



# Handle With Care: Bonding with First-Time Pet Owners

Article by Roxanne Hawn

## Providing additional support to build loyalty and cut down on confusion

Getting your first pet as an adult is a big deal, even if you grew up with pets in the home. There is something about being the ultimate decision-maker that changes things, especially as options for top-notch veterinary care continue to expand.

Whether a client is truly a newbie to pet ownership or practically so, this subset of people likely require and deserve additional time, attention and resources from veterinary teams. Those who become loyal, top-tier clients bring higher lifetime value to the practice and often community influence to help you attract more people like them.

### Setting expectations

With brand-new pet owners, veterinary teams can help set expectations—not only what clients can expect from you, but also what you expect from them. These early moments lay the foundation for pet-care teamwork throughout the patient's life.

Integrate a fair amount of education about your team's processes, even for things that seem painfully obvious to you. Examples include coaching first-time pet owners

about:

- Always having their pets on leash or in a carrier
- Weighing dogs on arrival and providing that information at check-in, if applicable
- Properly using entrance-only and exit-only doors as appropriate
- Any cat-friendly or fear-free strategies you use, if applicable
- How to check-in and check-out, including when / where to pay
- Where to wait and expected wait times if prescriptions need to be filled
- What the next steps will be—follow-up appointments or calls, etc.

Early on, it's also a good idea to help first-time pet owners understand team members' roles. For example, if veterinary technicians handle most routine questions in person, by phone, or through electronic means, be sure to pitch them as clients' own personal experts and explain which kinds of scenarios one of your veterinarians will get involved as needed. That way you don't have people assuming they will always get to connect with a veterinarian between appointments and potentially feeling short-changed if it's someone else.

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## Road maps forward

Budgeted pet-care plans or first-time/new-pet bundles can also lay out a road map for people to follow for the level of routine care you recommend. Bundled appointments also give you the opportunity to spread out educational conversations to avoid information overload.

Robert Crowley, DVM, owner of Community Veterinary Clinic in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, says, “I also find that you can only give so much information in the first visit. So, if I know I’m going to see those people two more times, then we kind of take the first visit to cover the first questions and certainly leave it open to if they have questions. We don’t typically follow-up with them, but we say, ‘If you have any questions, please give us a call.’”

## Consistent messaging and contact

Crowley and his wife Sarah Crowley purchased the practice in January 2018. He had worked there since 2004. She serves as clinic administrator and co-owner. They’re currently setting up efficiencies and protocols to make the most of practitioners’ time, to keep things flowing, to maintain client contact, and to be able to accommodate all the appointment requests they receive.

“Out of 100 percent of things that are done, 20 percent can be done just by the veterinarians and requires a veterinarian’s license. The other 80 percent can be done by technicians and by staff,” Crowley says.

Soon they will launch a clinic app to facilitate communication and enhance client connections with longtime staff members—many of whom have worked at the practice 10–20 years.

“Our longest appointments are still 30 minutes,” Crowley explains. “I certainly run over on some appointments and run under on others. And it all seems to work out. I don’t book an hour for new pets or first-time pet owners. And the nice thing, too, is that our front staff and our technicians are all relaying the same things. So, people are getting exposure to the same information multiple times, which really helps in remembering it.”

## Crowd-sourced recommendations

In many cases, practices can leverage the experiences and knowledge in their community of pet owners to provide ideas for recommendations about things like harnesses,

behavior solutions and local services such as trainers or groomers.

“Mainly [recommendations] are achieved through feedback from our clients,” Crowley says. “So, we have a long list. I don’t have a lot of personal relationships, but I do say, ‘Any trainer has to be a fit for you, too, so if they’re telling you something or doing things that don’t feel right, you may have to find another trainer because not everyone is a fit for every trainer.’”

The same is likely true for litterboxes, litterbox locations and litters for cats or harnesses for dogs with different builds or personalities.

In some cases, first-time pet owners may need help understanding that it sometimes takes experimentation and figuring out what works best for a specific pet and that there isn’t a single right answer for every question.

## First time for everything

Keep in mind, as well, that new pet owners may also be brand new to things like emergencies, cancer diagnoses and end-of-life decisions. Even when a client is many years into pet ownership, it may still be the first time they’ve had to make big decisions and may need additional consultation.

## Teamwork paying off

With help from a long-time friend who is a veterinary technician and thanks to patience from the veterinary team, Jamie Gee says, “I definitely felt like a first-time dog owner even after growing up with dogs. They were usually outdoor dogs that my parents did the majority of care ... I think I feel the most supported at the vet by the tech who comes in first and asks me questions, and they have always asked me specifically if I had questions about his diet, exercise, vaccines etc. That being said, my vet is really great too. I think that it helps first-time pet owners feel supported and comfortable to ask questions when you don’t feel rushed and when the people working at the vet place seem to like your pet. I have never felt totally clueless or like I couldn’t ask for help from my vet.”

## Best match

A big part of veterinary marketing and long-term client satisfaction is knowing what kinds of pet owners—no

matter their experience level—best match your values, team vibe and services. It all starts with being true to who you are and clear about your availability and expectations with first-time pet owners. Providing a little extra time and attention early can pay off later.



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## Sticky Points

Susan Johnston Taylor and her fiancé adopted a chihuahua mix named Sebastian when Taylor was 30. They got married, moved to Canada for a while, and then moved to Austin, Texas. They switched veterinary hospitals after buying a house in 2016. They may switch again.

Sebastian needs annual dental cleanings. In summer 2019 when Taylor picked him up after a cleaning, she found herself in a new and stressful situation—even though at this point she'd been a dog owner for several years.

"The vet's office told me he needed antibiotics," she explains, "but they didn't have the antibiotics in stock, so I'd have to take the prescription to a human pharmacy and get it myself. This was closing in on 6 pm when the vet's office would be closing. Sebastian had just woken up, so I couldn't pick him up any earlier, so I started calling human pharmacies. The first several didn't have the proper dosage in stock, and I worried I wouldn't be able to get the pills before he needed a dose at 9 pm ... essentially left me to fend for myself. Fortunately, my local grocery store pharmacy had the right pills and didn't charge me an absurd amount of money, but it was stressful for a few minutes."

What would have worked better? "They called me at 2 pm to let me know Sebastian was doing okay after the cleaning, but hadn't woken up yet, so that would have been a good time to give me a heads up about needing to track down the antibiotics," she says.

Here are some additional scenarios where first-time pet owners hoped for better support:

- **Basic care tasks.** "I did not grow up with pets. I didn't want one but my children (12 and 15) wanted one for years. My first pet came 2.5 years ago when I was 42. It was a Miniature Schnauzer. My vet team did not help much with knowing how to socialize her, how to introduce new routines or procedures to her, train basics, or even physical care. I would have liked help with knowing how to do some basic care (bathing, brushing, nails, teeth)," says Kathy Wiebe Nijenhuis.

- **Dog training.** "There were just so many resources with dog training that it was hard to figure out what was and wasn't the best way to do things ... we had a hard time finding proper resources for things like [socialization]. We were very lucky that we got an amazing dog trainer who was able to help us," says Siân Lepinski.
- **Vaccines.** "I was 31 when I got my very own pets. I got a cocker spaniel puppy named Rocky and an adult Siamese cat named Apollo on the same day," says Stephanie Biron. "... The times when I wish I was offered more support were around vaccines. I would have liked to know why each one is so important and exactly what each did specifically to improve my pet's life."
- **Nutrition.** Elke Groothuis says, "I grew up with two cats. I was very involved with taking care of them, but I didn't know much about vet visits because they both hated to go to the vet. My parents, most of the time, went without me. I was 26 when I got my dog Ollie ... I feel always very informed by my veterinarians. I can always bring him in if I'm unsure about something, or I can call them or Facebook message their business ... The only thing when I maybe needed some more help is nutrition-wise. I just didn't know what the best food was to feed Ollie. They recommended the brand they sell, but he got very bad allergies in the summer. They really didn't educate me on change of diet but recommended an allergy test. I decided to get educated by a local food shop instead, and I feed him raw now. His allergies are so much less now since I feed him raw."
- **Scolding.** Christine Morey was 35 when she adopted her first dog. She says, "I have moved vets a few times. I have found that if my vet doesn't treat my pet with the same respect as my children, I will not return. I remember one visit when my pet was uncomfortable getting a skin scrape taken, my pet growled, and the vet said, 'She's very cross' and told my pet, 'Stop! What is wrong with you?'"