

Stop Wasting Your Time on Client Satisfaction.... Really! ©

By Jan Miller

Consider this: in a typical customer satisfaction survey, you are given choices that range from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, with the middle choice of “satisfied”. When a customer selects “satisfied” they are telling you that you have achieved *the lowest level of acceptable service*. Imagine someone describing you as “satisfactory”? Doesn’t sound so great now, does it? In fact I would argue that it’s insulting and you may very well be on a fast track to mediocrity, if you aren’t already there.

What’s wrong with having satisfied customers (clients)? Simply this:

Satisfied clients leave all the time.

They are the ones who shock you when you get a request to have records sent to another clinic. There was never any inkling of a problem; they always seemed happy and *satisfied* when they were at your hospital, their pets were doing well and they were mostly compliant to recommendations. You know the ones? The clients you absolutely hate to lose and have no idea why they left. Furthermore, you will probably never find out why. When asked, they will say something like: “Oh, things were fine, we really liked Dr. Jones. We just thought we’d try someplace else for a while.”

Satisfied clients will do business anywhere, loyal clients will not.

In order to grow your business you must cultivate client loyalty, not client satisfaction. A loyal client will defend you. For example, if a loyal client sees a negative review of your practice on Yelp or some other review site, they will get on line and write a positive review. You don’t have to encourage them to do it, it will just show up. A satisfied client is ambivalent. In fact, a satisfied client might actually be swayed to go elsewhere by reading a negative review of your practice even if they have not had a negative experience themselves.

If you are a small animal practice located in an area where several other small animal practices exist (which is the majority of you), you must do something that differentiates you from the crowd. You can either be the low cost or the high cost provider (differentiating yourself through your pricing policies) or you can provide exceptional service. Otherwise, the only thing you have going for you is your location. That may get clients to try you out, but it will not keep them.

What follows is a list of ways you can assure yourself of achieving *the lowest level of acceptable service*.

How to Develop and Maintain an Ambivalent Client Base¹

- **Show no genuine or personal interest.** Provide impersonal service by insincere people. Do not attempt to get to know your clients.
- **Take too long to respond to client requests.** This includes voicemails, emails, and phone calls.
- **Have unfriendly people at the reception desk or allow anyone to answer the phone *without a smile (yes, a smile when you answer the phone).***
- **Put people who cannot answer basic client questions in positions where they will be asked.**
Can your staff answer all general questions about diet foods, appointments, flea and tick products, what constitutes an emergency, etc.?
- **Don't have enough people.** Do your incoming calls go to voicemail, *ever?* That's a sure way to cause an ambivalent client, or prospective client, to go somewhere else. Remember a client's needs don't go away just because you don't answer the phone. They simply call someone who does answer.
- **Poor professional package or image.** You've heard it many times before: People believe they get what they pay for. Is your hospital **always** clean and neat? Are all of your staff and doctors professionally dressed? Do you have notices scotch taped to the walls or doors? Do posters have curled edges? Is all of your collateral material (brochures, cards, educational info, etc) professionally created and printed?
- **Nickel and dime-ing.** Are you trying to justify your fees by itemizing everything under the sun? Absolutely you should make sure to charge for the services you provide, every time. However, having an invoice, or treatment plan, that spells out every gauze, syringe and needle is simply unnecessary and begs scrutiny and debate.
- **Poor staff training altogether.** Inadequate training is the root cause of most problems and client defection. Consider this: the next time instead of addressing the employee who messed up, address the person who was responsible for training them. How often is that you or a supervisor?

Ask yourself the following questions about your customer service:

1. Does your mission statement speak to why you are in business? Is it customer focused or business focused? Hint: it should be customer focused unless it is your intention to tell your clients they are not important.
2. Do you have *principles* that speak to how you will treat clients? I don't mean a policy manual (although you need one of those), I mean the principles that everyone in your practice will live by? Principles should align with your mission statement. Principles are about customers, policies are about employees.
3. Do you only employ *friendly people*?
4. Have you developed and discussed with everyone how to respond to the most frequently asked questions or most difficult situations? What are your principles regarding how to respond to an angry client? How do you respond to the client who wants an appointment today when you are

¹ Adapted from articles and books by Jeffrey Gitomer

all booked up? What are your principles about the client who arrives late for an appointment? Are you customer focused or business focused? What are your principles about a call that comes in 10 minutes before closing? What are your principles about who determines when a situation is an emergency, the client or the staff? Policies are rules that provide boundaries, principles are philosophies about how you provide service and treat customers.

5. Does everyone on your staff (including doctors) know and understand that they are selling your business *every single time they talk to a current or prospective client*? How good are your sales people?

Client loyalty is based on the **quality** of the relationship you have with them. When all is said and done, most people prefer to do business with people they like, people they consider friends. When a client has any type of interaction with you they can do one of three things:

They can say something good about you.

They can say something bad about you.

They can say nothing at all.

And the magic is that you are entirely responsible for what will be said simply by how you've treated them, spoken to them and followed up with them.

How do you go about creating loyal clients? For sure, it's not about having the lowest price. Why? Because as soon as someone else offers a lower price, you've lost the client. Those clients are loyal to low prices, not to you. Loyalty is not the result of your fee schedule or any single encounter. It is exceptional and *memorable* service, every day, one client at a time. It is the recognition by every single employee that what they do and what they say matters.

Here are some things to try in order to kick start a renewed effort toward increasing client loyalty:

- At the beginning of each day, pick a client at random to be "the client of the day". (Obviously this cannot be a euthanasia or other clinical situation that is particularly sensitive.) The entire staff must know who this client is. Provide this person and their pet with the most memorable experience anyone has ever received at your hospital. Each employee must determine what they will do to make the visit memorable. My favorite ideas include saying "Welcome", and "Thank you". (I am constantly amazed at how often these common courtesies are missing.) There must be 100 different ways to express "welcome" and "thank you", find them and use them. After the client has left, or even the next morning when you pick your client of the day, discuss how it went. Did the client say WOW? *Really, clients do say WOW when things have been exceptional.* Count your WOW's for a month. See if the number increases as you get more practice.
- Make sure your: phone messages, messages on your invoices, fax cover sheets, client education handouts, surgery scheduling information, boarding information, etc. all convey a client focused and friendly tone. Eliminate anything that begins with or contains the words: No, Not, Don't, We Can't/Won't, etc. and replace it with wording that is positive in tone. For example instead of: "Clients who are 15 minutes late for an appointment will be rescheduled or will have to

wait.”, say “In order for us to be respectful of each patient’s time with the doctor, we appreciate you arriving a few minutes before your scheduled appointment in order to complete any paperwork”. Another example: instead of saying “Please turn off your cell phones”, say “Thank you for silencing your cell phone”.

- Consider putting a reminder in for client’s who use prescription food. Ask them about how long a bag/cans last and say that you would be happy to give them a call to remind them when it’s time to re-order.
- For the client of the day, try giving them something they will show to others. If you have the ability to take digital pictures, why not put a picture of their pet on a mug (with your logo on it too) or a key chain with a picture in it. A tchotchke of some sort can be designed to provide a memorable experience for very little money.
- Provide the client with information that goes beyond the everyday routine. Another one of my favorites is to actually explain to the client what it is you are evaluating as you perform the physical examination on their pet. I know you have done a physical exam thousands of times and most of you don’t talk while you’re doing it. Well, I’m here to tell you that most clients want to know why you are doing what you’re doing and what you’re looking for. It’s not only a great way to develop the relationship with the client, it also allows you to discuss why it’s important to do a physical exam regularly (more than once a year) and what kinds of conditions may present at what stages of life. If your practice doesn’t do a lot of dental procedures, this is a particularly effective way to bring the client along with you as you explain how dental disease evolves.

I challenge you to give some or all of these ideas a try for the next month and see what happens.

Remember, if you are not finding ways to differentiate yourself from the crowd of other competitive practices you will always have a client base filled with satisfied and ambivalent clients.

Satisfied clients leave all the time.