

81% of cat owners say their cat is in excellent health. But only 37% of cat owners have visited in the last year for a wellness exam. (How do they know?)

3 Expand payment options

Remarkably, the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Studies have demonstrated that many pet owners do not know about their veterinarians' payment policies. It's vital to educate all of your clients on which credit cards are accepted and whether or not you offer third-party payment programs such as CareCredit.

Clearly, one of the biggest ways to make an impact on feline visits is to offer preventive care plans paid in monthly installments. In the Bayer feline study, 40 percent of cat owners indicated that they were more likely to visit the veterinary clinic, or visit more often, if the practice offered wellness plans costing \$10 to \$15 per month.

Such plans are feasible for virtually any practice. Here's an example. Let's say your routine wellness visit for an adult cat includes the following:

Service	Fee
Exam	\$60.00
Rabies 1 year	22.50
FVRCP booster 3 year	22.50
Fecal with Giardia	45.00
Total	\$150.00

These are some typical prices used for illustration purposes. Prices will vary from practice to practice. Also, the example does not include products

such as parasite control drugs because wellness plan experts have found that these programs work best when based on services, not products.

In the case above, the total cost is \$150 for a typical visit. Divide that into 12 installments and it's only \$12.50 per month. Add a \$3 service charge for monthly billing and it's only \$15.50 a month—a figure that a very large number of cat owners, including many who do not regularly visit the veterinarian, said they would find attractive. Keep in mind there are no discounts applied here—just standard fees for each service. It is not uncommon for practices with wellness plans to offer modest discounts in exchange for a full-year commitment to veterinary care.

Is this feasible for your veterinary practice? Yes. There are a number of companies in our industry that will provide full-service, turnkey wellness plan services at reasonable costs. For example, Preventive and Wellness Services (PAWS), a service from Veterinary Pet Insurance, charges \$2.95 per month per wellness plan client, plus a onetime setup fee. This includes service fees on all the credit card transactions. You can also set up a do-it-yourself wellness plan program using tools available for free at PartnersforHealthyPets.org, a site sponsored by a coalition of veterinary

companies and professional organizations, including the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA).

4 Maximize perceived value

In addition to managing costs and providing payment options, it's critical that veterinarians provide a high level of perceived value to clients. Obviously, the greater value a cat owner places on veterinary services, the less frequently cost becomes an obstacle. Value is primarily a function of service and communication. Here are some ways to maximize perceived value in your veterinary practice:

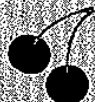
> **Consistency.** Have the client see the same veterinarian during every visit. People want to establish a relationship with their own doctor—whether it's a physician, dentist or OB-GYN—and see the same doctor every time. They want the same thing for their pet, according to the Bayer study.

> **Carrier help.** Before each visit, provide information to clients on how to acclimate their cat to the carrier and transport it to the practice with as little stress to the owner and animal as possible. Also, inform the owner what behavior to expect once the cat returns home. Remember, the appointment doesn't start when the client arrives at your practice. It starts in the home and ends when the client returns home.

> **Customized care.** Provide a cat-friendly waiting area separated from dogs and a cat-only exam room if possible. The American Association of Feline Practitioners' Cat Friendly Practice program can guide your practice toward less-stressful visits (see catvets.com for more information).

> **Client involvement.** Talk through the exam with the client, explaining in detail what body part you're examining, why you're palpating this and looking and that, and what you're finding as you go along.

> **Report cards.** Send a printed report home with the client, explaining your exam findings and what



Cats have a mutant chemoreceptor in their taste buds that prevents them from tasting sweet things.



Self-grooming can eliminate as much of a cat's body fluid as urination.



A cat's field of vision is 285 degrees, compared with 210 in people.

additional services or procedures were performed, if any. Owners also like it if you provide instructions on the care they should give their cat during the course of the next year.

> **Finalize the appointment.**

Check out and release the client quickly after the exam, and schedule the next appointment right there, while the client is still in the hospital.

> **Follow up.** Follow up after the appointment with a call or e-mail, checking on the animal and thanking the client for her business. Either the doctor or a staff member can make the call or send the e-mail.

> **Survey for success.** Conduct periodic satisfaction surveys of clients to determine what the practice does well and what it can improve on. This communicates to clients that you want to provide the best service possible.

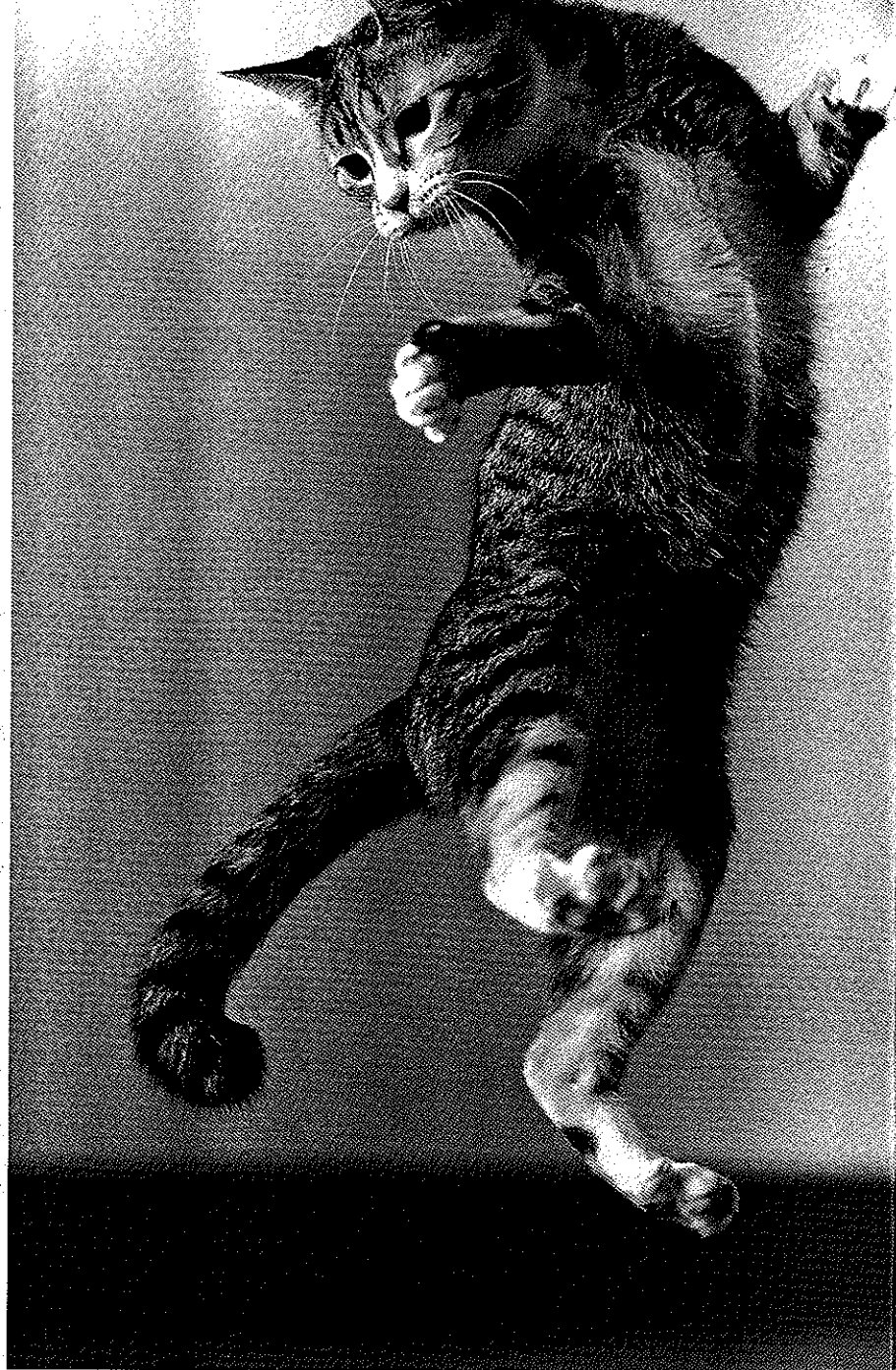
> **Be their rock.** Provide the name, phone number and e-mail address of a staff member—veterinarian or technician—whom the client can call with questions. Having an expert readily available to answer questions was one of the services that scored highest with cat owners in the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study III: Feline Findings.

Make the cat care commitment

So out of all of these strategies—keeping costs economical, offering monthly paid wellness plans, rewarding desired behavior, providing maximum value—what's most important? They all are! The practice that makes a commitment to all of these tactics is the one that can count on increasing its feline business and filling many of those open appointment slots. *dvm360*

John Volk is a senior consultant with Brakke Consulting. Dr. Marcus G. Brown is owner of Nova Cat Clinic in Arlington, Va., and president of the American Association of Feline Practitioners. Dr. Elizabeth Colleran, DAVBP, owns Chico Hospital for Cats in Chico, Calif., and Cat Hospital of Portland in Portland, Ore.; she is also past president of AAFP.

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56% of cat owners would take their pet to the veterinarian **more often** if they knew it could **prevent problems and expensive treatment later.**

Country cat, *city cat*

The obstacles to regular care are often the same for the scruffy barn cat as the pampered high-rise feline. The solution may be to use different tactics to get culturally different cat owners to comply. *By Julie Scheidegger*

Steph Burk, DVM, has a long history with most of her clients. Owner of Western Hills Veterinary Clinic, she was born and raised in Middletown, Ohio, and returned to her hometown to practice veterinary medicine after graduating from Ohio State University in 1988.

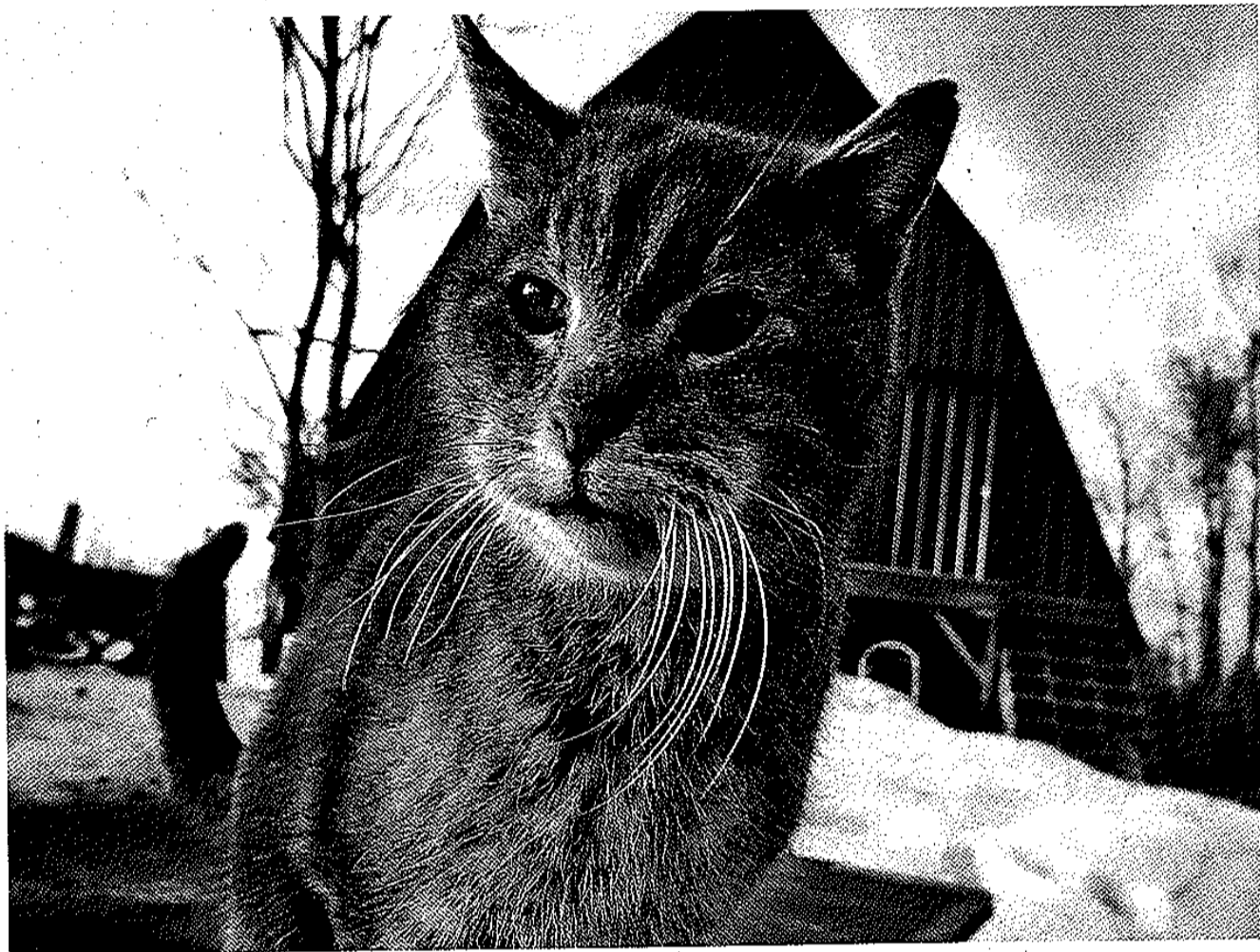
Her community is mostly rural and low-income—the Section Eight housing capital of the county, she says. “I know what they’re up against with their finances,” Burk says. Within a five-mile radius of Middletown, the median household income is less than \$50,000. Burk says not a day goes by when she’s not talking to someone about how to manage payment or provide the best treatment they can within their means. “Nevertheless, people try to help their pets,” she says.

In a former steel town where the largest employers are now big-box stores like Walmart, Sears and Target, Burk has realized that to get more pet owners through the door, she has to play the big-box game. “If you offer something at even a little bit of savings, even if it’s not a lot, people really pick up on that,” she says. The reality is that people see value in discounts, coupons, “BOGO” (buy one, get one) deals and loyalty rewards.

So this year Burk has done two things she never thought she’d do in her practice: offer a low-cost vaccine clinic and conduct a tomcat neuter day. She says both endeavors provide a needed community service but also (and more importantly for her business) they



Dr. Steph Burk



>>> The majority of Dr. Steph Burk’s feline patients are found pets and, given the rural area she serves, they are often outdoor cats as well. Serving a low-income area, Burk says cost is often a barrier, so she now offers low-cost tomcat neuter days and vaccine clinics to get clients who would otherwise never cross the threshold of her door into the clinic.

get more pets—specifically cats—through her door.

Burk holds the vaccine clinic once a month and is already seeing it generate new clients. There is no exam and therefore no exam fee, just the cost of the vaccine. Right now she says the clinic is drawing about 80 percent dogs, but she hopes it will catch on with more cat owners as well.

“There’s still this misconception that cats don’t need regular care, but people do feel they have to get around to getting a cat neutered,” she says. Hence her decision to offer a tomcat neuter day.

As with the vaccine clinic, Burk knew she would be providing a needed community service—at the very least, the neuter day might put an end to the seemingly endless litters of black-and-white kittens being dumped in the

area. “Somebody’s tomcat was having a field day out there,” she jokes. But it was also a deliberate move to get cats she knew were not getting regular—or any care—into the exam room.

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—Dr. Steph Burk

Her first tomcat neuter day was March 8 and involved 25 cats. In an area where low-cost spay and neuter services are commonplace at neighboring veterinary clinics, she charged clients just \$30. “Needless to say, I don’t make a lot of money off that,” Burk says.

And she’s the first one to say the

neuter day isn't about bells and whistles. "Some extras were available, such as vaccines, and quite a few people took advantage of that," she says. Burk also secured a supply of free flea control products from manufacturers and offered them as part of the service. She required cash or credit up front—no checks and no

"We're urban, but people just don't want to take their pets out of the house. They don't perceive that cats need regular care."

—Dr. Daphne Thompson

IOUs. "I wasn't stuck with any cats left behind," she says.

Though neutering 25 cats in a day was no small feat for the sole practitioner and her team, Burk says it was a success. She took advantage of the opportunity to begin new relationships—to let people know they had a

place where they could get help when they needed it. "The good PR from that is worth the deficiency in charges," she says. "We're hopeful that at least the ones that opted for vaccinations we'll get back for boosters."

What she really enjoyed was the opportunity to educate. Burk has a degree in anthropology and she loves to use it, especially when talking about cats. "Cats are the wildest of our domestic pets," she tells clients. "It is their instinct to hide illness until they absolutely can't." Burk says she's had cat owners bring in their pet at death's door, guilt-ridden that they didn't realize it needed care.

"Hopefully getting them through the doors—seeing the posters on the walls, having conversations with the staff—they'll learn that cats really do need more attention than most of them are getting," Burk says.

And while she admits the neuter day isn't the state-of-the-art medicine prized by today's veterinary profession, she has to be practical. "I think that the real world is a little different—you need to handle all these issues with common sense and flexibility and what works in your community," Burk says. "Common sense and compassion are really, really important."

She says she does her best to provide the best care possible within


her clients' means. "This is the real world, not academia," she says. "It's not the big city."

Daphne Thompson, DVM, an associate at the Cat Hospital of Chicago, is in the big city—but she says she faces many of the same obstacles to feline care that practitioners do at a small-town canine-feline practice. "We're urban, but people just don't want to take their pets out of the house," she says. "They don't perceive that cats need regular care."


The Cat Hospital of Chicago works to meet those challenges by devoting itself to cats. It is a gold-standard Cat Friendly Practice, as designated by the American Association of Feline Practitioners (see catvets.com). The hospital touts calming feline pheromones in exam rooms, exams performed wherever a cat is comfortable, individualized attention, top-notch accommodations including heated cage floors, continual monitoring for hospitalized patients and—to play to the crowd—no barking dogs.

Where Burk offers value in low-cost services to get her cat clients through the door, Thompson's Chicago hospital offers a special level of attention—a devotion to easing the anxiety of cats and clients—to raise perceived

Tastes like




Works like



been therapeutic nutrition like this.

form
initially




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