



# Using Ambush-Style Kindness to Recognize and Build Client Loyalty

Article by Roxanne Hawn

Kindness practices can also improve team morale.

Imagine a typical day. The practice team does what they do best as clients come and go. Everyone assumes it's status quo—until a surprise gives everyone a happy jolt. What if—BAM!—the team ambushes a loyal client with an act of kindness?

Maybe your team starts doing this once a week or once a month. Maybe it's the person coming in that week who has been a client the longest. Maybe it's someone who recently lost a pet and is coming in with another pet or a new pet for the first time. Maybe it's a client who recently had a pet diagnosed with something scary and who could use a boost.

Each practice can decide when, who, and how to ambush people with kindness. Use these ideas to kick start brainstorming that best matches your team's vibe and clients' personalities:

- A hug receiving line (for clients who like hugs)
- An impromptu song-and-dance party (for clients and patients who won't flip if you sing and kick up your heels on the way to the exam room)
- Instagram-worthy backdrops for silly photos of clients and pets
- Paper crown and a kazoo parade to mark the occasion
- A practice-wide announcement about why you're honoring the person so that everyone else feels the love too
- Gifts of photo(s) of their pets (if you have taken good ones)
- Thinking-of-you cards signed by everyone for people who are worried or grieving (and maybe prefer a quieter surprise)
- A short social media video (live or otherwise) recognizing the person and pets
- Gift certificates for veterinary products or services
- Gift cards to local restaurants or shops
- Gift baskets with treats for people and/or pets

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As an example, on the annual “Colorado Gives Day” (December 10, 2019), FirstBank executives surprised clients at Colorado State University’s teaching hospital by paying for their bill. A total of 13 families benefited from this surprise act of kindness. See the video here: <https://www.facebook.com/CSUVetHospital/videos/2439935186322889/>



## Why surprise?

MRIs of the brain show that the so-called pleasure center (nucleus accumbens) activates more strongly when something pleasurable comes as a surprise. People are essentially hard wired to pay extra attention to unexpected things. In other words, surprises make a big emotional and physiological impact. Some research even indicates that studying the brain’s response to the novelty of surprises may help understand addictions to certain drugs that heighten awareness and sensations.

Obviously, you need to be careful to surprise but not scare people or pets. We’re saying ambush here but think of it more like a magic trick than a huge shock.

Caroline Leavitt, New York Times bestselling author of *Pictures of You* and *Cruel Beautiful World*, explains that surprises remind people “that we are there for them. We see them. We are all part of the same circle. It’s too easy to feel lost and alone, and as if no one notices or cares or feels for you. And it’s the little things that are always the game changers. The unexpected blast of love!”

## Why kindness?

Leavitt actively performs random acts of kindness in her daily life in New York City. She says kind things to strangers of all ages, especially those who might feel marginalized.

She offers help and often simply helps without anyone asking.

“To me, kindness is a way to knit myself tighter to the whole world,” she says. “It’s a way of saying, ‘I am here with you. I hear you. I see you. What can I do to help?’ It’s a kind of deep connection that I believe changes you on a molecular level—not to get woo-woo about this!”

## What if it’s poorly received?

Not everyone will respond positively to an unexpected act of kindness. What then?

Leavitt can see both sides of this possible pitfall, having felt uncomfortable with expensive gifts from her sister after her mom died or others trying to help many years ago when her fiancé died two weeks before the wedding. She says, “I am close with someone who is mentally ill, and often kindness is twisted around to be something terrible and hurtful, so I have learned to be careful. Some people cannot tolerate kindness because of wounds they might have. Sometimes if it is too much, it can seem insincere.”

So, what can you do if your kindness backfires? “So how I respond when someone isn’t happy with my kindness is to calmly apologize or quietly ask them what it is that I can do for them,” Leavitt says. “I think the answer is really to ask the person, or if you are the person, tell everyone what it is you would need.”

## What if you’re already emotionally spent?

Increasingly, the veterinary profession is paying more attention to the mental health of practitioners and team members. For a community of professionals who already feel like they are giving, giving, giving all the time, suggesting another major outlay of emotion may feel impossible. That’s understandable. Here is why it might help.

Social psychology researchers have found that people doing one act of kindness daily for a week reported becoming happier than the control group. The study looked at four different types of kindness tasks:

- Toward people participants are close to
- Toward people they are less close to
- Toward themselves (self-care)
- Or simply looking to observe others’ acts of kindness in daily life

## "Combining the power of kindness and surprise may provide stronger feelings and connections than doing good veterinary work alone."

It turns out that a focus on kindness in any form made people feel equally good— "... suggesting that kindness to strong ties, to weak ties, and to self, as well as observing acts of kindness have equally positive effects on happiness." [J Soc Psychol. 2019;159(3):340-343.]

An organization called Life Vest Inside sells "Catching Kindness Cards." People pass along these cards to anyone they see offering kindness in the world. The cards keep getting handed to new people showing kindness. The goal is to hand off cards received within 24 hours to keep the positive momentum flowing. It also helps people focus on the good in the world while looking for a chance to give the card away. More than one million cards are currently in circulation. Check YouTube for documentary-style videos to see how it works: <https://www.youtube.com/lifestinside>

If your team isn't ready to spring kindness on clients, perhaps start with handing out these kindness cards or ones of your own to clients to recognize them for their own acts of kindness. Or you can begin by practicing or recognizing kindness with members of your team before expanding to include clients.

Small steps like this may bolster team morale. Maggie Wilson, reiki master teacher and metaphysical mastermind, teaches kindness practices to groups. After hearing about the mental and emotional strains on veterinary professionals, she offers the following advice to leverage kindness to yourself: "I have found with my clients a way to offer kindness to others when you feel drained is being kind to yourself first. Even if it's just a pep talk in the mirror for one minute. Just for that minute you say every kind thing you would want to hear. This energetically makes your mind think you are experiencing kindness. The mind cannot tell an inner event from an outer event. This is why when we see a sad movie or experience, we weep. Our mind doesn't know it is not happening to us. So, we can use the mind as a catalyst to build ourselves up even during our darkest moments. The mirror ritual can make you feel silly, but if you can laugh at yourself, you can be kind to yourself."

Wilson calls this positive self-talk process a "kindness rampage." It can work to boost others too. Yes, it's likely going to feel uncomfortable at first, but she has seen amazing results in team morale if individuals or the whole team rally with kind words for one minute at a time on a regular basis.

### The kindness contagion

If the goal is to build bonds between clients and the practice, then recognizing client loyalty matters. Combining the power of kindness and surprise may provide stronger feelings and connections than doing good veterinary work alone.

The effects touch not only the individuals the practice team chooses, but everyone on the team and everyone in your community of clients who feel the glow of active kindness and carry those positive feelings into their interactions with you and with others.

In a piece written for *Scientific American* in 2016, Jamil Zaki, assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University, wrote about the infectious nature of kindness: "In a set of new studies, my colleagues and I highlight a broader flavor of positive conformity. We find that people imitate not only the particulars of positive actions, but also the spirit underlying them. This implies that kindness itself is contagious, and that it can cascade across people, taking on new forms along the way."



Roxanne Hawn is a professional writer and award-winning blogger based in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. A former writer/editor for the American Animal Hospital Association and the American Humane Association, she has written about veterinary medicine and pet topics for nearly 20 years. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, Reader's Digest, Natural Home, [Bankrate.com](http://Bankrate.com), WebMD, The Bark, Modern Dog, and many high-profile outlets. Her first book is called *Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate*.