

# Getting Strong Client Testimonials

Article by Roxanne Hawn



## How to request and use real-life stories via social proof marketing

In the past, clients referred other clients to veterinary practices primarily via word of mouth. Those conversations—one person to one person—still happen, but it's much more common for the same exchange of information about which veterinary practices people like (or don't) to take place online in various forums, with many witnesses. It's called "social proof."

People can post ratings and reviews in a variety of places, including Google, Yelp and Facebook. Let's, however, talk about why you should ask specific clients to write specific testimonials that you can use in your marketing.

Other businesses tend to call such customer recommendations "case studies" but, since that phrase has a specific meaning in veterinary medicine, let's call them client testimonials. While these written recommendations might include a few clinical details of a pet's case, their main purpose is to carry your practice's key messages into the world through the voices of real clients.

Think of social proof a little bit like social popularity, with others wanting to do what the "cool kids" do, have what they have, and so on. However, the psychology of how testimonials and reviews affect the people who write them and the people who read them is important too.

### The power hungry

The increase in individual power to praise or criticize via social media and other online venues has become so great

that some businesses, including those in medical fields, sometimes face threats of a bad review online when clients are not happy or do not get what they want. It can become a form of cyberbullying, which in some cases has led to suicide for veterinarians.

Allan Block, MD, received threats of a bad online review after a potential new patient arrived with insurance Block's office doesn't take. The patient told the staff when making the appointment that he had a PPO plan, but he arrived with an HMO plan card. Despite Block offering a discounted cash rate and other ways around the problem, the person declined. He wanted to be seen for free. Otherwise, he would post a negative review.

Sound familiar?

In addition, some people become even a little famous (or infamous) for their online reviews. In certain groups of frequent reviewers, there is a notoriety that comes with trustworthy praise or epic rants. In some cases, that means the review isn't as much about the product or service as it is the person writing the review.

### The research says

Research published in 2011 found that the act of writing a review (good or bad) affects the reviewer more than you'd expect. Explaining a positive or negative experience lessens emotional hold of the event, but it also can increase or dampen the good or bad feelings about the product or service.

Researchers found that a good experience or a bad experience feels a little less so after writing about it, if there is emotion involved.

However, the effect of writing a review is different if the product is functional, like an appliance or piece of technology. Those people rated good experiences higher and bad experiences lower, and they were more likely to want to retell their experience through word of mouth.

Researchers have also found that if a consumer's first exposure is to positive reviews for a product or service, then even if they see negative reviews later, the initial positive

feelings remain. If people see negative reviews first, the same holds true. That's a good reason to make sure anyone looking for your practice online finds your best testimonials before they find any others.

### The best testimonials

Online reputation management is a whole discipline into itself, but when you're asking for written recommendations from your best clients, what do you want those client testimonials to include?

Andrea Pearson, chief marketing officer for Healthgrades, an online rating review site for human medicine, explains that good recommendations from patients share a few elements in common. "In human medicine, three things correlate to 'would recommend.' Good communication, sense of teamwork from everyone you interact with, and empathy," she says. "So those are what the best or most compelling testimonials should address."

The best way to get those three key elements into the recommendations you gather from clients is to ask people to answer in writing specific questions about their experiences with your practice. You'll get better quotes if people have time to think about what they want to say before they write it down. Let's face it, most of us aren't greatly skilled at speaking in sound bites.

Here are some guidelines:

- Only ask three to five questions. That gives people enough mental space to get warmed up, but the list isn't so long that people feel like it's a chore to help you.
- Ask people to reflect upon and describe situations where they saw good communication, teamwork and empathy in action.
- Also ask them to give insights on what you do best and what needs improvement. Sometimes asking both sides produces good content.
- Take each person's answers and pull together elements into one cohesive and slightly edited statement. In many cases, you can clear up what people are really trying to say in fewer words or more direct language.

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- Show people the edited version for approval.
- Use the final version of the testimonial—ideally with a photo of the person and their pet(s)—in your marketing efforts.

### The best use of testimonials

Consider these common ways veterinary practices can use client testimonials in their marketing, online and otherwise:

1. Feature testimonials on the main page of your website.
2. Share photos and testimonials on a regular basis via the social media channels you use, maybe even as your header image during the times of year you gain the most new clients.
3. Post photos and testimonials in your exam rooms and lobby.
4. Include some testimonials in the rotation if you have a lobby screen that rotates marketing messages.
5. Include testimonials in your printed marketing materials.
6. Feature new testimonials in your email or print newsletters.

Also consider that client testimonials can help keep up your team's morale when times are tough.

Your practice may not be the perfect match for every client, and every client isn't the perfect match for your practice. And, that's okay. But finding ways to enlist the help of those who love your practice can include asking them to

write testimonials that you can use in your marketing. Since these folks represent your top clients, you might also consider offering them a little something extra—perhaps in the form of an account credit or small gift—for helping you use real-life stories to build strong client testimonials.



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*, *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*.

## Related Reading

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