

The Forks in the Road: Build Trusting Relationships with Clients

Article by Dr. Jason Nicholas, President and Chief Medical Officer, Preventive Vet



For your clients, getting a new pet is an exciting time. But it's not all fun and games, right? After all, lots can go wrong and pet owners typically aren't aware of everything they need to know to keep their pet healthy and safe. To best help your clients—and build strong, trust-based bonds with them—you need to be providing them with the full range of health and safety information that they need. It's actually not as daunting as it sounds, and there are good business reasons why you should do so.

Who will your clients turn to?

Throughout a pet owner's journey, they'll be faced with *many* decisions. These are what I call "forks" in the road of pet ownership. There are more obvious forks, like socialization and training, vaccines, spay/neuter, and choosing a good food. But what about the multitude of other forks, those that typically aren't proactively discussed, yet can also have a serious impact on your patient's (and client's) life? Things like xylitol, lilies, sago palms, linear

foreign bodies, suffocation in chip bags, GDV, high-rise syndrome, the dangers of sticks, preventing noise phobias, and a host of other topics.

Clients don't know what they don't know, and they can't prevent what they're not aware of. So, are you taking advantage of the good will (and good customer service) opportunity to make your clients aware of all the dangers that lie in wait down these forks? Companies like 1-800-PetMeds, Rover and even Amazon and pet supply stores are seizing the opportunity to bond with your clients by using education. Here's a quote from a recent pet shop publication*:

"Sharing engaging and educational content is one of the best ways to position your store as a thought leader and central hub for all things "pet." It will ensure customers think of you first whenever they have questions and turn to you for guidance."

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Do you really want pet owners turning to pet shops *first*? I know, I don't!

Bridge the gap to help your clients, patients... and practice

The State of Pet Health 2015 Report showed the disconnect between what we within the profession view as important aspects of preventive care, versus what type of preventive care clients view as important. The resulting disconnect undermines our critical trusted advisor role and drives our clients to other sources, like pet stores, for information and advice about their pet's overall wellness.

Furthermore, because the majority of “traditional” client education (vaccines, preventatives, dental, etc.) is about products and services sold in veterinary practices, clients often get the impression that everything we talk to them about is *transactional* ... that we're educating only to sell them something. This also undermines our advisor role and drives clients further away, or at the very least, makes them more cynical of our recommendations.

How to balance the scale of transactional conversations

To counteract the conversational disconnect and retain your trusted advisor role, it's important that your client education is balanced. “Traditional” education is critically important; it just needs to be balanced with more altruistic, non-transactional, journey-helping advice and awareness.

I get that the thought of adding more education to your already packed appointments can seem quite daunting, but it doesn't need to be!

So, what can you do?

Our *101 Essential Tips* client education book series makes it easy and efficient for you to provide a wealth of bond-building, “fork-in-the-road-helping,” and even life-saving awareness to your clients. Here are some other things that your team can do to more fully educate and build bonds with clients:

- Ask lifestyle/milestone questions like “Are you planning any travel with your pets?” or “How does your pet do when you're at work?”
- Share seasonal tips with your clients—topics like holiday or summer/winter temperature warnings
- Share some interesting stories from the practice—stories with an element of prevention
- Investigate and share suggestions for local trainers/groomers/pet sitters/dog walkers
- Share products that your team loves to use—ideally, they shouldn't be ones you sell in your practice

If you've read this entire article, you may now be at your own “fork in the road,” and I know you want to go down the right path. New pet owners are eager to learn—you just need to give them the awareness of *all* they need to know. It's actually quite easy to do, and everybody will benefit when you do.

*Source: World Pet Association Article –*How to Add Customer Value When You Can't Compete on Price*, Sept 2017



Dr. Jason Nicholas is President and Chief Medical Officer of Preventive Vet™, a content publishing and consulting company made up of a group of dedicated veterinarians, certified trainers, behaviorists, writers, creatives, educators and, above all, awesome pet-loving people.

He loves helping veterinary teams communicate the education, awareness, and advice their clients need to take the best care possible for their pets. It's why he founded Preventive Vet, and it's why he wrote the *101 Essential Tips* client education book series. Everything Preventive Vet does is about helping pets and supporting vets.

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