

Chapter 2: Marketing Dentistry In A General Practice

I should start by stating that I hate the concept of “Marketing” dentistry. To me, marketing suggests that you are trying to convince someone to buy something they do not really need. Your patients **need** quality dental care and most of your clients will willingly consent, if they are **properly informed**. Therefore, I am going to outline some ways in which you can inform your clients of their pet’s dental health care needs. Once that is done, the rest will fall into place.

One underlying concept to keep in mind is that the owner is an important member of the oral care team. Whatever miracles you work when the animal is on your table, the long-term success depends on the owners. They are the ones that will have to brush the pet’s teeth and bring it in for follow-up examinations.

Be sincere, even if you do not really mean it

You cannot fake sincerity. If you want your clients to follow your recommendations regarding dental care, you must truly believe that what you are recommending is in the best interest of the patient. Your motivation must be the well-being of the pet, not your bottom line. Clients are very sophisticated and astute, and many bring a load of skepticism into the exam room with them. Therefore, the very first step in “marketing” dentistry is to educate yourself on the subject. Once you understand oral physiology and pathology and its effects on the animal as a whole, you will understand the tremendous benefits of proper veterinary dental care. You will also understand the wages of neglect. If you can speak with enthusiasm, even passion about dentistry, your clients are much more likely to take you seriously.

Team Work

Despite advances in the field over the last twenty years, veterinary dental care is still a novel concept to many pet owners. You may speak eloquently to them in the exam room about Fluffy’s urgent need for dental care, but the clients may still not be believers. If no one else in the practice mentions anything to them about it, the message loses credibility. Therefore, the second step is to educate your staff. This includes technicians, receptionists and anyone else that has contact with the clients. You want everyone in the clinic to be able to give

intelligent answers to your client’s questions. You want all your staff to be using the same language so that the message the client gets is consistent and reflects the seriousness of the situation. If they see that everyone in the practice thinks dentistry is important, credibility goes way up.

Talk real purdy

Language is a powerful tool. Depending on how you use it, it can either hurt or help your cause. For example, many clinics still call all dental/oral surgery “a dental” or “a prophylaxis”. These extremely vague generic terms give the uninformed the mistaken impression that all dental procedures are alike and rather simple. Anyone who has performed any amount of dental work knows that is not the case.

If an animal just needs a scale and polish to treat minor to moderate gingivitis then you might tell the client that the pet requires a thorough oral examination and hygiene procedure. For more advanced cases, you might explain that a thorough oral examination is required to assess the situation and then appropriate periodontal therapy will be instituted. Let your clients know what is going into their pet’s dental care.

Use the language of the discipline. Your clients have been visiting their own dentist and so are fairly familiar with the concepts and terminology. You can reinforce the idea that veterinary dentistry is much like human dentistry by using the same terminology. Do not call an oral hygiene procedure a “descaling” – that is what you do to the coffee maker. Be descriptive and thorough in your discussions. The corollary to that is that you do not want to overwhelm them with terminology – you must find a balance.

Avoid standard quotes

Even in my specialty referral practice, I get clients calling to ask how much I charge to clean a dog’s teeth. The suggestion is that there is a set price for a “dog dental”. Unfortunately, in many practices, that is the case, but it is a trap to be avoided.

Every case is different; some need only a coronal scale and polish while others may require radiographs, extractions, root-planing and flap procedures to adequately address the level of

disease. Having a set fee means you are over-charging some and under-charging others.

Certainly, you should have a dental services fee schedule, but it should be itemized and each case should have an itemized ESTIMATE, never a quote. This estimate can only be generated after doing an oral examination. So when phone-shoppers call and ask “How much to clean my dog’s teeth?” have them come in for an oral examination so you can do the treatment planning and come up with an estimate. Explain why this is necessary and inform the clients about the level of care their animal will receive. That way, as they shop around, they can compare apples to apples.

Do a thorough pre-operative oral exam with the owner

At some point (possibly at admission), you should do a thorough oral examination with the owner present. Show them what you are finding. Use dental models and other visual aids to explain what you see in their pet’s mouth, why it is significant and what you propose to do about it. Informed owners will often make the right decision.

During the treatment planning appointment, you will start to get a sense of the level of dental care the client wants/expects. Some want all the trouble teeth extracted while others are willing to authorize heroic measures to save teeth. You need to know what your client’s expectations are and what they are willing to pay for. You also need to know what their long-term commitment to follow-up and home-care will be. If they are not going to brush their pet’s teeth daily, then there is no point in undertaking heroic periodontal procedures – they will fail and everyone will be disappointed.

Have the client’s phone number at hand

No matter how co-operative the animal is, there is only so much you can learn from an oral exam while the patient is awake. At the treatment planning appointment or at admission, you did an itemized estimate, but once the patient is anesthetized, it is very common to find surprises.

If the new findings are minor, you may be able to handle them under the consent and estimate you have. However, if you find something that will mean a departure from the treatment plan or the estimate, you must contact the owner to discuss

the situation. Therefore, be absolutely certain that you have a phone number where you can reach the client during the day in case it becomes necessary. You might tell the client when you expect to have their animal on the table so they can plan to keep themselves available for your call.

Keep good (I mean really good) dental records

One of the great things about dentistry (from a mercenary point of view) is that almost all pets will require dental treatment several times throughout their lifetimes. Since dental disease is dynamic and changes over time, you must keep detailed and accurate records of the findings and treatments. This is not only good medicine (and of legal importance as well) but a good record can be a “marketing” tool.

I do a detailed dental chart for each animal’s treatment and at discharge I send a copy home with the owner(s). This gives them a hard copy outlining all the things I told them but that they forgot before getting home. The long-term success of many dental procedures depends on the client’s ongoing co-operation and commitment. Periodontal cases need daily home-care and sending a chart home showing where the trouble spots are can help the client keep on track.

Following treatment, your patient’s dental health should improve. If you have a detailed record of the pre-operative condition, you can compare that to the situation at recheck and point out to the owners how much things have improved. That can be a very powerful motivational tool. Before-and-after photographs are also wonderful. Many digital cameras take excellent close-up photographs and you can print copies immediately to send home with the owner.

The Discharge

When it is time to send your patient home, do take the time to explain the treatment, post-operative instructions and long-term follow-up requirements. As I have said, the long-term success of the dental treatment depends on the owners. You must take time to explain what you did, what effect it should have and what you need them to do. Have a written copy of their instructions as well.

Home-care

The prevention and control of periodontal disease depends on plaque control on a daily basis. Another section will discuss some specifics about home care but I do want to mention a few things here.

You can give home-care instructions at discharge, but do not expect the clients to absorb too much of it at that time. Be sure to schedule a recheck appointment for 7 to 14 days post-operatively. This will allow you to assess healing and is a much better time to go into detail about how to institute the home-care program.

You might also schedule another appointment (or at least a phone call) for a few weeks later to check up on progress. Do not just send them home with an instruction sheet and a brush and expect them to manage on their own. Your clients will need your support and encouragement.

Conclusion

No one would deny that dentistry has become an important part of companion animal medicine. One thing I have observed, however, is clinics that market dental care heavily but do not have the equipment or training to provide the level of care their clients expect and their patients deserve. Before you go too far down the road of marketing your dental services, make sure you can deliver the goods.

In my opinion, the key to selling veterinary dentistry to owners is to inform them honestly and thoroughly. Once they have the information, they will want the services.

Chapter 3: Informed Consent

Every time you undertake any medical or surgical procedure, no matter how routine it may seem, there are risks involved. There may be an unsatisfactory response to therapy, diagnostics may reveal unexpected problems, there may be a communication problem and there may be a problem with the fees. No matter how good a relationship you think you have with the client, you are leaving yourself wide open for trouble if you do not have a signature of consent from the client.

A signature of consent should indicate that the client knows what treatments are planned, why they are necessary, the risks associated, the options available and how much it is likely to cost. Good clients will not be insulted if you ask for a signature; they understand the need for you to protect yourself. Bad clients may be hesitant, but these are the ones that you have to watch out for the most.

Aside from giving you peace of mind that you have a signature tucked in the file, the policy of insisting on signed consent also benefits the client. By routinely formalizing an estimate of fees and going over the clauses on the consent form, it forces you to spend some time talking with the client about the procedure. Remember, you may view an extraction as a quick 'no worry' surgery, but a client who has undergone a similar procedure may have several questions and concerns. If you just flippantly admit the animal as if there is nothing to it, your worried client may not get a chance to express his/her feelings. They may feel silly being concerned when you seem so blasé. If you make sure you take time to explain the procedure and give the client time to ask questions and offer pertinent history, you will increase client satisfaction and decrease unpleasant surprises. In short, it is good for you, good for the client and, ultimately, good for the animal.

Another factor that should be disclosed for informed consent is who will actually be performing the procedures. Many clients may assume that since dental work is done under general anesthesia, that a veterinarian will be performing all portions of the procedure. While direct veterinary involvement in each case should be the standard of care, many portions of the procedure can be delegated to properly trained veterinary technicians. Clients should be made aware of this division of duties. In my own

practice, I currently perform all dental work while the technician assists and monitors anesthesia, and so my consent form does not address this issue. Yours should.

A sample consent form

The following is the text from the consent portion of my combination estimate-consent form. Above this text is space to do an itemized estimate.

My veterinarian has referred me to Hale Veterinary Clinic specifically to see Dr. Hale regarding a dental or oral problem with my pet. Dr. Hale will be unable to provide treatment for conditions other than those related to this referral. Further, Hale Veterinary Clinic will be unable to accept me as a client for regular veterinary services now or in the future.

I understand that this is an estimate only. All reasonable attempts will be made to work within this estimate or to obtain authorization for procedures not outlined above. If contact is not possible, I understand that other procedures may be carried out at the discretion of the doctor and that I will be responsible for charges related to these treatments. I agree to pay all fees related to the treatment of the named animal at discharge.

I understand that the practice of veterinary dentistry is not an exact science and that guarantees as to outcome are not possible. Treatment options and procedures have been explained to my satisfaction and I give my informed consent to Dr. Hale to carry out these treatments.

I understand that the ultimate success of the proposed treatment may depend on adequate home-care and follow-up and acknowledge my responsibility in this regard.

I understand that any anesthetic poses some risk to the patient and that every reasonable precaution will be taken to minimize such risks. In the unlikely event of an anesthetic complication, I authorize Dr. Hale to carry out such procedures and treatments as are deemed appropriate.

I give Dr. Hale permission to photograph my pet for the purpose of documenting the treatment and I understand that the photographs may be used for educational purposes. Confidentiality is assured.

When it is time for my pet's follow-up appointment with Dr. Hale, I wish to be (a) contacted by Dr. Hale or (b) contacted by my regular veterinarian (circle one).

I ask each client to read this portion, after I have explained the estimated fees. They then have an opportunity to ask any outstanding questions before signing. Every client is asked to sign this form and I have never had anyone hesitate in the slightest. In fact, I think most people find it comforting to have these details formalized.