

PICK UP ON THOSE SUBTLE CLUES ON THE PHONE, AND PERSONALISE YOUR CUSTOMER CARE

Alison Lambert BVSc CMRS MRCVS, Managing Director of Onswitch. Honorary Associate Professor at Nottingham University's School of Veterinary Medicine and Science

This session will explore the findings of research undertaken by Dr Elizabeth Stokoe, Professor of Social Interaction at Loughborough University, which finds that language and style are crucial in developing rapport over the phone in a health care setting. Data collected from telephone calls made to UK veterinary practices finds that all too often the first response to a caller with genuine worries for her beloved pet is "are you registered with us?" Often followed by bald statements of the costs involved, delivered without empathy. In this session we'll listen to real call recordings, where the clients' sense of switching off and disengaging from the conversation is palpable.

If an owner has got as far as picking up the phone to call your practice, she has a genuine health care need for her pet and has chosen your practice to help her. There is no scenario where she should put the phone down without having been offered an appointment. We'll look at how using a simple, but highly effective call-handling model, the 5 Steps, will improve the quality and consistency of your practice's telephone customer care:

1. Give a great greeting
2. Use the name of the owner as well as her pet / horse
3. Create an emotional connection
4. Provide additional information - leaflets or website
5. Offer an appointment

Demonstrating genuine care and building rapport with potential clients at this early stage of the customer journey is essential if you are to turn an enquiry into a loyal lifelong client. Owners have plenty of choice when it comes to picking a veterinary practice and research finds that they are much more likely to choose those that are interested in the pet and really want to help.

Of course, simply following a process for call handling without putting any emotion and genuine warmth into the conversation switches clients off. Not only that, but it can be detrimental to the health of the patient - Dr Stokoe's studies in the field of human cancer care have created the concept of the 'patient burden', whereby the caller is made to feel problematic for asking for help and therefore withdraws from the patient pathway. In the UK, with our brilliant, but increasingly stretched, state-funded National Health Service, it is not usually possible to get an appointment with a GP the same day. Dr Stokoe's studies found that where patients called up having found a breast lump and looking for an appointment, those who were simply told "I'm afraid there are no appointments today" were more likely to hang up and take no immediate action, thus delaying their access to potentially life saving primary care. Those who were given more specific advice, "I'm afraid we don't have any appointment today, but we do have a couple on Friday" for example, were far more likely to end the call with an appointment.

Research consistently proves that the words we use make a massive difference in the outcome of the conversation. A study in the human medicine field by Heritage et al (2007) found that

changing just one word in the conversation delivered a statistically significant uplift in the number of patients reporting all their concerns:

In the scenario, "Before we deal with that, are there any other things you would like us to address?" 50% of patients reported additional concerns. When the words were changed to "Before we deal with that, are there some other issues you would like us to address?" a massive 90% of patients reported additional concerns.

In this session we'll also explore the implications for the veterinary profession of Daniel Kahneman's Peak-End theory of memory experiences. His Nobel prize winning study looked at two sets of colonoscopy patients' recordings of how unpleasant their experience of the procedure was, with data collected at the time of the appointment and then again a month later. His research showed that two key stages coloured their memories of the procedure, the worst bit (Peak) and the last impression (End). The length of the procedure had no bearing at all on their experiences. In the vet world this means that it doesn't matter how long the phone call or the consult is, what clients remember is the best or worst bit, and their last impression - an otherwise brilliant call that ends poorly will put clients off, just as paying a large bill at the very end of a productive visit will leave a bad taste.

Of course it doesn't help that receptionists are fielding inbound calls from clients on top of greeting patients and taking payments - multi-tasking gets lots done, but none of it done particularly well. Some of the best calls we hear on the Onswitch Index programme are at practices who have a separate space for telephone calls, allowing the reception team to dedicate their full focus to all the other jobs required to make the customer experience amazing.

When customer care is genuine and personal it builds strong bonds with clients, and delighted clients will recommend you to everyone - getting the phone right is one of the most effective things you can do to boost your business.