

## **2019 Greater St Louis Veterinary Medical Association**

### **Reviving your Veterinary Practice (and Yourself)**

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#### **Restorative Rest and Healthy Habits for Long-term Success in Veterinary Practice**

One of the most common comments I receive after my sessions is “Where do you get all your energy?” Too often I’m confronted by veterinarians who are burned-out and jaded, cynical and callous or tired and testy. This session is designed to provide a step-by-step strategy to get back to the joy of practicing everyday veterinary medicine. How do we optimize our abilities while maintaining enthusiasm for our profession? The short answer is by preparing ourselves intellectually, being as physically fit and healthy as possible and including diversity in our lives. Research conducted during the past twenty years has shown that our physical state has tremendous impact on our ability to think, process and retain information and regulate our moods. In other words, how healthy and fit you are tremendously affects how well you perform mentally and emotionally – while enjoying it. By staying physically fit and healthy, you can maximize your potential as a veterinarian. The more productive you are, the better you’ll be and ultimately the more successful you’ll be – and avoid burning out.

##### Step 1 – Avoiding Burn-out: Exercise and your Mood

In 1999, Duke University conducted the SMILE Study (Standard Medical Intervention and Long-term Exercise) to determine the effect exercise had on patients suffering from depression. They compared subjects treated with the popular psychoactive agent Zoloft (sertraline). The researchers found that exercise was as effective as medication in treating depression. Moreover, when the test subjects were evaluated six months after the study’s conclusion, they found that 52 percent of the patients receiving Zoloft were still suffering from depression compared to only 30 percent of the exercise group. Perhaps even more interesting, the more exercise a patient did the less likely they were to be depressed. The Duke study found that every fifty minutes of weekly exercise correlated to a 50 percent drop in the odds of being depressed. The more patients exercised, the better they felt and the more stable they became.

Aerobic exercise increases the neurotransmitters dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine. These compounds play a vital role in the regulation of our moods and feelings. Exercise is our body’s natural means of keeping the brain chemistry stable and enhancing our chances of survival. Our estimated energy expenditure is less than 38 percent of our Stone Age ancestors. To make matters worse, we take in far more calories than our caveman relatives ever dreamed. Even if you follow the government recommendations of thirty minutes of aerobic intensity exercise each day, you’d still only burn about half of what our genes are encoded for. Overweight and obese individuals now vastly outnumber normal and thin people in the United States and Canada, and the number of patients diagnosed with mental and physical disorders linked to excess weight continues to escalate. We were designed to move and when we don’t, bad things happen, both physically and mentally.

##### Cold Coals: Life in the Shadows

A bigger concern for many people is what psychologists term the “shadow syndrome” of sub-clinical depression. These individuals experience common mood swings, are quick to anger, have trouble remaining focused and experience sadness and negative thoughts more frequently. While not technically depressed, these people are functioning sub-optimally. These individuals benefit tremendously from exercise. A recent doctor I worked with commented that “she had forgotten how much

fun veterinary medicine was” after four weeks on a five times a week exercise program. She was sleeping better, feeling more energized and found that “life was going her way.” While exercise is certainly no panacea, many people have lost sight of how good their life truly is due to the veil of sub-clinical depression brought on by abnormal brain physiology that a sedentary lifestyle creates. When the neurotransmitters released with aerobic exercise flood the brain and reset the normal neurochemistry, people feel better and experience optimism and happiness, something everyone could use more of in their life.

### Train for your Brain

If you were told there was a once-a-day pill that would make you smarter, more creative and slow the effects of aging on the brain, you’d be foolish not to take it. Exercise is such a pill. According to recent research, exercise can make you smarter and more creative and slow cognitive decline. Numerous studies have shown that aerobic exercise can improve memory and creativity, reduce cognitive decline in aging individuals, and boost cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility is particularly important in intellectually demanding professions such as medicine. This skill reflects our ability to shift thinking and produce a steady flow of creative thoughts and answers as opposed to reciting memorized information. Until a magic brain pill is discovered, exercise is the best option for optimal brain function.

These findings have been put into widespread use in several school districts across the United States. Students have been shown to perform better on reading and math tests and learn new concepts more rapidly after exercise. The conclusion of these emerging studies is clear: exercise can make you smarter. If we are to optimize our intellectual abilities as veterinarians, we owe it to our patients to take better care of ourselves so we can be the best we can be.

The question of how much and how to exercise is the topic of much discussion. In general terms, aerobic exercise is defined as physical activity performed at 60 to 80 percent of your maximum heart rate (MHR). A good starting point to determine your MHR is to subtract your age from 220. In the SMILE study, the individuals that benefited the most burned about 1,400 calories or eight calories per pound (3.6 to 4 calories per kilogram) per week. Start by taking your weight multiplied by eight (or 3.6 to 4) and get on your favorite exercise machine such as a treadmill or elliptical trainer. If you weigh 150 pounds (70 kilograms) and burn 200 calories in thirty minutes on the elliptical trainer, you’ll want to do at least six sessions a week.

### Step 2 – Physical Health

When it comes to disease recognition, we’re the experts. The majority of our veterinary education focused on diagnosis and treatment of diseases. Too bad we didn’t spend more time learning how to avoid illness. Today’s clients are interested in the preservation of wellness, and so should you. The transition from disease experts to experts in disease prevention is well underway in the human profession. Research demonstrates that our lifestyle: diet, exercise and stress management contribute about 70 percent of how long and well you’ll live. Genetics have been shown to influence only about 30 percent of a person’s life expectancy and quality of life. It’s time to take a hard look at your lifestyle to see if you’re reaching your full potential and what message you’re sending to clients and staff about health.

The first step is to schedule a thorough physical examination with your physician. Complete blood and urine tests and age-appropriate testing such as mammography, prostate exam and electrocardiography should be performed. If we’re going to recommend these tests and services to our patients, shouldn’t we have them done on ourselves? Next, based on a good check-up, select a personal trainer to teach you to properly exercise and enlist a registered dietician to help you eat healthier. These professionals are well worth the small price you’ll pay. The investment in your health will allow you to be a better doctor and the better you are, the more productive (and profitable) you’ll be. Finally, learn how to best manage your daily stress through meditation, yoga or other relaxation techniques. The time you spend refocusing and de-stressing will allow you to be more engaged with your loved ones, co-workers and clients as well as leaving you refreshed and energized.

### Finding the Time to Exercise

When I was training for Ironman events, I often felt I was pushing far beyond my comfort zone. Being a husband and father of two, owner of two businesses, practicing full-time and training twenty-plus hours a week is a bit of a stretch for anyone. I learned so much that continues to aid me today.

The value of this extreme time management that I put myself through repeatedly is that I have a difficult time looking at other people’s schedules and accepting that they “don’t have thirty minutes a day to exercise.” It simply boils down to

priorities. When your health is your priority, thirty minutes is nothing in the scheme of a busy day. When there is no commitment and true belief in the power of exercise, thirty minutes can seem like an eternity.

Studies have shown that people who exercise in the mornings are more likely to 1) do it and 2) continue to do it for long periods of time. For me and the individuals I train or coach, I find that early morning workouts are the best fit for our lifestyle and schedules. In addition, you start the day energized that sure beats a bedraggled and bleary-eyed morning greeting.

If you put off exercising until the end of your day, life is likely to interfere and cause you to miss your workout. From late emergencies to later soccer practice, evenings rarely work for most busy people. Of course, the only way to make early morning training happen is to get to bed earlier. Is it really important to find out what happened on a 10 pm drama each week? Try recording your favorite shows and viewing them at an earlier hour or on weekends. What about the modern time stealer – the internet? Are you mindlessly surfing and wasting valuable time you could spend interacting with family or sleeping? People need an average of seven to nine hours of sleep per night. If you have to awaken to an alarm clock, you're probably getting inadequate sleep. If you need a cup of coffee to get going in the morning, you're probably not getting enough sleep.

For most people, walking or jogging on a treadmill or outdoors is simply the most effective and time efficient means of exercise. Take five minutes to stretch, five minutes to warm up and reach your aerobic heart rate and then sustain aerobic intensity for twenty to thirty minutes. Warm-down over a five-minute period until your heart rate has dropped twenty to thirty beats. Perform a couple of minutes of light stretching and you're done. The entire process should take forty-five minutes or so. The key is to reach your aerobic heart rate zone and maintain it. You'll need an inexpensive heart rate monitor.

Regardless of the activity you pursue, with the exception of swimming, maintaining aerobic intensity is the best way to ensure you're getting the most out of the effort you're investing in exercise. Walking and running are natural actions and I encourage everyone to spend at least some time hitting their stride to maximize their fitness.

Strength training is another essential ingredient to fitness, especially as we grow older. I prefer compound exercise or motions that target natural movements and engage multiple muscle groups in one exercise. Before you pick up a dumbbell, I strongly advise you work with a certified personal trainer to make sure you don't inadvertently injure yourself. Gyms are full of newbies who either did some weightlifting in high school or watched it on television who get injured within a few days. Injury will not only cause you pain, it will also turn you off to exercise and you'll see your fitness fade fast. Work with someone to learn how to not only properly perform the movements but to also guide you in the exercise that work best for your body and goals. It's hard for me to watch some people in the gym slinging weights without a clue that what they're doing could hurt them – sometimes seriously. Don't be "that guy or girl" trying to do something you shouldn't. It looks easy to perform a biceps curl, but I can tell you from experience that most people can't even perform a curl properly. They move lots of weight and then wonder why they don't achieve the results they desire.

Integrating a goal other than a target weight is another critical step in achieving fitness. For many people, the thought of even running a 5k is daunting. For that reason, I refocus our efforts not on a number on the scale, but on an event. If a person trains for a 5k, they'll not only improve their fitness, but they'll lose weight in the process. As you complete a 5k, try a 10k in several months. Keep a goal in front of you and fitness, increased energy and stamina and improved intellectual abilities will follow.

If you smoke – stop. That's all.

### Step 3 – Nutrition

You can't be physically and mentally healthy if your fuel source is polluted. You need to focus on providing your body with pure nutrients to not only provide energy but to build and repair tissues, maintain a healthy immune system and stabilize your mood. We are what we eat; is your diet the best it can be?

Some simple steps include avoiding simple sugars, caffeine and alcohol. Drink water instead of soda; decaffeinated green tea to replace coffee. When you're feeling the urge to snack, reach for fruit or a handful of nuts and turn down the candy. Try eating three meals and two high-protein snacks each day. Calculate the number of calories you need to maintain your weight and learn what it looks and feels like each day.

Don't turn to alcohol in the evenings to "relax." Instead, talk to your family, read a book or meditate. Meditation can be as simple as sitting in a chair and thinking of – nothing. It is vital that you take some time and clear your thoughts and anxieties associated with work, even if just for five minutes.

Whenever possible, eat real, whole foods. Reduce the amount of processed foods you're eating. If it's in a box, it's probably processed.

Drink a vegetable and fruit smoothie every morning. My favorite consists of blueberries, strawberries, bananas, spinach (lots!) and hemp milk. Fruits contain significant calories so remember to calculate the number of calories in your concoction.

Supplements may also help. Adults such consume at least 2.5-grams of the omega-3 fatty acids DHA and EPA each day. DHEA may also help high-stress individuals. Other supplements you should consider include a good multi-vitamin, B-vitamin complex, resveratrol (+/-), l-carnitine, creatinine, co-enzyme Q10 or ubiquinol, a probiotic, etc. I also take nicotinamide riboside (Niagen), l-theanine with coffee, and a mushroom extract each day.

#### Step 4 – Incorporating Diversity

What are your hobbies? This question has puzzled more than one veterinarian I know. Some veterinarians can list a hobby but can't substantiate any participation. To avoid burn out, you need to participate in activities outside veterinary medicine. The best hobbies engage your mind as well as your body. Strive to do something, anything, twice a week. Free your mind on an activity that really excites you.

If you don't have a hobby – start searching for one. If there's something you always wanted to try, go for it. Forget the costs, if you burn out on your profession it will cost you more than any diversion.

#### Step 5 – Remember Why

Everyone has bad days. When you start feeling like the world is against you, recall the good times. I keep a drawer full of thank-you notes I've received over the years. Whenever I've felt like giving up, quitting or just plain feeling sorry for myself, I open this drawer and begin to read. I soon forget my troubles and focus on the positive influence I've been able to have with my patients. I feel truly fortunate to be a veterinarian; it's been my lifelong dream – and probably yours, too. Remember the "why" when you're feeling bad – then go out for a run!

Change is never easy, but the facts should make you seriously consider whether your health is affecting your ability to burn as brightly as you should. Whether you suffer from mood swings, diminished energy, difficulty sleeping or decreased enthusiasm, you'll certainly feel better after breaking a sweat. If you've lost the excitement of waking every morning and facing the day's challenges, try starting your day with a brisk walk. Almost whatever ails you will be made better by routine aerobic exercise. Getting into the "flow" of everyday medicine is immensely fulfilling and will allow you to sustain long term success. By improving your lifestyle, you'll improve your health and you're sure to see an enhancement in your professional abilities and personal life. You owe it not only to yourself but to your loved ones, co-workers, clients and the patients we serve.

### **Motivating your Staff**

Motivating people requires lots of energy. Encouraging positive attitudes, creativity, and exceptional client service and patient care demands constant input and focus from practice leaders. If we want sustainable growth and happiness, we must be guided by our core principles and beliefs. Our principles are used to navigate life's challenges and remind us why we work hard. The real test is if you can survive the trials and tribulations of practice life with your core beliefs intact. To help retain your principles, reach your potential, and motivate and energize your team, here are my eight energy injections to resuscitate the power in your practice.

- 1) **Convey Confidence** – Team members must genuinely trust their leaders, or they'll perform poorly and leave. Our goal as leaders is to inspire confidence and give our staff something to look up to and aspire to be more like. That's a tall order, but leaders should feel comfortable with it. I've always believed in leading by example, and that includes my attitude, communication with others, and lifestyle. I have no problem being held to a higher standard; it comes with the leadership title. If your team is slumping, check your own energy. Fading leaders signal to their teams it's

okay to ebb, resulting in decreased client service and patient care. Be conscious that you're being watched and emulated at all times and be the best you can be. Confidence is the common denominator of the best clinics. It's easy to convey confidence when you're following your principles.

- 2) **Meaningful Work Means More than Money** – Team members who do something meaningful are happier and more productive. Survey after survey reveals our attitude toward what we're doing impacts the quality of our work. Use your core beliefs to give meaning to helping pets and people. On the first day of work, I met with new employees and shared why I became a veterinarian and built my clinics. I was recruiting each new staff member to join my crusade for better pet care. It worked. Find your meaning, share your mission, and lead a pet care revolution. You'll have more engaged, enthusiastic, and effective employees when you attach principle-centered meaning to their work.
- 3) **Job Clarity: What to do and how you measure it** – Most veterinary clinics give new employees a job description detailing their duties. What they often leave out is how employees are held accountable for their work. My core belief and mission is: "Provide the most advanced and compassionate in pet health care for those who choose it." Easy to say but how do I evaluate if an employee actually achieves it? That's where clearly communicating what results I expect becomes essential for success. We start by specifically outlining our performance evaluation schedule: monthly the first three months, every six months for three years, then yearly. Next, we provide examples of evaluation criteria based on their position. Veterinarians are expected to receive a 90-percent favorable rating on client satisfaction surveys and follow-up phone calls, be able to perform routine surgeries in reasonable time ranges, and complete training modules according to an agreed schedule. The more specific you are in accountability criteria, the better your team will perform because they understand what's expected. I only expect my staff to adhere to standards that adhere to my principles, making staff evaluations incredibly easy and organic. Respect your beliefs and develop job clarity to boost employee achievement.
- 4) **Train to Trust** – The best teams trust their leaders and their leaders trust their teams. I prioritize staff training because it enables me to trust that my employees will behave and perform in both the manner I expect, and our patients and clients deserve. A methodical and consistent training system will keep your team sharp and focused on best practices.
- 5) **Recognize Worthy Employees** – The most successful managers shower their staff with praise and recognition. Constructive praise should be a staple of our daily leadership routine. When I conduct puppy training sessions, I teach pet owners to ignore their pup's negative behaviors unless injurious and liberally reward even the most insignificant positive acts. I apply the same principle with the people in my life. Try ignoring the insignificant imperfect actions you encounter and congratulate the acts of kindness, excellent work, and compassion you encounter.
- 6) **Everyone is a Problem Solver** – I believe everyone is talented and capable of solving problems. Effective leaders understand that frontline employees must be empowered and encouraged to solve their daily dilemmas. Even when an employee offers an inferior solution, I don't dismiss or dismantle their idea – I embrace it. That doesn't mean we'll implement or repeat it; it means I address it in an appreciative manner. Make it your goal to create a culture where everyone is constantly dreaming up solutions instead of complaining about problems.
- 7) **Checking In versus Checking Up** – Many veterinarians have a hard time not micromanaging their teams. I get it. We deal with life and death, cash and coins, and we really despise dealing with dissatisfaction. The problem is our employees hate micromanagement. Learn to trust your team and allow them autonomy. If you ask them to do something, refrain from constantly checking up on them. Instead, periodically check in to see how they're doing. The larger your business grows, the more important this concept becomes. I've learned to trust people until they prove otherwise, and I've been rewarded for it. Let go of your incessant intrusions and allow your team to flourish on their own.
- 8) **Nix Negative Employees** – No matter how inspiring, motivating, or awesome you are, you're going to encounter employees who don't want any part of your mission. That's okay, as long as you recognize them and remove them promptly. I've seen great clinics reduced to rubble due to one or two sour staff members. It really happens and you often won't know it until too late. One of your guiding principles is identifying attitudes that don't jibe with your mission. Trust your inner voice and surround yourself with likeminded individuals. The financial cost of paying unemployment benefits is trivial compared to the emotional cost of working alongside negative employees.

The happiest people are those following their hearts. Take time to discover your inner motivations and mission and apply them to your work. Use your principles to guide you and your team to be the best you can be for your patients and clients. You'll unlock incredible energy and excitement and maybe lead a revolution.

In an online study of 1,915 employees, 87 percent said they felt overworked, but more than 1/3 of them didn't feel overloaded. What do these numbers really mean?

According to the study, 42 percent felt they kept a good work life balance, 11.5 felt overworked rather often and the remainder felt overworked from time to time. 50.8 percent of team members felt absolutely satisfied with their work life balance, and the research showed that satisfaction decreased the more invested the person was in the business. (i.e. practice owners vs team members).<sup>1</sup>

How satisfied are you with your life currently?

The answer to this essential question may hold the key to longevity in your career, quality of interpersonal relationships, and overall life satisfaction. Not to mention how long – and how well – you'll live. You only have one life. Live the best life you can.

### **Make a Life Chart**

One of the easiest, and most meaningful, exercises you can do to begin your journey to your best life is to write it down. Begin by making a 1) current and 2) ideal Life Pie Chart. How much time do you want to give to the things that are important to you, and how much time do they currently get? Creating visuals for you to put your time priorities into perspective can be helpful in identifying areas that are taking up too much of your time or energy, or areas that you need to give more time and energy.

Regularly self-check the areas of your life. Are you getting closer to your ideal distribution of time, or further away from living your best life? A wise person once said, "The secret to happiness and meaning in life is doing more of what you love and less of what you don't." How much time are you engaged in doing what you love? Loving your work doesn't mean it's easy or without strife; it means challenging tasks are fulfilling and overcoming obstacles are meaningful.

What areas in your work or personal life need improvement and what areas are you excelling? Think about the steps you took to create each movement toward balance and recreate it in the areas of your life where you still want to see more time or balance created. Are you using your time to the fullest in each of the areas? Seconds add up to minutes which lead to years and decades. Use each precious moment wisely.

### **Making a Balance Action Plan**

When the time comes to finally create work life balance in your life, making a Balance Action Plan can be a great first step. This is a plan to decide where you need to focus your time and energy to improve your self-satisfaction in your balance. Start by creating a vision.

- Visualize life how you would like it to be. Write down what life would be like if it was "perfect." Don't focus on the "how" so much as the what. Now write down how you see life now, and then focus on the contrasts. Look for areas you can make small daily improvements or steps toward the "perfect" image you created. Life is a journey, so creating an action plan with daily improvements on life can never be a bad thing!
- Examine what is important to you. We only have one life, so what are the most important things to be in your life for you to be happy? Achievement, recognition, adventure, fun. Write down the words associated with the things that truly make you happy. Use these words to guide your areas to focus on.
- Think about the reasons you want to have a more balanced life. The benefits that will come with following through with your commitments. Focusing on the "why" can help prevent you from creating an internal dialogue of the reasons you think of reel that you can't or won't achieve balance. Focusing on the benefits to come and the positive can help to keep you motivated.
- Practice presence in your activities. Be 100-percent involved in all that you do. This will create quality, even when quantity is not what you want it to be. Checking emails during dinner may seem like multi-tasking, but the lack of presence in the time and interaction with your family may not be worth it in the long run.
- Find your "space". Where can you have physical or mental space that allows you daily quiet, peace, and reflection. Focus daily on your balance, your goals and reasons for balance as well as what this commitment means to you.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.adviseamerica.com/19-great-work-life-balance-statistics/>

- Be prepared for obstacles. Be ready for the things that might get in your way, temporarily, or permanently. Work, family obligations, volunteer projects, holidays. Plan for how you will work into these times balance, have a plan for a “comeback” when life gets unbalanced. When you come prepared, overcoming these times will be easier and less overwhelming.
- Know your limits, don’t be afraid to set them, and then stick to them. Don’t be afraid to be “selfish” with your time and make your needs a priority.
- Set up support. Identify those around you who can help you and encourage you to meet your balance goals. Life coaches, partners and friends can help if you let them!

### **Best Life Hacks:**

Along the way, I have picked up tips and tricks for creating balance in life. So, just a few from me to you:

- Change clothes immediately upon arriving home from work. This creates the mental image of leaving the day behind and changing mind set.
- Schedule your down time. Literally. On your calendar. Use technology such as online calendars, Siri, Alexa, and Google Assistant, and others to take notes, create reminder lists, schedule to-do dates, and reserve down time to charge of your time.
- Do three enjoyable things for yourself every day. They don’t have to be big things. They will help you to recognize the joy in your everyday life, practice presence in the moment by bringing awareness, and bring positivity to your everyday thinking. Try it, it works!!
- Work smarter not harder. There are apps, widgets, gadgets, and heck even full-blown robots that get us through our daily lives (I love my two Neato vacuums!). Utilize the technology available to reduce work times and hours.
- Enjoy your days off. Plan small fun outings or events for the weekend. Try to break up house chores and errands during the week so that you don’t have to spend you whole weekend catching up on housework, homework, or laundry. We know these things will always exist in life, we need to figure out how to be more efficient and redistribute tasks to create the balance we are seeking.
- Ask for help. Seriously. Right now.

### **Important Things to Remember**

- While it is easy for me to offer this advice, it really is how we create balance. It is also important to keep in mind that balance is managing and anticipating imbalance. Life is going to happen, and we have to be ready to work with it, not against it. Things will not always be perfect. This is life.
- Remember to check in with yourself every now and again. Make sure that you are still working on the right priorities, acknowledge the advancements and achievements you make, and acknowledge areas to improve without self judgement.

*Balance is not something you find it’s something you create. ~ Jana Kingsford*

## **Current Nutritional Challenges and Next Generation Pet Food**

### **Talking about Pet Food and Confronting Pet Obesity**

Over half the dogs and cats in the United States are now classified as overweight by their veterinarian<sup>1</sup>. Recent surveys suggest that most veterinarians aren't discussing the serious health threat of obesity and that pet owners are desperate for help. If veterinarians continue ignoring nutritional education, not only will our patients suffer, but also our practices will pay a price in decreased visits and revenue. The veterinary profession must address these issues and develop strategies to promote healthier lifestyles, encourage nutritional counseling by veterinarians, and break the silence on the obesity conversation.

According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention's (APOP) 2017 National Pet Obesity Awareness Day Survey conducted on nearly 2,400 dogs and cats by US veterinarians, 56% of adult dogs and 60% of adult cats were classified as overweight or obese. Obesity by itself is classified as a disease, but the health conditions associated with obesity reveal the heart of the epidemic's impact on pets and their owners. Osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, joint injury, various forms of cancer and decreased life expectancy are all linked to obesity in pets. "The body of evidence indicating that obesity causes costly and painful conditions is clear," per Dr. Joe Bartges, a veterinary nutritionist and internist who serves on the APOP board and as Small Animal Clinical Sciences department head at University of Tennessee Knoxville's College of Veterinary Medicine. "Without the obesity risk factor in place, the likelihood of pets getting many serious diseases is inarguably reduced."

What do veterinarians think about pet obesity and their role in treatment and prevention? In November 2013, APOP and Trone Brand Energy, a North Carolina-based marketing firm focused on animal healthcare needs, interviewed 548 veterinarians to find out (95% confidence with a margin of error of +/-4.17%)<sup>2</sup>. In general terms, veterinarians felt they were the most trustworthy source for animal nutritional information, yet felt they needed more education.

Veterinarians overwhelmingly (93%) agreed that obesity is a "big deal." Paradoxically, 36% of veterinarians admitted they don't discuss a pet's weight with a client unless the pet is overweight. Veterinarians also estimated the number of dogs and cats that were overweight at 50% each.

93% of veterinarians reported they would like to see more involvement from pet food manufacturers in educating pet owners about the risks associated with pet obesity. While veterinarians generally didn't credit manufacturers with adequately educating pet owners about pet obesity, not all veterinarians thought food choice was linked to pet obesity.

Veterinarians weren't confident that clients would follow through on exercise or dietary programs with their pets. This could be due in part to the lack of programs in place to help owners comply and hold them accountable—something APOP hopes to affect through upcoming industry partnerships and programs.

Many veterinarians admitted to being under-equipped to fight pet obesity and would welcome a host of tools that are proposed to be part of the APOP coalition and upcoming efforts.

Pet owners and veterinary professionals were questioned about pet obesity, diet and nutrition, and sources of pet food advice. **58% of pet owners and 54% of veterinary professionals reported they had tried to help their own pet lose weight.** Low-calorie and weight loss diets combined with increased exercise were the most cited weight loss strategies.

When asked what was the "**biggest challenge to exercising your dog**," "Too busy" was the most common response, topping 25% of all pet owners and 43% of veterinary professionals. Behavior issues (21% pet owners and 19% veterinary professionals), inadequate access to exercise areas, and physical limitations of owner and pet completed the top four reported challenges.

The "fat gap" is rampant. 82% of pet owners indicated their pets were at a healthy weight, compared to veterinary estimates that 50% of pets are obese. Simultaneously, nearly half (42%) admitted they didn't know what a "healthy weight" was for their pet.

Pet owners most strongly associated a decreased lifespan with pet obesity. Longevity should be highly considered as a key "reason to believe" for consumer-facing communications. Nearly three-quarters, 72%, of surveyed pet owners indicated that decreased life expectancy was linked to pet obesity.

48% of pet owners stated that their **veterinarian failed to recommend a maintenance or routine diet** for their pet and 15% commented that they “had to ask” to receive a pet food recommendation. 50% of surveyed veterinary professionals replied they offered maintenance pet food recommendations.

When asked if they believed **“commercial pet food is better or worse than ten years ago”** (the melamine pet food recall was in 2007), 63% of pet owners and 76% of veterinary professionals reported pet food in 2017 was “better.”

**“People food” for pets** was generally considered “unhealthy,” with 65% of pet owners and 67% of veterinary professionals agreeing.

**Organic pet food** was perceived as “healthier” by 39% of pet owners, down from 43% in 2016, while 40% reported “I don’t know.” 26% of veterinary professionals categorized organic pet foods as “healthier,” up from 15% in 2016. 17% of veterinary professionals stated “I don’t know” when it comes to organic pet foods being “healthier” for pets.

Raw diets continue to divide these two groups, although support of raw diets among pet owners appears to be diminishing and confusion increasing, at least according to this survey.

- **“Do you think raw diets are healthier for dogs and cats?”**
- “Yes” – 28% of pet owners (35% in 2016) and 13% of veterinary professionals (15% in 2016)
- “No” – 28% of pet owners (30% in 2016) and 72% of veterinary professionals (71% in 2016)
- “I don’t know” – 45% of pet owners (35% in 2016) and 15% of veterinary professionals (14% in 2016)

Pet owners also reported confusion and disagreed with veterinary professionals about low- and no-grain diets and corn.

- **“Are low- or no-grain diets healthier for dogs?”**
- “Yes” – 46% of pet owners and 21% of veterinary professionals
- “No” – 12% of pet owners and 63% of veterinary professionals
- “I don’t know” – 43% of pet owners and 16% of veterinary professionals
- **“Do you think corn is healthy for dogs?”**
- “Yes” – 5% of pet owners and 50% of veterinary professionals
- “No” – 63% of pet owners and 30% of veterinary professionals
- “I don’t know” – 31% of pet owners and 20% of veterinary professionals
- **“Do you think corn is healthy for cats?”**
- “Yes” – 3% of pet owners and 34% of veterinary professionals
- “No” – 63% of pet owners and 46% of veterinary professionals
- “I don’t know” – 34% of pet owners and 20% of veterinary professionals

Nutritional and dietary solutions were the most appealing course of action for pet owners with an obese pet. The weight management programs will need to be packaged well and involve a veterinary team effort to gain consumer uptake. The barrier to switch to a premium-priced diet is perhaps lower than most manufacturers and veterinarians predict, with 62% indicating they would pay a \$10 monthly premium if it would help their pet lose weight. 61% of pet owners stated they would commit to an exercise regimen for their pet that required 2 to 3 hours each week for two months if their veterinarian recommended it.

As demonstrated in our survey, pet owners believe nutritional care and pet food are of primary importance in enabling best care.

### **Talking about Obesity with Pet Owners**

The first step toward improving the lives and well-being of the pets we’re entrusted to care for and to end this epidemic is to start talking about it. We know that being overweight and obese is bad for pets; why aren’t we talking about it more often?

In a 2004 study published in *Obesity Research*<sup>3</sup>, 52.6% of obese patients that did not undergo bariatric surgery reported that their primary care physician “never” or only “once in a while” discussed their morbid obesity with them. In other words, unless the obese patient was going to have surgery, their doctor rarely mentioned their weight. One of the key reasons why physicians fail to counsel their patients about obesity may lie in their perceived distrust in the success of available treatments.

They see lots of weight loss options and lots of overweight people; the math simply doesn't add up. When confronted with the decision to discuss something you don't really believe works, you're unlikely to discuss it.

It's no different in veterinary medicine. We see lots of overweight and obese pets and lots of diet foods and diet treatments and yet the number of fat pets keeps growing. Subsequently we stop talking about it. Nobody likes to bet on a losing horse – especially one that we believe loses with patient after patient, day after day.

Our clients depend on us for recommendations to improve the quality of life as well as life expectancy of their pets. However, due to busy schedules and lack of training in weight-related disorders, nutrition and weight loss, it is often difficult for veterinarians to communicate this information and promote change. For our profession to truly help our patients, we must take the time to learn about these issues and make the time to talk about them with our clients.

If we're going to talk about pet obesity, we must believe it's important – really important. Veterinarians who understand that achieving and maintaining ideal weight will improve their patient's quality of life and life expectancy are more enthusiastic about the topic. We must study the association between obesity and conditions such as type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, hypertension, heart disease, cancer and more. We must become familiar with the impact that a pet's weight-associated morbidity has on the pet-family bond and how this can negatively influence the level of care a pet receives as they age. We must search for simple lifestyle changes that can make huge improvements in a pet's well-being. We must feel comfortable looking a client in the eye and confidently discussing strategies for losing weight in a non-threatening manner. Once you believe in something, others sense that passion and are more inclined to listen and believe in you.

Another potential source of bias against counseling clients about their pet's weight issue is the doctor's perception that the client doesn't care or want to hear about it. If a doctor enters the room and thinks that the client isn't motivated to change their pet's weight, they're probably not going to start talking about obesity. Unfortunately, we're often wrong. In the same manner that we pre-judge clients and their willingness to pay for medical care, we often incorrectly assume that clients don't want to learn about pet weight loss or nutrition. This issue becomes even more challenging if we don't truly believe in the benefits of weight loss and the value of spending our precious time discussing it. If we assume that everyone will be willing to pay for our services and is interested in improving their pet's quality of life, regardless of the challenges, we will better serve them.

Because of the social stigma associated with being overweight and obese, many doctors simply find it more comfortable to avoid the topic altogether. Further, a few high-profile media cases involving patients suing physicians for offending them while discussing their weight has heightened fears and decreased the number of doctors being proactive about weight issues. The American Medical Association (AMA) commented on this dilemma in November 2003: "(If your patient's weight is a health issue, you should not hesitate to approach the topic."<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of the client's weight, our responsibility is to the pet. With this in mind, we must feel comfortable separating our client's obesity from the discussion of their pet. Normally the client is aware that their pet is overweight or obese yet may not fully understand its impact on their pet's health. Instead of stating the obvious, "Did you know Fluffy is obese?" try saying, "I'm concerned about Fluffy's weight because I'm worried it may be causing health problems for her. Do you think her weight is causing health problems?" This is especially important when the patient has weight-associated conditions such as osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes, or hypertension.

If you receive a noncommittal or disinterested response, don't start detailing how diet and exercise can help Fluffy achieve an ideal weight. Instead, focus on the long-term health risks associated with Fluffy's excess weight. "I know how much you care about Fluffy and that's why I want to help you avoid some serious disease such as diabetes, heart disease and arthritis." Center the conversation on the prevention of debilitating and often costly diseases as opposed to the latest diet fad or tool.

### **Show Support**

It is vital you demonstrate unconditional support and acceptance when confronting obesity. Admit that weight loss is a challenge for everyone, including veterinarians, and that you understand the difficulties first hand. Share your own struggles and you'll gain the trust of your clients.

Clients will also respond more favorably to your recommendations if they feel understood. A 2001 *Annals of Internal Medicine* published article<sup>5</sup> demonstrated that by communicating empathically doctors had higher diagnostic accuracy, patients adhered to the recommended therapies more frequently and patient and physician satisfaction was higher in a shorter

amount of time. The hallmarks of empathic communication include active listening skills such as using nonverbal cues such as maintain good eye contact, nodding in agreement and leaning toward the client to convey interest in what they are saying; framing the client's statements to demonstrate that you understand what they are saying ("Let me see if I have this right: Fluffy began gaining weight after a new neighbor moved in next door."); reflecting the emotional tone of the client's statements to show you understand how they feel ("Yes, I know how frustrating this can be."); involving the client as partners in the care of their pet ("Is there anything I left out?" or "Does that sound right to you?").

Partnership with our clients is a vital component of any successful medical recommendation. It is critical that we match our treatment plan with our client's preferences, abilities and readiness for change. This is contrast to the traditional directive approach in which we simply tell the client what they need to do because we say they need to do it. Today's client no longer accepts everything a veterinarian says as valid without challenge. This isn't a threat or creation of an adversarial relationship but rather a cry for involvement. We should encourage our clients to discuss their lifestyle patterns (what, how much, when and where do they feed their pet or exercise them?), why they think it's important for their pet to lose weight, what signs of improvement in what time frame do they expect and what challenges do they foresee (multiple cats on various diets). By actively partnering with clients, we allow them to help us tailor a treatment plan that is more likely to succeed as opposed to dictating the terms for change.

In addition to accepting a weight loss or other health plan, we must also be certain our clients understand it. Don't rely on the old standard "Do you understand?" Everyone nods blankly in agreement because the last thing they want to do is to be lectured – again. Try using the "teach-back method." After you explain how much and how frequently you want the client to feed their pet, ask "Would you mind explaining to me that feeding plan so I can make sure I didn't leave out anything?" This technique works well for medications, follow-up care or any actions that your clients need to complete on their own.

Winning the war against pet obesity will not be easy. There is no "magic cure" or "silver bullet." Even with today's amazing technological advances, the foundation for long-term success depends on changing veterinarians' and pet owners' attitudes toward pet weight issues and adopting a healthier lifestyle for their pets. The fantastic opportunity we have as veterinarians is that we may, by extension, positively impact the health and well-being of our human clients. It is time to make a stand and stop ignoring one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in our pet patients and their owners. Educate yourself, develop a communication strategy and uphold the oath we took when we entered our profession with each and every patient.

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Nutrition is perhaps the most confusing, complex, and contentious medical discipline. Innumerable approaches, overwhelming opinions, and conflicting conclusions obfuscate consensus. In other words, there's a whole lot of debate going on about nutrition and clear answers are scarce. Veterinary medicine isn't immune to this food-diet-lifestyle confusion. Strong opinions abound and an increasing number of untrained, uncredentialed, and unlicensed individuals are offering therapeutic recommendations based on personal experiences and unsubstantiated claims. This is leading to confused pet owners and a surge of myths and misinformation. Here are some of the top pet nutritional myths and how your team can politely bust them.

*(Presentation Note: Specific and current pet food and diet myths will be reviewed during presentation. Below is a communication strategy you can use to create your own tactics to help shape your client's behavior and beliefs toward healthier and evidence-based approaches. EW)*

## Myth Busting 101 for Veterinary Teams

Busting myths is hard. Whenever people believe in something, regardless of how illogical or unproven, it's a real challenge to change their minds. Instead of attempting to change someone's beliefs or behaviors, I recommend trying to gently shape

them. Regardless of the myth, misperception, or potentially wrong behavior, here is a strategy I've found helpful when politely busting untruths:

1. Start with Thank You – No matter the situation, I advise always leading with compassion when interacting with others. Your alternative is to be emotionally neutral or negative; neither encourage collaboration and trust between two people. Start by acknowledging your sincere appreciation that the pet owner is seeking information to help their pet. “I’m really glad you’re interested in learning more about the best way to feed Buster.” or “I really appreciate the effort you’ve taken to find information about the best way to feed your cat.” Begin each conversation tilted toward positivity by thanking the client for their efforts, however potentially misguided.
2. Find the Why – The next step in myth-busting and shaping behavior is to determine why the owner is interested in or made a dietary change. “What made you interested in the BARF diet for Buster?” or “Was there something about your cat’s condition or health that made you switch foods?”
3. Find the What – Myths may take many shapes and forms. It’s essential you clarify exactly what the client means by “raw,” “BARF,” “no-grain,” “organic,” and other poorly defined terms. “Tell me more about Buster’s typical breakfast or dinner.” or “Walk me through your preparation of a raw meal for Kitty.” or “When you say grain-free dog food, is there a specific brand you’re feeding or what do you look for on the label?” Try to solicit as much detail and specifics as possible: types of proteins and where they’re sourced, quantity fed or prepared, how the food is handled and stored, and so on. Be sure to document this information in the pet’s medical record.
4. How does this make their pet feel? – Many pet owners are using new dietary strategies for a specific reason (see above). The next step is to connect that change with how they perceive their pet’s feelings and emotions. You’ll need to incorporate how the pet “feels” in your advice. “How do you think Buster feels on the new diet?” After all, helping a pet “feel better” is the whole point of diet. Improving a pet’s quality of life is often sought in the food bowl.
5. Thank You Again and a Nudge – After you’ve obtained the basic diet history, thank the client again for sharing. Keep in mind it can be intimidating for a pet owner to disclose these details, especially if they fear judgment or disagreement from the veterinary healthcare team. “Thank you again for sharing this with me. The more details I have, the better medical advice I can provide to help you and Buster.” By adding “medical advice,” you’ve taken the first step in subtly shaping and reframing the conversation. Use your authority as a medical professional to politely move the message away from marketing and unsubstantiated claims and toward an evidence-based nutrition discussion.
6. Do you really, truly object? – Is it harmful? Sometimes a client’s diet change, despite being unconventional or a strategy you’re unfamiliar with, is within the realm of possibility and safety. I’ve had clients feed a diet they drive 100 miles across state lines to purchase, the label makes some outlandish claims, yet appears complete and balanced. That’s not a diet I’m likely to dismiss or even attempt to change unless I have evidence it’s harmful or the pet has a medical condition that needs another approach. Be careful not to dismiss a diet or brand unknown to you; there are plenty of safe diets out there that aren’t my choice and others I don’t know much about. Before trying to change a behavior or diet, be sure you really, truly object to it.
7. Facts Don’t Matter Most of the Time – Unfortunately, it’s rare that a medical professional can prompt sustainable change based on facts alone (smoking, heart disease, obesity, substance abuse, etc.). people can cling to some pretty outrageous beliefs, despite an abundance of hard scientific evidence to the contrary. Be prepared with plenty of facts supporting your claims and preferences but be aware that you’ll rarely shape or change behavior solely based on the evidence.
8. It’s Not a Debate – The natural tendency in these situations is to immediately counter inaccuracies, dispute claims, and correct wrongs. That’s probably not the best choice when dispelling food myths with your clients. Avoid interrupting, listen intently, and demonstrate interest and concern regardless of what the pet owner is telling you (in other words, no eye rolling). “I feed him XYZ food because, as you know, dogs are really just wolves.” Instead of pointing out that dogs are not, in fact, wolves, try a softer approach when confronted with inaccuracies: “I’m really glad you’re interested in what the best diet for dogs is; so many dog owners simply buy the cheapest food. In general terms, dogs need... (insert your nutritional philosophy here).” Don’t use their preferred terms; frame the topic in your terms. In this example, repeating “dog,” not “wolf” is best. Even saying, “No, dogs aren’t really wolves.” removes emphasis from the topic at hand – finding the best nutritional approach for their dog – and places it on whether dogs are taxonomically “wolves.” It’s not a debate; don’t make it one.
9. What’s the alternative? – The most important motivator for shaping or changing behavior is offering a better alternative. The client originally made a change because they believed or were persuaded that there was a better option than their current situation. Your next alternative must be even better (and easier, cheaper, something...). This is the time to make sure you have a deep roster of alternative diets and dietary strategies to accommodate many clients. If not, don’t be surprised that every client doesn’t fit neatly into your limited offerings. Long gone are the

days when carrying a couple of brands or only believing in a single nutritional philosophy will work with today's well-educated clients who are exposed to countless diets and ideas.

10. Why is your option better? – Sharing a few facts can help support your case, but if you've uncovered the real reasons for change (see above), this is where you put that information to work. "I totally understand that you were looking for a more ancestral, healthy diet for Buster. I also understand your concerns about highly-processed dog foods. My primary concern is that the raw diet you're feeding, which you said is mainly chicken necks, liver, and hearts, is not nutritionally complete, leaving Buster deficient in many key nutrients essential for a healthy immune system and preventing disease. Of course, I'm also worried about your family contracting a contagious food-borne disease like E. coli or salmonella, but I want to focus on Buster's long-term health. With that in mind, and your interest in whole or less-processed foods, do you know about ... (insert your option here: i.e., high-pressure pasteurized raw diets)? That may be an excellent alternative that helps reduce some of my nutritional worries while giving you piece of mind."
11. Repetition is Key – You're usually not going to change people's behavior after a single interaction. Shaping behavior often requires patience, strategy, and persistence. Many times, a client will politely listen, not change, but begin considering what you said. When they return, whether in a week or a year, you should re-engage and reinforce your message(s). It may take months to years before change occurs; don't take it personally if at first you don't succeed. Many clients are also observing if you're sincere by whether you bring up the topic in the future. Repetition often signals credibility; it's so important you talk about every time you see them. If you're following your passion and scientific evidence, you'll never waver, despite rejection. In fact, your passion will compel you to try and try again!

These techniques work on busting diet and nutrition myths, promoting weight loss and dental programs, and any other medical service or product you feel important to tell pet owners about. Role play with your team and explore the optimal ways you can effectively communicate your key messages to clients and good luck busting diet and pet food myths!

## Next-Gen Pet Foods

The world loves pets: dogs, cats, horses, birds, rabbits, and fish share homes with over a billion human families. Americans will spend over \$30 billion this year feeding their pet loved ones, the vast majority of that food pouring into 107 million dog and cat bowls. Unknown (or ignored) by the vast majority of pet owners is the fact that the pet food industry is now one of the major contributors to global meat production, encouraging factory farming and environmental destruction. The ethical friction between "loving pets" and "ignoring livestock suffering" is leading many pet owners to scrutinize what's inside the kibble they're dishing out to their pets. It's time to radically redesign how we feed our pets. The clean meat revolution in pet food has begun.

The size and scope of this revolution is impressive. If we add up all the pet food bowls in the U.S., we'd discover that pets eat 30 percent of all meat in the United States, making them equivalent to the fifth largest country in the world in terms of animal protein consumption. Clever marketing, fueled by hundreds of millions in advertising budgets, has tricked dog owners into believing their Maltipoo is a bloodthirsty wolf wrapped in a Vuitton sweater (not kidding). An entire generation of dog lovers has been manipulated into buying high-meat kibble, regardless of the damage to other animals, water, land, or air. Factory farms and deforestation aside, are pet owners buying safer pet foods for their wolf-in-Maltipoo-clothing? Maybe, maybe not.

What goes into making, and what leaks out of pet food has me a little concerned. As a veterinarian, I've found the majority of modern pet foods found in grocery and pet stores to be nutritionally complete and balanced, eliminating most nutritional diseases in dogs and cats. And then we focus on pet food safety. I have been both relieved and alarmed by the surge in pet food recalls over the past decade. Relieved that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is doing a much better job protecting pets from contaminants and alarmed that there's so much contamination.

There have been over 200 pet food recalls since 2009. Most are from disease-causing bacteria, but during 2018, pet owners were shocked to learn that a lethal euthanasia drug, pentobarbital, was in many pet foods. JM Smucker, owner of Nutrish, Gravy Train, Kibbles 'n Bits, and Ol' Roy (to name a few), had to recall over 107 million cans of poisoned pet food. I guess you can say that made me more than a little alarmed. Pentobarbital-containing pet food aside, I have an even bigger concern with much of the pet food industry, and that has to do with the humane treatment of animals – all animals.

Veterinarians take an oath to "the protection of animal health and welfare" and "the prevention and relief of animal suffering." I'd like to emphasize to people that choose to eat or feed their pets meat, I'm not judging your "eating ideology." What I vowed to do, and take very seriously, is to prevent animal suffering, and that means educating pet owners on the

impact their pet food choices have on other animals, especially those we eat or feed. That's why I stress "mindful feeding" for pet owners.

The purchase of each bag and can of dog food represents a choice in how a cow, chicken, or pig lives its life and dies. Currently, the lives of these highly-intelligent, feeling, emotional animals are pretty awful inside the secretive modern food production industry. You know the tragic truth: thousands of animals crammed into metal sheds with barely enough space to stand, pumped full of antibiotics and hormones, and sentenced to a brutal life often ended in terror and pain. We need to be mindful of the consequences of our pet food choices. This is the disgusting reality of pet food meat production. But I haven't finished the disgusting part yet.

Pet food production is pretty bad for the environment. Recent research indicates pet foods are responsible for 25 to 30 percent of the environmental impact of meat in the United States, polluting water, soil, and air. Making all that meat for pets creates about 64 million tons of greenhouse gases each year, equaling the annual exhausts of more than 12 million cars. In addition to toxic gases, water pollution is a rising threat. There are now over 550 dead zones around the world, vast areas of ocean in which life has been largely destroyed by agricultural wastes. The once "fertile crescent" of the Mississippi Delta has become a dead zone, risking the lives and livelihoods of tens of millions of Americans. Intensive farming also requires a lot of drinking water. One pound of beef requires about 2500 gallons of water, compared to 250 gallons for a pound of soy or 25 gallons for wheat. There's a better way to feed our pets, but first we need to overcome some pet food prejudice.

"Ingredient bias" is real, especially among pet owners. Anything that's not "meat, beef, pork," or "poultry" is often viewed as inferior in terms of pet nutrition. The first step in the clean meat revolution is to explore, and potentially accept, a variety of alternative proteins. Cultured proteins, plants, insects, algae, and, our current interest, fungi, must be welcome on our menus and in our pet food bowls. We need to elevate the culinary conversation beyond traditional ingredients and embrace new foods that are good for us, our pets, and the environment. We've got to shed our antique ingredient biases and open ourselves to new ways of making food.

Our new way of making pet food began by revisiting an ancient Asian protein, koji (*Aspergillus oryzae*). Over thousands of years, the Japanese perfected this safe, nutritious, and savory fermented food that is considered a national treasure (it has its own holiday). Koji is the "secret sauce" of miso, soy sauce, and sake. It is added to many dishes to boost the umami flavor craved worldwide by billions. Rich in protein, koji contains the ten essential amino acids dogs require from their food. Koji also has been shown to support gut health in humans, providing microbiome-nourishing prebiotics. And did I mention it tastes great? All those elements led us to conclude that koji was going to be an important part of the clean meat revolution in pet food.

Safe, nutritious, environmentally-friendly, ethically-sourced, and affordable also make our modern production of koji revolutionary. No animals are harmed, no risk of euthanasia drug contamination, and we can produce tremendous quantities of this protein source in a sterile, secure, and small setting. This makes me very happy as a veterinarian. It also inspires me to take part in this revolution.

The time has come for us to get serious about feeding about pets more safely, sustainably, and ethically. The real challenge is how do we revolutionize pet food in order to preserve our planet while providing the best in nutrition? Free yourself from ingredient bias, think beyond the bag or can, and let's work together to win the hearts, minds, and paws of future generations. Let's win the clean meat revolution for everyone – and everything.

## **The Future of Aging in Pets: How Veterinarians Can Extend, Enhance, and Ease the Senior Years**

One of the greatest joys in veterinary practice is restoring health and vitality to an older pet. Veterinarians love helping a senior dog overcome its struggle to step up into the car, so it can continue to enjoy walks in the park. We cherish the opportunity to boost an elderly cat's immune system, enabling it to combat chronic illness, and maintain high quality of life for as long as possible. Over 40-percent of U.S. dogs and cats are estimated to be "senior" or over 7 years of age, offering plenty of opportunities for successful senior pet outcomes. As young and old pet owners seek integrative treatment alternatives for themselves, they are increasingly interested in natural options for their aging pets. Here are three tips to help you treat senior pets naturally.

### **1. Don't Wait for Disease**

Consider offering nutritional supplements, dietary changes, and diagnostic testing before symptoms develop in older pets. Many veterinarians wrongly view natural treatments and lifestyle changes as last-ditch efforts instead of preventive measures. Begin discussing diet, supplements, stress-reduction, and environmental enrichment strategies during early adulthood, before illness strikes. Look for subtle signs of illness and investigate any changes in behavior, routine, or appetite. I'm especially passionate about adding antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, joint health and digestive aides, and B-vitamins to nearly every pet I see, especially those over age 7. When disease develops, I try to catch it as early as possible through regular exams, blood, and urine tests. Many times, if the condition is recognized quickly, natural treatments and lifestyle changes can stall or prevent progression.

### **2. Team Approach to Treating Senior Pets**

A well-trained and dedicated veterinary healthcare team is essential to oversee the medical care of older pets. If your medical philosophy emphasizes natural and integrative modalities, it's imperative you involve receptionists, technicians, and assistants in sharing your message. Clients are likely to ask a staff member, "Does it really work?" The answer clients receive largely determines compliance with your advice. Staff training empowers your team to confidently answer these inquiries and reinforce the importance of your recommendations. Create a one-page summary of a natural supplement or integrative treatment, role-play common communication scenarios, and ask for honest feedback from your team. By understanding your team's questions and client concerns they encounter, you can better prepare them to promote your message of integrative medicine.

### **3. It's a Journey**

Lifestyle changes and integrative veterinary care is about more than the destination; it's about the journey. Focus on tiny daily changes pet owners can sustain: Replace a processed treat with a whole food alternative; add a simple urinary tract aide or antioxidant to a meal; commit to a 10-minute walk each day, no matter what. Optimal health builds on daily habits; make sure your clients understand the healthy habits their pets need to stay mentally and physically strong.

Serving senior animals is a joy every veterinary healthcare provider is fortunate to experience. You can help guide your pet patients on a lifelong pursuit of good health by embracing – and encouraging – proven natural treatments and healthful habits. The destination we seek is achieving and maintaining a state of optimal health, mental sharpness, and emotional strength that gives us and our pets meaning and happiness. That's a goal we should strive for each day we're privileged to practice integrative veterinary care.

## **Perspectives for Adding New Services and Products**

I'm always searching for ways to improve my patient care and client service. Over the past 23 years I've helped pioneer senior care programs, long-term drug monitoring protocols, and weight management and nutritional counseling alongside regimented staff training, communication role-playing, and innovations in veterinary hospital design. If you're considering adding a new service or product in your clinic, try these simple and straightforward steps to improve compliance and success.

### **Step 1: Believe in It**

Successfully adding a new service or product into your daily practice begins with personal experience and firm belief. Whenever veterinarians struggling to gain acceptance of a new therapy confront me, I ask if they've tried it themselves and believe in it? It's nearly impossible to recommend a medical procedure to your clients you haven't personally experienced and sincerely trust. I wouldn't offer a product or perform a treatment on my personal pets I didn't wholeheartedly believe was safe and effective and the same goes for my patients. Nothing speaks louder than personal testimony. To testify convincingly, you first must believe.

Is it an FDA-approved treatment? That's important to me as a veterinarian because FDA clearance indicates a therapy is safe for my patients. Once you're satisfied a product or therapy is safe for your patients, you need to believe in it.

My best advice for anyone considering adding anything to his or her practice is to first prove it to yourself before offering to your patients. Don't believe the hype; believe in your interpretation of the data and results. Evaluate the science, examine the safety record, and establish if the service or product aligns with your core values. If it passes those three tests, try it. If you're satisfied with the results, ask your team to review it and give their opinion. If your team loves it, you've got a winner.

What you've done is achieve belief and buy-in the old-fashioned way: you earned it. Lukewarm acceptance won't cut it; your team needs to be excited and enthusiastic if they're going to effectively promote the innovation. If you and your staff genuinely believe in what you're recommending, your clients are much more likely to act on your advice.

### **Step 2: Frequently Use It**

I have a friend who worked in marketing at Coca-Cola for many years. One evening we were discussing the "cola wars" and he revealed the secret to winning: Accessibility. The goal of Coke, in his opinion, was to be as close as possible to every human being on the planet. If Coke was within arm's reach, an individual was more likely to reach for it. I've taken those words to heart and applied it to my practices. If you want a recent addition to gain acceptance in your daily practice, it's got to be within arm's reach, literally.

I recently visited a practice owner friend who had completed a new facility. He had bragged about all the latest gadgets he'd acquired, and I was eager to see his dream clinic. As he escorted me through his sparkling high-tech temple, I didn't see his boasted high-dollar ultrasound machine anywhere. He led me to me a back room where he kept it until needed. He told me it was simply too expensive to risk leaving out in his treatment area. I asked how often he used the gleaming gizmo. At least a couple of times a month, he replied. Needless to say, I wasn't impressed, and his investment certainly wasn't as profitable as it should've been. Out of sight, out of mind, out of use, out of revenue. Use it or lose it, as the saying goes.

The better we become at something, the more likely we are to do it. Frequent use accelerates learning and understanding of a new product or service. If you only use or recommend something a couple of times per month. You're never going to gain the expertise our clients and patients need and deserve. Have your "new things" easily accessible and prepared for action; you'll be surprised at the number of opportunities you have each day to use them when you're constantly reminded.

### **Step 3: Share It**

As your confidence in a new product or service flourishes and your experience grows, you'll want to share it with your clients and community. Begin by creating a "Success Book" detailing complex cases with outstanding results. Take pictures of every new therapy case at diagnosis, throughout treatment, and at completion of healing. Ask pet owners for a brief quote about their experience and if they'd recommend the new service or product to others. Combining personal testimony with client's recommendations is powerfully compelling and can aid pet owners in making more informed veterinary care decisions.

In today's fast-paced and constantly changing medical environment, it's more important than ever to keep your clinic welcome brochures and website updated with new services. Consider crafting personalized client brochures explaining what class 4 laser is, how it works, and why you're excited to offer it. Take this content and add it to your website and repurpose for social media postings.

After you're comfortable with a new product or service, it's time to contact your local media. Newspapers, radio, and television are always looking for local stories to highlight and pet news is always welcomed. Other good outlets for sharing your news are weekly or monthly community or business magazines. I also recommend working with rescue groups and animal bloggers to distribute clinic news and updates. Don't make the mistake of delaying a new service until you've published a press release and gained news media. Start with yourself, extend to your team, and then share with your clients and community.

There's one final element you need to achieve sustainable success in practice and in life: Keep an open mind. Don't discount new ideas, products or therapies simply because you don't initially understand them. We live in an amazing time full of rapid changes, astonishing advancements, and wholesale upheavals. I'm not suggesting you accept every new thing; I'm advocating you investigate innovations that connect with your beliefs and practice values. Approach new services and products impartially and unbiased and you may discover incredible improvements in your patient care and client service.

## **Creating a Culture of Creativity: Attracting, Retaining, and Developing the Best Staff**

Misery loves company. This adage proved painfully evident during a recent meeting with a veterinary colleague. She was seeking my advice on handling sour team morale and sagging revenue. Her clinic was doing a little better than three years ago, but patient visits had failed to rebound and both she and her team were losing enthusiasm. Despite working longer hours than ever before, she still couldn't afford to hire an additional veterinarian to grant her much-needed time with her family. To top it off, she'd put on about forty pounds and was having trouble with achy knees and borderline hypertension. She was complaining that her receptionists were constantly at war with her technicians, and everyone seemed upset with the practice manager. As I sat there taking mental notes on her ailments and complaints, I started feeling pretty miserable. My spirit drooped because she was needlessly suffering. I took a deep breath, centered my thoughts, and outlined five simple steps to cure the conflict in her life before it killed her. It was time to end these "Space Wars," and create team harmony through education and training.

### **Step 1 – The Mirror Test**

Whenever you're unhappy or the people around you appear bitter, the first step to positivity is to take a good hard look at yourself. Our world is primarily composed of what we're looking for. I've found if you pursue peace and harmony, you tend to find it more frequently than when you assume everyone is threatening and hostile. The most content, authentic, and pleasant people I know are also the most complimentary of others, generous, and supportive. If you want the people in your life to be pleasant and fun to be around, start by being pleasant and fun. I can't stress enough the importance of leading by example. We are all leaders at some time during our day, often when it's least expected. If a team member confronts you with gossip or gripes, your response will ripple throughout the workplace. If you're truly tired of workplace cliques and tension, you'll politely redirect the conversation and make it clear that sort of talk isn't appropriate. Even if it feels bogus at first, fake a positive outlook until you become it. What's the harm? Are you afraid to trick others into thinking you're happier than you really are? There's more to this step but I wanted to move to Step 2 first.

### **Step 2 – Clean Your Fishbowl**

As painful as it is to ponder, most of our life is spent within a few thousand square feet. When that fishbowl becomes toxic, it affects us. Because this is your one amazing life, it's up to each of us, the goldfish, to clean our fishbowls. If we wait for someone else to remove the waste and sludge, we may wait too late, literally. To clean up our fishbowls, I suggest these tips:

- **Purge Poison Pufferfish** – Sometimes we have harmful nurses, veterinarians, or other staff swimming in our water. These divas and dilettantes are easily recognized by their forceful demeanor, predilection for defamation, and sequestration of secrets. They make themselves virtually indispensable and are commonly a client favorite and loathed by your staff. You'll never swim freely and joyously until they're gone. Nicer, better-qualified fish will flee or never jump in your bowl. If you're thinking, "I know I should get rid of..." -- you must.
- **Dethrone Practice Princesses and Princes** – Do you have any special fish in your bowl? Chances are they're poison puffers in camouflage. If you're constantly asking for a certain staff member, soliciting their advice, and spending more of your time with a couple of employees, you probably have a power player subtly usurping your guidance. For peaceful water, you can't inadvertently create a wake behind you. It can be challenging to spot a favorite employee because they hide in our blind spot of ego. Have a manager or other employee ask the least ranking team member if you have a "vet's pet." The best teams are equally loved and respected by their leaders.
- **Fair Feedings** – Equitable pay is essential to avoid inter-office conflict. If nurses are paid significantly more than receptionists, animosity will occur. The key is to train each clinic position to tackle more complex and, ultimately, profitable, responsibilities. An experienced, exceptionally trained front desk employee can prove immeasurably valuable to an efficient surgery. Veterinary nurses can be equipped with incredible knowledge and skills that expand their ability to provide additional services and information. None of this is possible, however, if an unknown wage war is underway in your finite fishbowl.
- **Swim in Schools** – There's nothing like witnessing a coordinated effort. Everyone seems to know where he or she needs to be, what to do, and what the objective is without obvious oversight. Everyone dreams of swimming in that school of fish. To make that dream a reality, you must become positive and create your focus as leader, clean your fish bowl, care for your fellow fish mates, and provide instruction. Creating a culture of collaboration requires leadership with purpose, a workplace that rewards good deeds instead of constant lashings for missteps, and a shared mission. This isn't rocket science; it's teamwork.

### **Step 3 – Test your Strengths**

For nearly 30 years, I've been an advocate for personality testing in the workplace. I've used a variety of tests and techniques to gauge new hires' aptitudes, abilities, and ideal placement. Understanding an employee's traits and tendencies can help managers develop individualized training pathways, incentives and compensation packages, and motivation strategies. I've also noticed an unexpected effect of all this personality testing and talk: The team begins to emphasize and discuss their strengths. Teams reflect their leaders' attitudes and interests. When staff enter an environment focused on discovering what makes them tick and how to make them better and happier, that becomes important to the employee. It allows employees to better understand each other and focus on solutions and strengths instead of failure and weaknesses. Evaluate your initial interaction with new staff members and make sure it clearly conveys your commitment to make them stronger, better, and more satisfied with work.

#### **Step 4 – Efficiency is Your Responsibility**

Inefficiency is the enemy of harmony. When things take longer, require more energy, or don't meet expectations, conflict follows. Too many veterinarians and managers whine when they should be resolving. "Why did they...", "If only..." and "It'll be different this time." are some of the most dangerous words I hear. We blame external factors for our failures, shortcomings, and inefficiencies. As leaders, we're responsible to develop systems, protocols, and strategies to make our surgeries operate smoothly. When things fall apart, don't cry about it, fix it. Every obstacle presents an opportunity to improve. At first it can be overwhelming; there are so many things you need to change. Start attacking one issue every day. When you witness something that could be improved, write it down on a note pad you carry in your lab coat. That evening, list ways to correct the problem. The next day, share your thoughts with the team. Once you've decided on a plan, do it. Make it your daily goal to work on one issue. Some problems will be solved by moving something, buying something, or stopping something. Others will require more time or complex corrections. Whatever you do, keep making things better, every day. As leaders, veterinarians, and managers, pledge to stop whining and commit to working on your problems.

#### **Step 5 – Don't Fuel the Fire with Junk Food**

Food influences our mood. Our physical state affects our attitude. If you want to be a happy and positive person, you've got to take care of yourself. One thing I've noticed in high-stress environments is the tendency to give into unhealthy cravings. If you've got a bickering team, low morale, and depressed enthusiasm, don't fuel the destructive fires with sugar. When we're under pressure, our body secretes cortisol, a primary stress hormone. Cortisol instructs our brains to crave quick-energy foods such as sugar and simple starches. That's great if you need to escape a thundering T rex. The problem is what happens an hour or two after the perceived Tyrannosaurus threat is gone? Your body craves rest. You become depressed, seek solitude, and can get quite cranky if bothered. In other words, a normally nasty employee takes it to an unholy terrifying level.

Take stock of what snacks and drinks surround you. Are they healthy selections? What about your own food choices? Do you prowl your treatment area with a sugary drink in hand? Do you clutch a chocolate bar as you criticize a co-worker? Ditch the doughnuts for apples and nuts. Replace soda with water. Swap pizza for salad. You'll be surprised how much more agreeable you'll be after taking a ten-minute stroll during lunch. Start your day with 30-minutes of exercise, yoga, or meditation and you'll see the world in a healthier light.

Every moment of every day you're faced with a simple decision: Are you making something better or not? How we address stress, anxiety, and conflict are active choices we make continuously. We can't eliminate conflict from our lives; we can lessen its impact and damage. We can also minimize the frequency of fights by focusing on fairness and fixes.

As I ended my conversation with the veterinarian, I noticed a tear trickle down her face. As I followed the cascading droplet, her face erupted into a bright smile. She got it. There was hope. She could do this. I forgot all about this encounter until a few months later when an unexpected email arrived. She wrote to thank me and updated me that she'd fired three problem employees, reduced her evening hours, hired another vet, and shed twenty-two pounds. She commented she was "living the life she wanted" and finally realized she was in charge of her happiness. As I finished the letter, I felt my heart swell with gratitude. She did it and you can, too. You can win your own "Space Wars" and restore order and peace throughout your galaxy.

## **The New Client Conversation: From Online to In-Person**

Pet owners have become quite vocal about their first impressions and experiences with veterinary clinics. If you don't believe me, ask the internet.

“Oh my gosh, the place reeked of musty paws! Plus, I had to carry my sick kitty through a sketchy parking lot. Never going back there with my cat.”

“I read all these great reviews and was completely underwhelmed by the filthy lobby, poor website, and complete lack of interest in friendliness. Dated, dirty, and discourteous.”

“I don't care where you went to school, if my dog doesn't like you or your employees, I don't like you.”

Those reviews can stall business growth faster than a Lab scarfing a steak dropped on the floor. No way to beat it, despite your best effort.

The secret to success in veterinary practice has always been to blend competent medicine and surgery with excellent client service in a comfortable and aesthetic environment. Like it or not, clients are judging us not only on our veterinary skills, but how we look doing it. I've focused on four main client contact points to optimize our perpetual first impressions: exterior, interior, vibe and virtual to achieve success. Let's look a little closer.

### **Crucial Curb Appeal**

My first clinic was Pug-ugly. “It's so ugly it's cute.” is not an ideal description for a medical facility. My wife and I knew we had to improve the exterior as soon as possible. We had no money, so we did it ourselves. Re-stripped and power-washed our five parking spaces, planted a couple of shrubs and potted plants, added mulch, added a small sign near the door, and generally tidied up. I fondly remember Laura and I arriving pre-dawn (and pre-work) and putting in an hour of yardwork before cleaning up and doing our “real jobs.” We were proud of our little clinic and wanted to reflect that joy to the world.

These days, I'm honored to visit clinics all over the globe. To be honest, I'm disappointed more than not. That expectation begins as soon as I get within eyesight. Is it clean, modern, easy to access, and look inviting? Does it convey compassion, competence, and trust? Even if someone knows nothing about the practice, they can glean an idea of whether or not they trust you long before opening a door.

First impressions are rooted in evolution and helped us survive. Our limbic system is constantly monitoring the environment for threats and opportunities. Our subconscious is constantly signaling “safe:caution,” and “like:dislike” prompts resulting in actions and behaviors. When you “get a feeling” or “trust your gut,” you're tapping into an elaborate network engineered over millions of years to keep you alive. That's why what the world sees matters. You can't beat evolution and you can't see the subconscious. But it sees everything.

I know what you're thinking: “That's nuts! Even Einstein was messy! Anyone who judges my clinic on appearance is wrong!” Maybe, but our clients do it without thinking. Don't blame them, blame their limbic system. Rational thought has no domain over these hardwired responses.

My first bit of advice to optimize those gut-felt first impressions is to walk your yard and examine the clinic's exterior. Does it reflect your standards? I used to joke that I wanted my clinics to be as clean as my surgical fields. I was only half-joking.

A coat of paint, updated outdoor lighting and signage, a manicured landscape, clean windows and awnings, and neat walkway announce a professional and energized attitude. These simple, yet significant, improvements often require little investment other than your time and effort. That's no joke.

### **Instant Interior Impression**

Neuroscience also indicates the first four seconds of a first impression are the most influential. That's when the amygdala and anterior thalamic nuclei are sizing you up. Sights, sounds, smells, and textures are analyzed in a nearly-instantaneous algorithm. An encounter is then granted the “like” or “dislike” subconscious judgment. You know it by an inexplicable

visceral response: a “shiver down your spine,” “something’s a bit off,” or “this place is awesome!” You can’t explain the feeling; you just know you feel it. Unfortunately, it may be even harder to get a limbic vote of confidence for veterinary professionals.

Pet owners visiting a veterinary clinic are often in an emotionally-heightened state, creating the potential for more intense negative responses. Any slight scent or sound can be overwhelming to a turbocharged amygdala. A cat’s cry can seem to signal extreme agony or a foul odor nauseating. A receptionist’s casual glance may be perceived as offensive and a forgotten name downright distressing. If we fail during those first few seconds, the appointment may be doomed. You can help avoid consultation catastrophe by striving to control the first impression. Control begins by experiencing your clinic as your clients do.

Enter your clinic through the main entry, using the same route most clients take. Check the door frame, the welcome mat, and the windows. I don’t have to tell you what clean looks like; you “feel” it. Next, and I’ve done this hundreds of times in my own clinics, drop down on a knee to inspect your waiting area from a “pet’s eye view.” The reason I do this is that by altering my angle of observation, I literally (and figuratively) see things differently. Repeat this process as you walk around your clinic, taking note of anything you want to improve. And there’s always something to improve.

Take a deep breath. What do you smell? Is it pleasant, offensive, or bitterly antiseptic? Whatever aromas you detect, your pet patients identify much, much more. Close your eyes and listen carefully. Do you hear wailing, barking, or meowing? What is the music? Is there a throbbing industrial hum or high-pitched whine that may frighten pets? Is the reception desk and lobby orderly? A cluttered interior may express disorganization, disinterest, and incompetence, especially to the fussy thalamus.

Your clinic’s entry and lobby set the tone for many of your appointments. If veterinarians are going to upgrade their client’s experiences, we need to pay careful attention to the ambiance created. And that leads us to consistently providing the “good vibes” we all seek.

### **The Persuasive Power of Positive Vibes**

The most powerful influencer of a first impression is your personal energy. While “positive,” “happy,” and “energetic” are enigmatic concepts difficult to scientifically validate, everyone knows they’re real. While the limbic system is busy appraising environmental parameters, your brain’s cortex is determining the final “feeling.” This is where it gets murky – and magical as far as I’m concerned. There are innumerable perceptions we don’t understand and probably aren’t aware of, including electrical energy fields, pheromones, hormones and perhaps bacterial, viral, and fungal messenger proteins that boil down into an emotional gumbo we call “vibe.” And vibe can be pretty persuasive for both pets and pet owners.

When we communicate with the intent of leading someone to action, we’re using persuasion. For example, most veterinarians would agree we need to persuade pet owners to vaccinate their pets against rabies virus. We may employ a variety of communication tactics to induce the belief in vaccination and cause pet owners to vaccinate. While we’d like to think scientific facts, figures, and rational thought would prevail and everyone would protect their pets against rabies, it isn’t that simple.

In addition to logic and facts, persuasion is also swayed by context. In the veterinary clinic, context may refer to the interior and exterior settings, but it also includes the “feeling” or “vibe” a client receives from the people inhabiting the space. Because these people are our staff, we have considerably more control over vibe than you might imagine.

Perhaps the easiest way to measure your clinic’s vibe is to ask. Pull a trusted client aside and ask how they felt when they arrived. Send out an anonymous online survey asking questions such as, “How did you feel when last visited? Welcomed, Ignored, Neutral or Normal” Spoiler: You’re hoping for “welcomed,” not the other responses.

To change the vibe, you first need to critically evaluate yourself. Are you energetic, positive, happy, and buoyant? Do people flock to you and feel better after an interaction? How do you respond when chaos hits? I can tell you with absolute certainty that a clinic’s vibe is founded in the personalities and projections of its leaders.

Staff training can create welcoming vibes. Train your front staff to greet each client with eye contact and a warm smile. Try my Rule of Three: Everyone knows the next three appointments by name, species and breed, and reason for visit. This simple habit ensures your team can personally welcome each client without fumbling for a name. It also instills confidence (an

important component of positive vibes) in both staff (we're on top of things!) and clients (they know who I am!). Monitor your team for negative comments about staff or clients, no matter how seemingly subtle. Judging clients ("I can't believe she waited this long!") can lead to shaming and incite adversarial relationships instead of collaboration. Vibes are contagious; make sure yours are positive and productive. But what if you're not present to spread your joy?

### **Impressionable Internet**

The majority of human communication requires physical presence in order to interpret our reception. We track body movements, posture, rates and tones of speech, and incalculable other tangible info to adjust and adapt for optimal impact. What happens when physical interaction is replaced by virtual interface? How do we extend excellent first impressions to our websites, social media, and electronic communications? Mindfulness.

The term "mindfulness" has been somewhat sentenced to the realm of meditation and inner-peace seekers. Mindfulness actually is much simpler: Being consciously aware of what you're doing. When it comes to electronic interactions, we need to be much more mindful of what, how, and why we're communicating. Once again, it comes down to details.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), humans are still working out the details when it comes to online relations. The best advice I can give is to stay aware. Coding preferences, fonts, colors, and platforms are shifting at dizzying rates. If your website is over two years old, chances are it's virtually obsolete (couldn't resist). Veterinary professionals are notoriously slow to change, and many of us are getting clobbered on the internet by outdated technology and "virtual vibe." Check out the online presences of large corporations and pet industry leaders. They're easy to navigate, slick, and hip. Right or wrong, that translates to "great" and "high quality" for many young pet owners.

Social media continues to be an important driver of business nearly everywhere but veterinary medicine. I encourage you to begin experimenting with Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. I say "experimenting" because the world is still figuring out what it wants from these platforms. Apply mindfulness to your posts and transcend "cute" and strive for "meaningful." You don't need "viral;" you need "impactful" and "actionable." You also need to listen to the world.

"Social listening" means lurking on social media, noting trends and tactics, and applying them. Follow a variety of successful brands and celebrities and if you "hear" something you like, see if you can appropriate it for your content. Anyone who tries to sell you a "content recipe" or guarantees internet virality is probably wasting your money. I believe in hiring online experts, but you get what you pay for. Maintain a simple content calendar (pet-themed holidays, animal events, etc.), and post monthly (minimally) website blogs, and daily-to-weekly social media. My goal is to meaningfully (and mindfully) encourage and promote examinations, adhere to medical recommendations, and raise awareness about pet care topics and developments. Think about it. (That's mindfulness.)

### **Perpetual First Impressions**

There is no single first impression; it's an infinite series of interactions and emotions. Evaluate your environment, elevate your vibe, and enhance your electronic communications. The future will be won by those that combine mindfulness with strategy, compassion with competence, and innovation with collaboration. Endeavor to make every client contact your best first impression. That's the surest way to secure success both today and tomorrow.

### **How to Professionally Ask Clients for Positive Online Reviews**

I was wet, cold, and slouched beside my broken-down car. Desperate for a tow truck, I pulled out my iPhone and Googled. In less than a second, I had three nearby choices plotted on a map. Beside each tow service was a string of stars. The first business had a 4.9-star rating; the other two three-point-something. I tapped the five-star listing and twenty minutes later was surveying the world from atop a toasty tow truck. I had leveraged technology to get me out of a jam, selected a service based on advice from total strangers, and completely bypassed traditional advertising and marketing channels. Ten years ago, this system couldn't be imagined; today I can't imagine living without it. Welcome to the new economy of trust.

Humans are hardwired to compete and collaborate. Those two traits are arguably more responsible for our ascension to the peak of the predatory ranks than any other twist in our twenty-three pairs of DNA. It's no surprise technology has tapped into that primal presence and created the sharing and trust economy. If you distill this movement down to its core elements, you find we both seek to learn and desire to perform better than other people. We learn and share through reviews and rankings;

we perform better when we know we're being reviewed and ranked. That simple idea is completely reshaping businesses, service providers, and our veterinary clinics. If you're not building and demonstrating trust on these new platforms, you're being left behind.

Traditional trust was built on expensive external codes. Banks built colossal marble columns and massive steel vaults to prove trustworthiness with your cash. Hotels constructed enormous entryways and donned exquisite attire to convey luxury. Professionals invested in costly Ivy League educations to signal skill and expertise. Marketing was driven by institution-approved messages and coordinated campaigns to encourage sales. All of these platforms are being challenged by the power of crowds banging away on keyboards and posting smartphone videos. Trust and credibility are being redefined and broadcast in exciting new ways.

Today's typical consumer makes purchases based on Amazon reviews and blog descriptions; selects a hotel tagged on Instagram and ranked highly on TripAdvisor. We read news stories because our friends shared them; we get into cars with strangers and stay in private apartments because hundreds of people gave them five stars. The new language and currency of value and trustworthiness is being defined by the three-billion Earthlings hardwired to collaborate and compete online. Which brings us back to that friendly tow truck driver and our veterinary practices.

As we neared the auto repair shop, my dead-car-transport-jockey changed the conversation. "I hope you never have to call me again. Being broken down by the highway can be frightening and dangerous. You can help others in your situation by letting them know about me, so they won't be as worried if they're in your situation. Here's a card with my information and how you can rank us on Google. It only takes a minute and I'd really appreciate it." Not only did I tip the driver generously, I promptly gave him five-stars. This guy was brilliant!

The act of asking for an online review demonstrates the shift from passive to active consumer advocacy. In the past, we imagined our most satisfied "clinic advocates" strolling through their lives joyously proclaiming to everyone they met the greatness of their veterinarian. That was never true. At best, these super-clients passively advocated for us whenever the subject of veterinary care came up. Sure, if Neighbor Nellie complained or bragged about her vet, your advocate spoke up in your favor. The problem was her voice didn't carry beyond the coffee table. We've now entered an era of active advocacy. If you receive a glowing review, it can be seen infinitely by innumerable pet owners. No longer are super-clients limited by the people they encounter; they can touch everyone with internet access and interest. It begins by asking for help.

Here are six tips to help you promote active advocacy, create value, and boost your credibility in the new trust economy:

1. **Don't ask for reviews – ask for help.** Pet owners naturally want to help other pet lovers. Leverage this instinct by changing how you ask for online reviews. If you have a client whose pet lost weight, beat a dermatological problem, is fighting cancer, or is simply doing better, try this tactic: "Mrs. Smith, I know how frustrating ear infections can be. You've done a fantastic job with Buster and followed our instructions perfectly. I'd really appreciate you sharing your experiences with other dog owners going through a similar situation. Here's a card on how to leave a short note on Google."
2. **Snowball effect.** The more success stories and positive reviews someone sees, the more likely they are to share their experiences. "Like begets like" rings true in both nature and online. Involve pet owners in a shared community and encourage them to aid others. Remember, we're hardwired to collaborate. All you need to do is activate those pathways and watch the snowball of encouraging stories roll and grow.
3. **Make reviewing easy.** Companies profiting the most in the trust economy are those utilizing technology to connect with their clients. Services such as DemandForce can send your clients a follow-up email or text message containing a simple click to review or leave feedback. Printed business cards with easy instructions on leaving an online review also work well. The key is to ask and then make it effortless to complete.
4. **Virtual extroverts.** The truth is many veterinarians are introverts. What you lack in eye contact and verbal persuasion can be made up in how well you communicate electronically. If you're uncomfortable asking for a review, draft a confident email request. Participate in text conversations, social media posts, or blogs. The digital footprints you leave help build credibility far beyond the range of your voice. Blog boldly.
5. **Great reviews equal higher Google rankings.** Google incorporates your clinic's rankings in its search algorithm. Your page rank and map placement are heavily influenced by online reviews, especially Google Reviews. This gives added incentive to ask each client for help.

6. **Your reputation has a new language.** I built my clinics on positive word-of-mouth. The next generation of veterinarians will succeed based on five-star reviews. This is a profound shift that requires immediate and strategic attention. A medical professional is only as good as their reputation; that reputation is being built on digital trust.

What about bad reviews? How should a veterinary clinic respond? Here are five steps to positively addressing negative online comments:

1. **The best defense is a good offense.** Bad reviews will happen; it's inevitable. To mitigate the impact of one-star reviews, pile on the five-stars. I encourage you to ask for an online review at nearly every visit. Google algorithms are built on math; make sure the numbers add up in your favor by actively asking for a five-star review.
2. **Defense matters.** Set up free Google alerts, pay an online reputation management service such as BrandYourself or Reputation.com, or hire a dedicated social media assistance provider. Whatever you do, make sure you have some mechanism to monitor the permanent internet conversation about your clinic. It's happening regardless of whether or not you realize it. On the upside, identifying and thanking clients for positive posts is a proven practice builder. #KnowItToGrowIt
3. **Respond immediately.** The faster you respond to negative online comments, the better. Don't delete unless you're considering legal action, or the post contains sensitive or offensive content. If you delete the review, the story pivots to, "What're you hiding?" instead of you addressing the issue openly and honestly.
4. **Stay positive and shift the conversation offline.** While it's tempting to point out the errors in a negative online review, it bores onlookers and devolves into a tit-for-tat playground skirmish. Instead, try posting: "We're sorry you had a bad experience with us. We'd like to learn more about your issue so we can make things right and improve our level of care. Would you please call Susy at this number immediately?" That shows viewers you acknowledge a problem and want to correct it. Nobody's perfect and everyone knows it so don't pretend to be. If the person continues on a tirade, they'll most likely be viewed as a nutter with a personal agenda.
5. **Learn from bad reviews.** I teach my staff that complaints are "Concealed Corrective Comments." In nearly every negative review, there's a lesson to be learned. Ignore the emotions and focus on the underlying problems.

Our developing digital lives aren't a fad; it's an evolution. As virtual reality matures and always-present, instant internet access arrives, the trust economy will flourish in ways we can't fathom. The winners and losers of this latest currency are being defined today and will impact generations of pet owners and veterinarians.

I'll leave you with a final warning and a hope that stress the importance of deciphering the trust economy: As our digital identity becomes established, it will become harder to reinvent yourself or escape a bad reputation in the future. The real reason you left your last job is only a LinkedIn connection or two away. Future potential clients will ask the internet if they should trust you with their pet's care. If you cultivate an excellent online reputation, you can go anywhere, including places nearly impossible to reach in the real world. As virtual medical care becomes a reality and spreads globally, your online reputation will largely determine how successful you'll be as a veterinarian.

The trust economy is what many of us dreamed for: a decentralized, democratized form of capitalism that reaches the greatest number of potential clients with the fewest barriers. Now that the trust economy is here, it's up to us to optimize it for both our profession and patients. I trust we'll do the right thing.