



The Cat-Friendly Practice

Why are cats the underdogs when it comes to veterinary care?
How can your customers get them back on top?

For many cat owners, the veterinarian is the option of last resort. In fact, nearly four in 10 cat owners say they would take their animal to the veterinarian only if it were sick, according to survey results from the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study. Not surprisingly, lack of patient visits results in poor feline health and welfare, and less successful practices.



As part of its "toolbox" of offerings for veterinary practices, Partners for Healthy Pets (www.partnersforhealthy-pets.org) offers a module on how to develop a feline-friendly practice. Partners for Healthy Pets is a committee of the American Veterinary Medical Foundation, created to ensure pets receive the preventive healthcare they deserve through regular veterinary visits.

The estimated U.S. cat population exceeds the number of pet dogs by several million, according to data from the American Veterinary Medical Association. Yet the Bayer study found that 40 percent of pet cats had not been to a veterinarian in the prior year vs. only 15 percent of dogs. Those numbers add up to one thing: An underserved feline patient population.

The Partners for Healthy Pets tool is designed to help veterinarian practices understand what a cat-friendly practice is, and to help them transform their practices accordingly. Resources include web conferences and videos, informative articles and more.

- A pre-recorded web conference on "Becoming a Cat-Friendly Practice," by Elizabeth J. Collier, DVM, DABVP, past president of the American Association of Feline Practitioners and spokesperson for the AAFP Cat Friendly Practice initiative. This webcast, which provides one hour of CE

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Feline Friendly



Think like a cat

Do your veterinarian customers want to know the key to increasing cat visits? They should try thinking like a cat, that is, adopt a feline perspective, says Elizabeth J. Colleran, DVM, DABVP, in her web conference on "Becoming a Cat-Friendly Practice," on the Partners for Healthy Pets website. As the veterinary team improves its understanding of feline patients' needs, clients will take note. Ultimately, a stronger relationship between the veterinary practice, the client and the pet will emerge. Cat owners will show up at the practice more often, and visits will be less stressful for all concerned.

Many cat owners don't have a clue about their pets, says Colleran. But veterinary professionals do. It's their job to educate clients about the characteristics of cats, so clients can make better healthcare decisions on behalf of their pets. What are some of those characteristics?

- Cats are solitary survivors. They don't cooperate with one another. They don't have any hierarchy. They need to feel in control of their environment.
- Cats use their entire body – and senses – to understand and communicate with the world.
- Fear is the No. 1 cause of bad behavior in the veterinary setting. "We need to learn how to read the emotional states of our patients and respond accordingly," says Colleran.
- Cats like predictability, which speaks to the importance of controlling their environment.
- In the wild, hunting is a very important skill for the cat. At homes, cats should have opportunities to play and to work at hunting, with various toys.

Understanding these characteristics can help the veterinary team and the owner make visits to the vet less stressful.

credit, suggests strategies to lessen the stress of the veterinary visit for the pet, the owner and the veterinary staff; and how to create a more cat-friendly practice.

- Pre-recorded web conference on "AAFP Feline-Friendly Handling Guidelines," developed by AAFP and the International Society of Feline Medicine, by Ilona Rodan, DVM, DABVP, medical director and owner of the Cat Care Clinic in Madison, Wisc., and founder of Feline-Friendly Consulting. One hour of CE credit.
- Videos on the CATalyst Council Cat-Friendly Practice, designed to help veterinary teams enhance feline visits to the veterinarian. Videos are: "Cats & Carriers: Friends not Foes;" "The Best Place to Examine a

Cat;" "Tips for Examining a Fearful Cat;" "Massage to Calm an Anxious Cat;" "Getting a Cat Out of the Cage;" and "Handling a Cat for Lab Sample Collection." (The CATalyst Council is the outcome of two grassroots efforts – Re-Branding Felix and the CATalyst Summit. A non-profit entity, the CATalyst Council includes three distinct groups: veterinary medicine, shelter/animal welfare, and related industry entities, such as foundations and cat fanciers, the media, and commercial companies.)

• "Pouncing on Opportunity," an article from Trends magazine, with stories and case studies of practices that have successfully implemented cat-friendly techniques. ■

Editor's note: Partners for Healthy Pets is a committee of the American Veterinary Medical Foundation created to ensure pets receive the preventive healthcare they deserve through regular veterinary visits. Led by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association, this is a collaborative alliance of over 110 veterinary associations, colleges of veterinary medicine and animal health companies, all committed to a vision of improved overall health for pets. Partners for Healthy Pets provides tools and resources that help communicate the value and benefit of preventive care, enhance the veterinary-client relationship, and improve the overall quality of preventive healthcare provided for patients. It recently launched a consumer-targeted advertising campaign to promote the importance of annual veterinary checkups. These tools include surveys to help practices gauge their level of client service and satisfaction; guidelines to implementing AAHA/AVMA canine and feline preventive healthcare guidelines; tools to create Internet and social media marketing programs; and more.

It's tough to fool a cat....

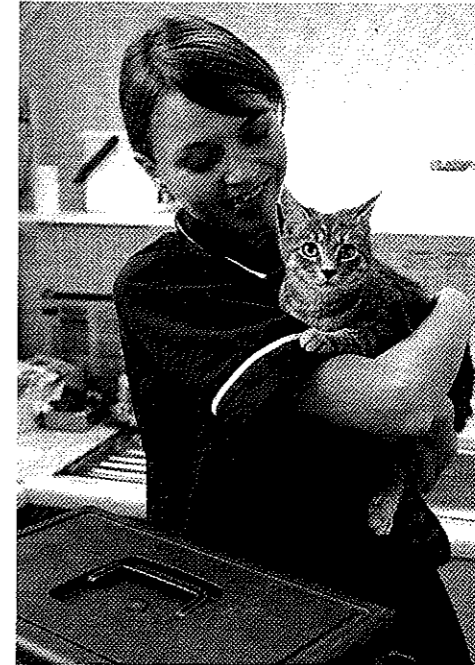
So don't even try

"A cat is usually put in its carrier for one purpose, and that is to be taken to the veterinarian," says Dr. Deana McReynolds of the Broadway Veterinary Hospital and Laser Surgery Center in Seattle, Wash., and a cat-friendly "success story" cited by Partners for Healthy Pets. "The cat knows something is up and that it's not going to be fun. Its natural reaction is to aggressively resist being put in a carrier and to show signs of stress during exams."

McReynolds was convinced that by becoming certified by the American Association of Feline Practitioners as a Cat-Friendly Practice, the practice would attract regular visits from skeptical cat-owner clients. Certification as a Cat-Friendly Practice is awarded by the AAFP to practices that meet 10 criteria designed to serve the unique needs of feline patients. A practice can qualify for silver and gold levels of certification. The process is completed online at the AAFP web site (catvets.com).

Broadway became one of the first CFP-certified hospitals in the nation. "As a result, our staff has become skilled in cat-friendly handling techniques, and we provide a welcoming, low-stress environment for our feline patients."

McReynolds has found the Partners for Healthy Pets "Feline-Friendly Practice" tool to be useful for staff training purposes. "The Partners toolbox is an excellent starting point for any veterinarian, including non-AAFP members, seeking to become more knowledgeable and skilled in handling feline patients," she says. "The Partners site is a one-stop location for resources on how to make a practice more accommodating to cats."



Results? "We've gotten a lot of positive feedback," she says. "Cat owners now tell us how much they appreciate the way we work with their animals and how different our approach is from what they experienced in the past." The practice has seen a dramatic reduction in the number of bites and scratches that the staff has gotten from feline patients. "When the client sees that the cat is calm and manageable in the hands of our healthcare team, they realize that our methods result in a better exam experience."

Tips for creating a Cat-Friendly Practice

A cat-friendly practice shows its stripes from the time the cat and her owner enter the reception area, to the moment

they leave with instructions in hand, says McReynolds. She offers several tips – published in the Partners for Healthy Pets website – for handling feline patients in a cat-friendly manner.

- Avoid putting cats and dogs in the same room. Establish a cats-only section of the reception area so that feline patients avoid proximity to dogs, which tend to be energetic and loud. Placing a towel over the cat's carrier in the reception area can shield it from the view of other animals.



Feline Friendly

Cat-Friendly Certification

By joining the American Association of Feline Practitioners' Cat-Friendly Practice program, practices are guided to assess and implement cat-friendly tactics in 10 different topic areas:

Staff training and continuing education; client communications.

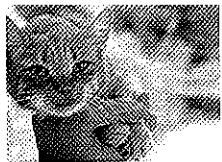
- Veterinary practice/waiting room.
- Feline handling and interaction with clients.
- Examination room and clinical records.
- Wards facilities.
- Pain management/operating room and anesthesia.
- Surgical equipment and dentistry.
- Diagnostic imaging and laboratory facilities.
- Treatment/health and safety.
- Preventative care by life stages.



Use synthetic pheromones to reduce anxiety in feline patients. Wrapping a cat in a towel treated with a commercial pheromone spray often has a calming effect.

- Bring cats to the exam room as soon as possible after arrival. This avoids fear escalation, which can result when a newly arriving cat encounters other animals in the reception area. Give cats 10 to 15 minutes prior to the exam to become acquainted with its surroundings.
- Conduct all procedures (patient history, obtaining vital signs, the physical exam itself, treatment, and client discussion) in the same room whenever possible. This avoids subjecting the feline patient to the stress of moving to several areas of the clinic.
- Use a stuffed animal to train staff in gentle feline restraint methods, such as wrapping a cat in a towel to simultaneously provide security and facilitate the physical exam.
- Avoid exposing cats to strange smells. Clean the exam room with a scent-neutral agent after each patient leaves to prevent exposing incoming cats to odors from dogs and other feline patients.
- Use synthetic pheromones to reduce anxiety in feline patients. Wrapping a cat in a towel treated with a commercial pheromone spray often has a calming effect.
- A cat-friendly approach is mostly about preventing a cat's anxiety level from escalating to fear and aggression, and less about the way the cat is physically handled.
- Visit the Partners for Healthy Pets web site, "Feline Friendly Practice" Resources Toolbox page and spend some time exploring.

McReynolds also advises veterinary practices to pick up a copy of Dr. Sophia Yin's book *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats: Techniques for Developing Patients Who Love Their Visits*. It's an excellent multimedia reference, she says. ■



Feline handling guidelines

Cats are the most popular pet in many countries, and yet they are the underdog when it comes to veterinary care, says Ilona Rodan, DVM, DABVP, medical director and owner of the Cat Care Clinic in Madison, Wisc., and founder of Feline-Friendly Consulting. Rodan is featured in a pre-recorded web conference, "AAFP Feline-Friendly Handling Guidelines," on the Partners for Healthy Pets website.

There are 13 percent more cats than dogs in the United States today, but dogs visit the veterinarian more than two times as often as cats, per the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study, says Rodan. What's more, adult and senior cats are perceived as needing less care than kittens, and indoor cats are perceived as needing less care than others. Such misconceptions have led to an upsurge in dental disease, diabetes, roundworm and other conditions in the U.S. feline population.

Feline resistance is probably the biggest reason for the lower incidence of cat visits, says Rodan. Cats don't like to go to the vet; and their owners don't like to take them. Hence the need for veterinarians and staff to learn proper feline-handling techniques. Proper handling can reduce feline fear, aggression, anxiety and pain; protect and strengthen human-feline-veterinary bond; provide better lifelong feline healthcare (including prevention and early recognition of medical and behavior problems); and increase safety,

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efficiency and job satisfaction for the veterinary team, says Rodan.

The veterinary practice should learn to recognize early signs of fear, such as avoidance, fleeing or fiddling (such as overgrooming a spot). By providing places for the cat to hide and otherwise cope with its fear, the veterinary team can prevent the cat from resorting to its last option – fighting.

Cat owners know their pets don't like change. Yet a trip to the veterinarian has many unfamiliar aspects for the animal: Their owner is chasing them around the house, shoving them into a carrier; they're forced to take a car ride, something with which most are unfamiliar; then, to top it off, they find themselves in an unfamiliar hospital environment, with strange people, smells and handling techniques. It's a recipe for fear, anxiety...and resistance.

The veterinarian's goal is to make the feline patient feel safe and secure. Recognizing signs of fear is a good start. A fearful cat freezes, with ears back, pupils dilated, hair bristled, etc., says Rodan. Direct eye contact can exacerbate the situation.

The team should move slowly and calmly, avoid looming over the cat, avoid approaching the cat from the front, and stay calm. Careful, gentle handling of the cat in the carrier and during the examination is a must. ■