



Pet Care Partnerships

Good veterinarian–client relationships result in healthier pets

By Roxanne Hawn

Christine Merle, DVM, MBA, CVPM, shares her life with a horse named Happy, a cat called Mystic, and a new puppy dubbed Dozer. As a veterinarian with experience both in veterinary practice and as a consultant for top hospitals, she knows a lot about the science and business of pet care. Dr. Merle could easily serve as her pets' healthcare provider. Yet, she chooses not to. "I always have a colleague do exams, draw blood—do everything," she says.

Dr. Merle's example underscores the importance of both the family and

the veterinarian in a pet's health and happiness. While veterinarians supply medical expertise and intervention, families make the important decisions and provide the majority of pet care. Working together to build trust, effective communication, and genuine teamwork, pet parents and veterinary professionals can improve the lives of their companions and patients.

Of course, the type of veterinary experience pet owners are comfortable with varies depending on their preferences. Be sure to talk with your veterinary team about your preferences,

so you get the kind of veterinary experience you desire.

Nancy Bureau, DVM, CVA, practices at Alpine Hospital for Animals in Boulder, Colorado. At Alpine, most clients prefer not to use the term "pet" to describe the animals in their lives; they consider themselves to be guardians, not owners, of their animal companions.

Dr. Bureau says, "I think most people who think like that have chosen a veterinarian who treats their animal friend the same way." And maybe that's the key. No matter where you fit on the

Exam Room Etiquette

Manners expert Jodi R. R. Smith offers this advice for engaging in polite and respectful conversations with your pet's veterinary team:

- **Tone of voice and collaboration are everything.** Even when you are worried or frustrated, try to keep your voice neutral, then offer your input followed by questions like, "What do you think?" to keep the conversation constructive.
- **Bring notes, and take notes.** Many times, you're exchanging a lot of information in a short amount of time, and it's easy to forget something you wanted to discuss or something the veterinarian mentioned.
- **Accept responsibility for your own understanding.** Rather than saying, "You're not making sense," say, "I didn't understand that last part," or "I need your help to understand...."
- **Deliver reminders quickly, and then move on.** Veterinary teams manage thousands of cases per year. If the doctor or a staff member forgets a point or two about your preferences, be matter of fact with your reminder. There's no need to explain everything again from the beginning.
- **Leave specific messages.** Be clear about why you're calling and what you need, rather than just saying, "Call me."
- **Emotions are OK.** As healthcare providers, veterinary teams help people through tough times often enough that they understand if you are upset. In nonemergency situations, it's fine to ask for time to collect yourself.



pet lover spectrum, all of us are happy when our veterinary team engages with our pets on the same level we do.

TRUST

The seeds of strong veterinarian–client trust are sown in routine treatment visits and shared approaches to basic wellness. Typically, when you and your veterinarian have a good rapport about pet care basics, you are also more likely to mesh in a situation where your pet requires lifesaving care. Although those intense situations stick out in our minds, good relationships with your veterinarian are formed during the routine, day-to-day pet care scenarios.

Dr. Bureau says, "If your veterinarian's approach to you and your pet during basic wellness visits falls in line with your philosophy, then you've found a good fit. It doesn't

mean the veterinarian treats his or her own animals the same way, but as long as everyone can agree that this is what's best for your animal friend, then great. The bond you've made will often carry over when your dog or cat actually needs special care."

what's going on at home. The trick for you, as a pet owner, is to deliver the right level of detail and answer the healthcare team's questions to the best of your ability.

Dr. Bureau recommends that owners hold a family meeting to make a list of

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COMMUNICATION

Pet parents certainly rely on veterinarians to provide medical information, but for communication to be effective, it needs to work in both directions. To provide the best care, veterinarians rely on owners to keep them informed about

concerns or questions before veterinary appointments. This way, everyone in the household gets the chance to offer insight and make suggestions. For instance, one family member may have noticed something about the pet that no one else has. In addition, some family

members may have gotten advice from friends, trainers, or breeders or may have done research online, but even if the information is accurate, it may not apply to your pet.

"You can absolutely look online," says Jodi R. R. Smith, founder of Mannersmith, an etiquette consulting firm in Boston, "but don't assume that you now have the same expertise as someone who has gone to veterinary school and deals with animals every day. Twenty minutes online is not the same as a veterinary degree."

As both client and veterinarian, Dr. Merle sees each side of this communication dilemma. Yet, as a client, she hopes a preexisting trust allows both parties to have a conversation where differing points of view are examined and discussed in partnership, not competition.

TEAMWORK

Don't be too tentative about reaching out to members of the veterinary practice team if you need additional

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information or a little extra support. Also, it is important to be honest. If the option your veterinarian recommends seems too extreme or too expensive, or

if you have other concerns, don't be afraid to say so.

"My first job," says Dr. Bureau, "is to protect your animal's health. My second job is to protect your bond. My third job is to protect your bank account—wherever I can—and to help you spend your money wisely.

"Once I've advised people of their choices," she adds, "part of protecting the bond is not judging them . . . as long as they remain advocates and make choices that are in the best interest of their animal friend."

You know your pet best. When you reach out to your veterinary team with a collaborative spirit, they're equipped to educate you as needed, offer options, and support your pet care decisions.

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A freelance writer and frequent contributor to HealthyPet, Roxanne Hawn spends loads of time training her adopted border collie, Lilly Elizabeth.

