what donations they need. Put a sign in the lobby asking clients to drop off pet food and cat litter. Keep track of the number of pounds of donated pet food and post a running tally in the lobby. Move donated items to a storage area so they don't clutter your lobby.

Prepare clients for emergencies. Candy, table scraps, and holiday decorations can cause unexpected emergencies. Put information about protecting pets during holidays on your website, message on hold, bulletin boards, and flyers in the lobby. Let clients know where to find the nearest emergency clinic. Animal Hospital Specialty Center in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, provides referring veterinarians with brochures, business cards, magnets, and holiday safety handouts to share with their clients.

When you spread holiday cheer, you'll show clients that you appreciate their business. Client loyalty is especially important in today's economy. Extras help cement and continue relationships.

Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver, Colorado. Her consulting firm helps practice owners and teams improve compliance, client service and hospital management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training for more than 1,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, an 11-doctor, referral hospital in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. Serving Denver for more than 40 years, the AAHA-accredited hospital offers internal medicine, surgery, oncology, acupuncture, and emergency care to Denver's best friends 24 hours, 365 days a year. Wendy is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' monthly e-newsletter at www.csvets.com.