DIFFUSING THE ANGRY CLIENT

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In this session, we will explore extensive studies conducted in the airline industry and how to adapt findings to the veterinary practice. Ultimately, we will learn 6 tools for managing angry and complaining clients that can be applied to nearly any situation.

The six tools are:
1. Timeliness – How quickly we respond to complaints.
2. Facilitation – How easy we are to complain to.
3. Redress – What we do to “make it right”.
4. Apology – How and when to say “I’m sorry.”
5. Credibility – What we will do to ensure that others are not affected similarly.
6. Attentiveness – Communicating with empathy.

Proceedings:

Customer service is a critical part of the medical experience provided by veterinary clinics. As the primary point of contact with pet owners who are calling into the clinic, arriving for appointments or to have concerns addresses, and departing after a medical interaction, front desk staff members commonly come into contact with angry or upset clients.

While a front desk staff member may or may not be the appropriate person at the clinic to address a particular clients’ complaint or concern, all front desk staff members should have the ability to receive a complaint, begin the process of addressing this complaint, and improve the practice’s strategic position within a given encounter.

When facing an angry or complaining client, here are a dozen tips for people serving clients, regardless of their position within the hospital, to remember.

1) “Remain calm. When a customer starts yelling or being otherwise rude, there is nothing to be gained by responding in a similar manner. In fact, that will probably escalate hostilities. Maintain control of yourself, even if the customer’s tirade makes you feeling like yelling yourself.”

2) “Repeat their concerns. Once he’s had time to explain why he’s upset, repeat his concerns so you’re sure that you’ve identified the problem correctly… Repeating the problem shows the customer you were listening, which can help lower his anger and stress levels. More than this, it helps you agree on the problem that needs to be solved.”

3) “Phones are great diffusing tools. If a [client] emails you and you don’t respond for minutes (or hours) it can seem like they’re being ignored. You, in fact, may be busy helping other folks or even investigating their issue. But if the user reaches a boiling point, real-time communication can help to reassure them that you’re actually taking their issue seriously. In addition, it’s easy to dehumanize people you interact with on the web; all they are is a faceless email address. Hopping on the phone reminds users that they’re dealing with a real person, and they should perhaps be nicer.”

4) “Don’t take it personally. Remember, the customer is not angry with you, they are displeased with the performance of your product or the quality of the service you provide. Your personal feelings are beside the point.”

5) “Use your best listening skills. The first thing an angry customer wants is to vent. To do so, they need someone to listen—and, for better or worse, you are that person. Listening patiently can defuse a situation, as long as the customer feels acknowledged in his or her complaint. Hear them out. When they are done talking, summarize what you’ve heard and ask any questions to further clarify their complaint. Body language can be
critically important here. Keep eye contact. Stand or sit up straight. Keep your arms uncrossed. Show how closely you’re paying attention to their problem. ²

6) “Actively sympathize. After the customer vents, he wants to know you understand where he’s coming from and how he or she feels. Express sympathy for their unpleasant customer experience. Respect and understanding go a long way toward smoothing things over.”¹

7) “Never Argue Back. It is natural for upset customers to express their anger, but some customers can take things too far and your reaction may be to defend yourself. However, as a professional customer service specialist, you should never argue back. Maintain your integrity and be the better person. If customers begin to abuse you verbally, let them know that you understand their frustration and that being rude will not solve their problem. Let the customer know that you are there to help, but you cannot do so until they calm down.”⁴

8) “Apologize gracefully. Whether the customer’s complaint is legitimate or not is really irrelevant. If you want her to stay a customer, you need to express an apology for the problem they are having (or perceive to be having). A simple, straightforward statement is often all that’s needed: ‘I’m sorry you’re not happy with our product. Let’s see what we can do to make things right.’”¹

9) “Kill Them with Kindness. If your angry customer refuses to calm down, then kill them with kindness. Be sincere, respectful, and understanding. Show sympathy for their situation and express empathy for their frustration. By keeping calm and controlling your own anger, you may find that your customer will ease up a little too. Try to make a joke to lighten the mood or share a story to show that you can relate.”⁴

10) “Present a Solution. Now you need to present her with a solution. There are two ways to do this. If you feel that you know what will make your client happy, tell her how you’d like to correct the situation… If you’re not sure you know what your client wants from you, or if they resist your proposed solution, then give her the power to resolve things. Ask her to identify what will make her happy. For instance, you could say, “If my solution doesn’t work for you, I’d love to hear what will make you happy. If it’s in my power I’ll get it done, and if it’s not possible, we can work on another solution together.””¹

11) “Take Action and Follow-up. Once you’ve both agreed on a solution, you need to take action immediately. Explain every step that you’re going to take to fix the problem to your client. If she has contacted you by phone, make sure that she has your name and contact details. This gives her a feeling of control because she can get hold of you again if she needs to. Once the situation has been resolved, follow up with your client over the next few days to make sure that she’s happy with the resolution. Whenever you can, go above and beyond her expectations. For instance, you could send her a gift certificate, give her a great discount on her next purchase, or send her a hand-written apology.”²

12) “Use the Feedback. Your last step is to reduce the risk of the situation happening again. If you haven’t already done so, identify how the problem started in the first place… Find the root of the problem and make sure it’s fixed immediately… Also, ensure that you’re managing complaints and feedback effectively, so that you can improve that way that you do things”²

Works Cited: