

Communicating for Better Results

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Communication is perhaps the most important skill in life. In “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” Steven Covey devotes an entire chapter to the importance of communications. Habit 5 is “Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood. “

Most people want most of all to be understood. We are so intent in making our point that we don’t may not listen at all and if we do it is generally so we can make our response...you know, be understood!

According to Covey we respond in one of four ways

- **Evaluating:** You judge and then either agree or disagree.
- **Probing:** You ask questions from your own frame of reference.
- **Advising:** You give counsel, advice, and solutions to problems.
- **Interpreting:** You analyze others' motives and behaviors based on your own experiences.

Effective communication is not about speaking...it is about listening, hearing and understanding.

As veterinarians we are trained to be solution oriented. To move beyond the problem as efficiently as possible. It would seem that we are not the only health care group to cut to the chase. In a study of physician/ patient interactions, residents interrupted the patient within an average of 12 seconds of entering the room. The time with patients averaged 11 minutes, with the patient speaking for about 4 minutes.

Remember what we said earlier?

Formal training programs in communications are being incorporated into many schools and training programs. 65% of medical schools now teach communications skills. Unfortunately, those of us who have been in practice a lot longer have often been left to stumble in the dark and develop our own style or lack of style.

There are literally dozens of publications and presentations that focus on developing communications skills. Why? Because people recognize the value of communicating effectively but the next time you are at a symposium walk into a few sessions on orthopedics or cardiology and you’ll frequently find Standing Room Only. Now visit a couple of communications sessions and notice how few people are attending.

An often ignored area of communications is psychosocial communications. End of life care and euthanasia are a vital part of our care giver role. Done with empathy and compassion and it can be a rewarding part of our practice. Done harshly or with insincerity and it can be a relationship ending interaction.

The reality is we may well go for months without being presented with a case of cardiomyopathy or a ruptured cruciate but we will see a need for communications, support and empathy two to three times an hour.

The opportunity to communicate at a meaningful level with a client is an opportunity to build a human and medical connection with a client who will be a client for a long time to come.

Steps to building a client bond

- Make yourself available and welcoming
- Greet and welcome
- Engage...15/5
- Consider their perspective and involve them in the decisions
- Communication skills: open-ended questions, reflective listening
- Make it clear that you are committed to the wellbeing of their pet
- Educate rather than sell
- Demonstrate concern by follow-up calls and ongoing communication

In their book “Made to Stick”, Chip and Dan Heath discuss the key qualities that make an idea (or in this case a recommendation) of sufficient relevance and value to foster action.

Those qualities are:

- **Simplicity**...Present your idea in a basic easy to understand statement free of jargon that only we might understand. “Fleas and ticks not only make our pets miserable they also transmit diseases that can make them very sick.”
- **Unexpectedness**...Get their attention with a “Did you know...” ““Were you aware that 17% of the people in the US are infected with dog roundworms?”
- **Concreteness**...Simple statements of fact “Dogs and cats age much more rapidly than people”
- **Credibility**...people have to believe your statement. “When people relocate or travel with their pet they can spread parasites from one area to another”

- Emotional...How is it relevant to their pet; their family. "Parasitic diseases can spread from pets to people. I know you have children and we want to do everything we can to protect them."
- Stories...whenever possible demonstrate with real anecdotes. "Heartworms were once a very regional disease but they now occur in all 50 states and Canada. There are over 1million infected dogs in the US alone."

These steps serve to engage the listener (in this case the client) and make the message of personal relevance.

Avoid interruptions either vocal or environmental. In a study of physician residents interacting with patients the average time between initiation and interruption was 20 sec. Most physicians spoke 50% more than they listened. That is not to mention the interruptions and distractions produced by background noise, telephones and computers or knocks on the door.

The key to effective communications is active and focused listening...seek first to understand...