

Veterinary Practice News

THE INFORMATION LEADER FOR VETERINARY PRACTICE AND BUSINESS

February 2020 • Volume 32/Number 2 • VeterinaryPracticeNews.com



Exclusive Series

In honor of National Pet Dental Health Month, this is the final installment of a three-part series on how to grow your practice through dental services.

Revelations in oral health compliance

By Andrew Schultz, Jr., MBA, and Danielle Heberle, CVT, VTSH (dentistry)

In our first two installments, we wrote about baselining your dentistry program and the need to train your entire staff. Now we turn to the task of getting more of your clients to say yes to oral health. To do that, you must take a multichannel approach to client communication and, most importantly, recommend treatment. This may come as a surprise, but a recent survey revealed the number one reason pet owners do not have their pets' teeth cleaned is because the doctor never makes the recommendation. It's likely every other patient you see has periodontal disease, which means your client education and marketing materials should not only focus on treatment, but also prevention.

Little convincing is needed for the patient with advanced disease because bad breath, cruddy tartar, and loose teeth

are obvious signs that are hard to ignore. The trouble is, those patients are suffering and may have been for years, so it is your job to begin educating clients about the need to prevent disease as early in their pet's life as possible. It is much less expensive to prevent disease than to treat it, both in terms of your clients' hard-earned money, as well as their pets' quality of life and longevity. As the patient ages and disease progresses, the cost to treat rises, as does the risk from anesthesia when there are comorbidities.

If you want to increase dental compliance, your methods for educating clients need to be on point when owners are in your clinic. That said, client education should extend well beyond what they see and learn while they are with you. Every touch point with current and prospective clients should include messaging about preventive dentistry, so that once they arrive in your practice, they expect an oral

exam and a discussion on the findings. When clients enter your clinic or hospital (and throughout their visit), dental messages must support the importance of oral health in terms of prevention and treatment. For those who comply with your recommendation for dental care, reinforcing their good decision and harnessing their experience for the benefit of your other clients will pay off over and over.

When clients arrive at your practice, the customer care team member should review the reason for the visit and explain an oral exam will be a part of the physical exam. This is the first in-person reference to oral health your clients should receive, helping them to understand how important it is to pets' overall wellness. Remember, many clients see you as their pets' doctor, but on the human side, the dentist is a different office, so we may need to make the connection for them. Oral health messaging should be ubiquitous throughout their visit from the reception area to

the waiting room, into the exam room, and even in your retail space.

Consistent messaging

In our last article, we emphasized how training your entire staff on dentistry is vital for a successful dentistry program. Your customer care team should watch a dental procedure from start to finish so they have an understanding and true appreciation for all that goes into the process. Observing a procedure allows them to effectively communicate and reassure clients of the quality care and expertise that is involved with a dentistry procedure. When your customer care team reinforces the message clients are hearing from veterinarians and technicians, it evokes confidence, credibility, and compliance, which leads to healthier pets and happy clients.

Brochures

Handing your client a brochure

outlining the importance of oral health or anesthesia safety isn't as effective as opening it up and highlighting essential points regarding the patient care you are recommending. Make sure clients understand what's at stake, ask them to make a commitment to their role in home care, and walk them through the steps to a comprehensive oral radiograph exam (CORE) procedure under anesthesia. If you are taking the time to personally deliver a message, they will understand it is important. If not, you leave it up to chance, and it may just get ignored and discarded later.

Procedure books

Ever heard the saying a picture is worth a thousand words? Consider putting together a picture book that illustrates all the steps of the recommended dentistry procedure. What better way to create and reinforce the perception of value or the difference between the care your hospital provides versus

Consider putting together a picture book that illustrates all the steps of the recommended dentistry procedure.

PHOTOS COURTESY MIDMARK



the clinic up the road that charges half the price. Taking pictures of each step in your hospital and uploading them to one of the many photo album sites is easy and very affordable. Key components include the oral exam, preanesthetic bloodwork, IV catheter and fluids, multiparameter monitoring, thermal support, a dedicated team member monitoring the patient, dental radiographs, scaling and polishing, charting, oral surgery, home care product pictures, and happy pets.

Exam room posters

Think about your own experience going to the doctor and how medical posters are usually hanging on walls. You probably look at those posters while you're waiting, so why not do the same in your practice. Posters on the wall showing the importance of dental radiography or anatomy of the teeth are informative and can also be terrific conversation-starters. Your team can create customized messages for each exam room on a bulletin board, or you could purchase posters already created by various industry partners. Be sure to frame them for a more professional look.

Dental models

When clients think about teeth cleaning, they are likely only considering the tartar on crowns, and that simply cleaning it off is the goal. However, 60 percent of the tooth lies below the gum line, which is precisely where painful disease hides. Dental models that show the entire tooth from the crown to the apex of the

root can give clients perspective as to why X-rays are needed and why just removing the tartar from tooth surfaces is insufficient. Each exam room should be equipped with cat and dog dental models, or they should at least be easily accessible.

Client handouts

These are important, not just when making a recommendation, but for when a procedure is complete. What better way to validate the perception of value when you send home a pet's dental chart, radiographs, and before-and-after pictures.

Home care regimen

Finding the most effective route to good oral health must involve the pet owner, so it is your job to discuss the different options for home care and let the client decide which one to implement. Brushing is best, but seems to be the most difficult for clients to adopt. Some don't dedicate time to brushing or have trouble when the pet resists their efforts. Either way, while in the exam room, a member of your team should demonstrate how to properly brush the pet's teeth while explaining the benefits. They can also discuss the alternative home care products. Encourage owners to be patient with their pet and to start early. Pets may actually look forward to the flavored toothpaste when the owner is consistent and provides positive reinforcement. Cindy Charlier, DVM, DAVDC, says that if people can train a lion to jump through a ring of fire, we can train our pets to look forward to their teeth getting brushed.

If you do not get patients on

home care early, an ideal time to get the owner to commit is after their pet's annual CORE procedure, which allows them to start from a clean slate. Upon dismissal of their pet, a sample pack of oral care products should be sent home to see which method will be accepted. Do not send clients home empty-handed. Chews and oral rinses are ideal for those owners who cannot make time or for pets that resist or become stressed with brushing. Whichever product the client chooses for home care, be sure it has the seal of approval from the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC).

Recheck exam

A complimentary two-week recheck is an important step in determining that your patient is healing, but also provides another touch point to further educate, reinforce home care, and elicit testimonial stories about how their pet's behavior has changed. These can be the most rewarding for you and your staff because they remind you of why you do what you do.

Client testimonials

Ask clients who have had their pets' teeth cleaned to provide a written testimonial on how much better the animal feels since having a procedure. Get permission to snap a photo or have them email a cute picture of their pet so you can create a lobby poster, dentistry hero of the month display, or photo book of success stories. Many clients think their pets are just

aging, slowing down, and naturally stopping the things they used to do. That isn't always the case when their mouth hurts. How many times have your clients come in and raved over how their pet is playing like a puppy again? They might even begin to accept their kisses now that their mouth is clean.

Waiting room video

When deciding on playing or streaming client education videos in your waiting room, be sure they include information on oral health care all year long and not just during dental health month.

On-hold messaging

Dental education should be a staple for on-hold messaging, which is another contact point to drive home the importance of oral health and to reinforce the expectation that an oral exam will be a routine part of every visit. Your goal should be that every client who comes in actually asks for a dental exam without prompting. Wouldn't that be nice!

Your website

Dental services ought to be featured prominently on your website, and like all promotional messaging, should focus primarily on education about prevention and treatment of oral disease. Include links to articles, as well as downloadable materials and handouts. Emphasize the steps the pet owner can take with brushing and home care products

approved by VOHC that can help prevent plaque and tartar. Always encourage pet owners to look for signs of periodontal disease (list them) and to include annual dental cleanings in their budget and plan of care. Online pet portals connected to your site often include information about oral health to back up and reinforce your efforts.

Social media platform

We live in a digital world—social media is where society turns to get its information. Having a robust social media platform that includes important oral health notifications, videos, and information your clients can access lets them know just how serious periodontal disease is. It will also attract comments and testimonials to provide proof of its importance and benefits. A now substantial and ever-growing percentage of your clients are digital-natives—using social media allows you to reach them. Remember, it is not up to you to do everything on this list yourself. Recruit one of your own tech-savvy enthusiasts on staff to curate your social media. You may even consider the one you are always catching on their phone around the office.

Open house events

Many successful practices hold an annual open house, replete with bouncy castles and hot dogs for the kids. Engage your clients about oral health as they tour your hospital by including dental stations to



Dental models that show the entire tooth from the crown to the apex of the root can give clients perspective as to why X-rays are needed and why just removing the tartar from tooth surfaces is insufficient.

demonstrate brushing, talk about oral health, and promote free oral exams. The resulting booked appointments can add a direct return on investment for the open house itself.

Community events

When you set up a table at the local “taste of the town,” fall festival, or “bark in the park” event, be sure to talk about dentistry. You could also consider offering free oral exams and brushing demonstrations.

National Pet Dental Health Month

Why do you perform more dentistry procedures in the month of February? National Pet Dental Health Month should be about taking advantage of the industry attention to highlight oral health, happiness, and well-being of pets, not scheduling as many discounted dentistry procedures in the shortest month of the year. Every month should be pet dental month in your

practice, and by having these conversations with pet owners early and incorporating an oral exam as part of the patient’s wellness exam, clients will expect and not be surprised when you let them know it’s time for their pet’s annual dentistry procedure. Clients think bad breath is normal when in fact it is a sign of disease. It is up to us to give them the knowledge to pay attention to the mouth. A standardized approach to educating clients on periodontal disease should begin at the kitten and puppy stage, as well as with any new client joining your practice.

We have presented a comprehensive list detailing proven channels for client education. Some are essential to support your message, especially the ones your clients experience during or after their visit, which are the easiest to create and implement. The ideas for client education as part of your marketing and community outreach efforts can be even more powerful, but may cost more, take longer to

implement, or may depend on your tech savviness. Nonetheless, if you bring the project of creating client education materials to your team, you will be surprised by the enthusiasm and creativity you unleash. Plus, you will create ownership and buy-in with much quicker results.

For more tools and resources, see *2019 AAHA Dental Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats* at bit.ly/2SFJIF4. ●

Andrew W. Schultz, Jr., is director of business development and clinical services for Midmark and serves on the board of directors of the Foundation for Veterinary Dentistry (FVD). Schultz also served as director of “Project Milkbone,” a study into the dental performance of companion animal practices and presenter of “Double Your Dentistry” at the Veterinary Dental Forum (VDF). Danielle Heberle, CVT, VTSH (dentistry), is clinical services manager for Midmark, and leads Midmark Academy where she oversees a network of more than 50 dental and anesthesia experts who train in over 500 veterinary hospitals a year from a course menu totaling 100-plus hours of related continuing education. She was awarded the American Veterinary Dental College Presidential Medal for Stewardship in 2018.

Electronic and single printed copies for distribution with permission to Midmark Corporation from *VeterinaryPracticeNews* February © 2020 Kenilworth Media Inc.

