

Financial Care for Clients: A Lifetime of Support & Guidance

How to financially prepare
clients for a pet's care
over a lifetime



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Establishing financial care partnerships with clients

All too often, veterinary teams are placed in tense situations when a pet needs life-saving care, and cost is the elephant in the room. Helping clients be financially prepared for both the planned (i.e., wellness care) and the unexpected (i.e., accidents and illnesses) is key for making these emotional times less stressful for everyone. When you guide them on ways to build a financial safety net, clients can focus on your

recommendations and make the best decision for their pets.

The goal of creating a financial partnership with your clients is to drive long-term health for pets and your practice. Moving away from that reactive “moment in time” approach, to a proactive, prepared approach, will give owners the tools they need to provide lifelong pet care. When veterinary healthcare teams proactively communicate, educate, and substantiate the

value of financial preparedness, compliance may be increased, and you may build loyalty, improve patient outcomes, and build practice financial success.

Creating a financial care partnership, not just a financial policy with clients, empowers them to provide lifetime care for their pets because you give them flexible financial choices. In essence, client financial care leads to a lifetime of pet care.



“As workflows are evolving, this is the ideal time to reset the financial experience and the relationship with clients as you’re reconnecting.” — Boo Larsen



Meet the Expert: Boo Larsen

Boo Larsen is the general manager and vice president of the veterinary profession at CareCredit. After more than 22 years in the veterinary field with a strong focus on marketing, she knows how to reach clients in a relatable fashion.

Setting the tone with proactive financial conversations

As veterinary professionals, no conversation is more difficult than one that revolves around money. Clients who say you are “only in it for the money,” or claim you’d “fix my pet for free if you truly loved animals,” make maintaining a positive relationship challenging.

Upfront conversations about financially preparing to provide care over a pet’s lifetime can ward off uncomfortable discussions.

Focusing on preventive and wellness care during that first puppy or kitten visit is crucial, but so is discussing how to financially provide for that pet through every stage of life. By weaving in the expected costs over a lifetime

from the initial appointment, you can guide pet owners on expenses they can expect from puppy- or kittenhood to their pet’s end of life. Base the conversation on the pet’s breed to better prepare owners. For example, bulldogs typically need corrective airway surgery, or lifelong allergy management. Offering guidance on the bills that may come their way can help pet owners be prepared, which may reduce the likelihood of those unpleasant money conversations—and better still, economic pet surrenders or euthanasias.

According to data from Synchrony’s 2021 Lifetime of Care study, chances are high that pet-related expenses will be a source of stress, as one out of three pet owners will face an expense that causes financial worry. In addition, many pet owners may not see the value of regular wellness care, which

can go a long way toward preventing expensive medical issues. Instead, they generally see their veterinarian as someone to go to for emergencies.

Based on these figures, we know we have a two-fold problem:

ONE: Pet owners who are unprepared for the true cost of veterinary care, and have not been educated on financing options.

TWO: Veterinary teams that do not explain clearly the value of their services, or underscore the importance of preventive care for a pet’s health, happiness, and longevity, and how such care can benefit the owner’s expenses in the long run.

Knowing this, we must demonstrate how critical regular wellness care is for pets at an early age, as well as explain financial options.

An opportunity to lay a solid financial foundation

Take a look at this common scenario, to see how you can adjust your language and better prepare pet owners for a lifetime of pet care.

The current financial conversation
Your new client brings in their first puppy for an initial wellness visit, excited about the tiny, adorable dachshund they purchased from FaceBook Marketplace—clearly an impulse decision. Since this is a new client with their first pet, whom they are already

madly in love with, you don’t want to start your relationship by talking about finances. Instead, you share in their delight over pet ownership and skip that tough topic. Unfortunately, you never backtrack and explain that dachshunds can develop breed-specific issues that may be expensive.

By the time you see the dachshund for his annual wellness visit—a few years, rather than one year later—the pup is rotund, and a foul odor emanates from

his mouth. Now you need to have the difficult conversation about the potential for IVDD and painful—often costly—dental disease. The owner feels blindsided, because they have no idea about these common breed conditions, or how to pay for their dog’s treatment. If you had taken the time to talk about potential health issues and financing prevention and treatment, you could have saved the pet owners—and the pet—from unnecessary stress, worry, and discomfort.

The financial conversation of the future

Similar scenarios happen frequently in veterinary practices. Rather than being the voice of reason and squashing the pet owner's new puppy happiness, veterinarians may forgo discussing potential surgery to fix that adorable bulldog puppy's airway—and the associated cost. However, pet owners need to know the true cost of their four-legged companion's care, and the consequences of not planning appropriately. Understanding possible health

issues and their costs will better prepare clients to provide their pet with necessary care without an emotional, tense conversation when care is needed.

According to the AVMA's Language of Veterinary Care Study in 2021, conversations about the cost of veterinary care can be positive and productive, when the right words are used—yes, there are words to avoid. But, before veterinarians discuss important topics that can make a difference for their

pet's health and cost of care with pet owners, they must first build strong relationships.

“Word choices are critical. Clients are seven times more likely to follow a veterinarian's recommendation if strong, clear language is used.”

— Karen E. Felsted, DVM, CPA, MS, CVPM, CVA



Meet the Expert:

Karen Felsted, DVM, CPA, MS, CVPM, CVA
Karen Felsted has spent decades in the accounting and business management fields, and is the founder of PantheraT, a management consulting firm that deals solely with the animal health field. Karen is a DVM, CPA, CVPM, and recently became a certified valuation analyst.



Building relationships: It's personal

When building a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR), focus on more than seeing a pet to establish access to care. From that initial visit, through the course of the pet's lifetime, concentrate on strengthening your relationship with the pet and the owner. By taking the time to get to know the pet—and demonstrating that personal knowledge to the owner—you'll position yourself as an expert on that particular pet's essential care.

According to the AVMA's Language of Veterinary Care study, personalized recommendations stood out as the most valuable benefit of having a "regular" veterinarian. As you spend time fostering a relationship with a pet owner, you're able to deliver customized care suggestions based on the pet and owner's lifestyle. Pet owners see this as a valuable resource that is much preferred over generic advice found online.

It's about building relationships—so whatever vet you choose to go to, they know your pet and will remember you, so they can assist you better.

— AVMA Language of Veterinary Care study

By nurturing this relationship, you can more easily approach essential cost conversations. When a client trusts that you have their pet's best interests at heart, based on the time you've spent cultivating the relationship, they likely have the mindset that you're working together as a team—whether or not they are struggling with finances.

Realize the role you play for the pet owner by helping that person care for a pet over the course of their lifetime. In many cases, the person's closest companion is their pet. By forming a strong relationship and being able to discuss financial options, you're not only protecting the pet, you're also protecting the pet owner from making the heartbreaking choice between affordability and care."

— Melissa Gutierrez



Meet the Expert:
Melissa Gutierrez

Melissa Gutierrez is the senior vice president and general manager of Pets Best Insurance. She has more than 30 years in the insurance industry, and understands the true value of insurance as it pertains to healthcare costs.



Building relationships: Becoming the “regular”

While veterinarians often focus on the value of regular veterinary care, they may not realize the importance of explaining the value of a relationship. Rather than telling clients that regular veterinary care is valuable, and worth the cost, concentrate on the benefits of the relationship with a “regular” veterinarian. Emphasize that regular care is not only to address the pet’s medical needs, but also for the veterinarian to get to know the pet. Many pet owners skip annual wellness visits because their pet appears healthy, so veterinarians need to stress that regular visits are truly invaluable, because they allow personalized recommendations for the pet’s care.

“Roughly one-third of all pets don’t see a veterinarian at least once a year. This is a tragedy for animal health and welfare. When asked why they don’t see a veterinarian, the biggest reason is a perceived value gap. Clients don’t go because their pet wasn’t sick or injured, or because they think the price is higher than what they think it’s worth.”

— Matthew Salois, PhD

Once the value of a relationship is established, the veterinarian can more easily recommend care that a pet owner will agree to, including the cost. The strong relationship built through face-to-face interaction and online communication (e.g., social media news, blog posts, app notifications) allows for financial discussions without the typical tension. Each interaction

then further strengthens the relationship and builds trust and credibility. Additionally, the veterinarian now has the opportunity to plant the seed of future pet care costs in the client’s mind, without appearing like a “money-hungry veterinarian.”

“It’s critically essential that veterinarians and their staff cultivate an authentic relationship with their clients, because that relationship is really what drives veterinary care to being much more than a transaction. It becomes more relational. And pet owners, through that relationship, have a better understanding and perception of the importance of veterinary care, particularly wellness and preventive care.”

—Matthew Salois, PhD



Meet the Expert: Matthew Salois, PhD

Matthew Salois is the chief economist for the American Veterinary Medical Association. Over the course of his career, he has served as director of global scientific affairs and policy at Elanco Animal Health, chief economist with the Florida Department of Citrus, and assistant professor at the University of Reading in the U.K.

He has also held various other positions at Florida universities.

Mastering the art of cost communication: 8 tips

When talking to your clients, use these tips to choose the right wording and help build a stronger bond:

1: Focus on the bond between pet and owner

While you can list facts about why veterinary care is necessary, nothing is as effective as playing to the emotional bond between pet and owner. Highlighting that connection forms a positive, relatable approach when you suggest that pets need the same medical care as any other loved one in the family.

2: Refrain from comparing veterinary care to human healthcare too often

Although almost 7 out of 10 pet owners see their pet as a family member or child, you'll likely receive pushback when you suggest pets need the same exact care as people.*

3: Understand that scare tactics will create a negative perception

People do not respond well to scare tactics, and will likely be turned off by words like “vulnerable” and “deadly.” Use a softer, more positive approach to gain compliance.

4: Position pet owners as the pet’s advocate for successful preventive care

Remind pet owners that pets can’t communicate about their own health and tend to hide illness—this is a positive, gentle prompt for regular wellness care.

5: Explain the “why” behind wellness care

Do not use vague language that suggests a pet can become sick without regular preventive care. Rather, describe conditions that may affect that particular pet. For example, underscore the importance of life-style-appropriate vaccinations for a dog who goes to doggy daycare, or

explain that a senior cat needs screening tests because of their predisposition for kidney disease. Ensuring pet owners understand the “why” behind your recommendations goes a long way toward gaining compliance and acceptance.

6: Set expertise apart by highlighting experience

People understand that veterinarians undergo extensive schooling, but they’re more interested in the experience you have under your belt, and how you use that to provide the best care for their pet. Avoid saying that only veterinarians are qualified to help pet owners because of their education. Instead, accept and recognize that other pet care professionals—and the owners themselves—are qualified to make health recommendations, particularly in specialty areas, like training and grooming.

7: Consider the clients’ perspectives

Too often, veterinarians focus on selling the value of their services, and their

“Communicate why your recommendation is beneficial for the pet in terms that make sense to the client. For example, the client doesn’t care about what happens to their pet at the cellular level when they have heartworm disease. They want to know that heartworm disease is serious, but prevention can keep their pet healthy and by their side. Emphasize the things that are important to the client to have the most success with recommendations.”

— Karen E. Felsted, DVM, CPA, MS, CVPM, CVA

*Synchrony. Lifetime of Care Study (2021). Available at: <http://petlifetimeofcare.com>

experience, when clients want to hear how the cost relates to their pet's health and well-being. This difference in perspectives causes communication breakdowns and leaves pet owners feeling uninformed and unheard. When you explain a treatment plan and cost, concentrate on the various options and associated costs, and your recommendations in relation to their pet.

8: Address cost head on

Don't dance around the fact that your services cost money. Clients appreciate plain-spoken financial discussions that address the true cost of veterinary care. Acknowledge their concerns, clarify the reasoning behind your recommendations, and provide financial options to make talking about money less uncomfortable. Explain that you can work with them to offer flexible care and treatment options that fit

their budget—veterinary care isn't one-size-fits-all.

One thing to avoid: Refrain from referring clients to a low-cost facility, unless they ask for the referral or it's the last resort before economic surrender or euthanasia. People don't appreciate the feeling of being pushed away or judged because of their perceived financial capabilities, and this may erode your relationship.

“Your ability to talk about money is integral to patient care, client satisfaction, and practice success. Honest dialogue with clients is the foundation to building trust, making clients feel comfortable discussing treatment choices, and to understanding the cost of care.”

—Wendy Myers, CVJ



Meet the Expert: Wendy Myers, CVJ
Wendy Myers started Communication Solutions for Veterinarians, Inc. in 2000 to help teams achieve real results through effective communication and practical business strategies. She has also served as editor-in-chief of *Vetted*, a leading business journal with more than 5,000 subscribers.



Beyond the estimate: How to present your treatment plan

Strengthening your relationship with pet owners through each interaction builds trust and credibility. This is why they will choose you over the low-cost vaccine clinic, and will likely follow your recommendations, whether or not they are pricey. However, when you present the estimate—which should always be called a treatment plan or treatment solution—you should address cost head on.

Language to use: “Veterinary care is expensive and is often a reason even the most loving of pet owners have to make difficult decisions around what they can and can’t afford.”

Empathic, upfront discussions about cost resonate with your clients, and they appreciate it when you demonstrate understanding about pet care expenses.

Do this when presenting your treatment plan:

> Discuss the treatment plan, focusing heavily on the “why” behind diagnostic testing and certain treatments. If a senior cat is vomiting and urinating excessively, explain your reasoning behind recommending blood work, a urinalysis, and blood pressure check. Once the pet owner understands why you are recommending these diagnostic tests, they’ll know a cost is associated, but they may not know how much.

> Learn the cost of common diagnostic tests and treatment protocols, so you can give your client a ballpark figure of the total bill. Although it can be less awkward for you to pass the cost conversation onto another team member, pet owners appreciate it when the veterinarian takes the time to discuss cost and financial options. Once you’ve answered the pet owner’s questions about whether they can go step-by-step through a diagnostic and treatment plan, and the associated costs and financial options, you can hand the itemized treatment plan explanation over to another team member.

> Send your veterinary technician or CSR into the room to go over the treatment plan, line by line, reiterating the necessity of the tests and explaining the costs. Ideally, they should have already interacted with the client during this visit, established a relationship, and built trust.

By being upfront about how costly veterinary care can be, and the costs associated with a diagnostic or treatment plan, you preserve the trust and relationship you have built.



“Don't underestimate the power of that trust relationship. Value it and protect it, because if the client trusts you and truly believes that the things you're saying and recommending are in the best interest of the pet and of them, then those conversations come a lot easier.”

—Jessica Vogelsang, DVM



Meet the Expert: Jessica Vogelsang, DVM

Jessica Vogelsang is the chief medical officer at American Animal Hospital Association. She has a wealth of experience as a practitioner in both emergency and general practice, and is a renowned veterinary writer and sought-after speaker for the industry and public alike.

Talking money: It's time to start

No pet owner wants to be surprised with a big bill when checking out. They want to talk about cost from the beginning, so they know what to expect, and how their pet will directly benefit.

When your veterinary technician goes over the treatment plan for a wellness visit, they should itemize the list of vaccinations and screening tests due for the pet, and then ask the owner for

any questions they may have about the plan for the visit.

According to Synchrony's 2021 *Lifetime of Care Highlight Report*, three out of four pet owners consider an unexpected expense of \$250 or more a financial issue. And, a significant number of pet owners—45% of dog owners and 38% of cat owners—who originally thought they were financially prepared for pet expenses were not.

Clients may not be aware of their different options for fitting veterinary care into their budget, or that they can discuss finances with their veterinarian. As their veterinarian, you need to explain that, ideally, they should financially prepare for their pet's care from the day they bring them home, and ensure they know their options, and the costs to expect. Being transparent about the lifetime cost of care is critical for adequately preparing owners, and providing the best care for your patients.

Give pet owners the opportunity to ask:



The total cost



Whether they can budget for their pet's care by splitting up vaccinations and tests



If you offer payment plans



If you offer financing options, such as a healthcare credit card or wellness plan

To help your clients financially prepare, please see “Prepping for pet ownership: Financial and medical considerations for a lifetime of care” pull-out page at the end of this booklet.

Making it easy for clients to pay

Once your client knows what to expect, ensure they can pay easily and conveniently. In this digital age, digital payment is a must, and a financial care model should incorporate choice and convenience, because the newest pet-owning generation wants ample choices and flexibility from their veterinarian.

What are your options?

Provide a range of options to your clients so they can build a safety net based on their financial goals and personal preferences, and be ready for both planned and unexpected pet-care costs. These options can include:

Pet health insurance — Pet owners can customize a policy based on their priorities after weighing a deductible against a premium. A wide range of coverages exists for accidents and illness, wellness care, specialty and holistic care, and much more.

Wellness plans — Wellness plans allow pet owners to incorporate their pet's preventive care into their monthly budget. Bundling services is enticing to pet owners who feel they're getting more value, and providing the best care for their pet at a set cost.

Pet and healthcare credit card — A dedicated card with budget-friendly

financing options gives clients a dedicated way to pay for all types of veterinary care from routine visits to unexpected illness or surgery - so they're always ready with a way to pay.

Installment loans — Installment loans offered through third-party lenders are one-time loans that cover a specific procedure or service. The pet owner must reapply each time.

Pet owners can also combine options, to be ready for any pet health scenario. This concept is similar to human health, where people have health insurance to cover major illnesses, and a healthcare credit card to take care of premiums and deductibles.

Meet client needs by:



Offering a variety of ways to connect with your practice and team



Providing conveniences like online pharmacies, curbside drop-off, and virtual patient portals



Offering financial flexibility and choices



Providing virtual care and digital payment, which are becoming more favored by the general population

Brutus and best outcomes

Brutus the bulldog puppy had not had a great start to life. Thrifty and scrawny, the pup gazed beseechingly into the eyes of his future family from the cover of a bush on the side of the road. With melting hearts, his family swooped him up from the downpour and proceeded to schedule an appointment at ABC Animal Hospital.

Upon Brutus's initial physical exam, Dr. Smith found an overwhelming parasite load, both internal and external. After prescribing treatment for roundworms, hookworms, and fleas, he also recommended that Brutus's family invest in a pet insurance policy for their new puppy.

Heeding Dr. Smith's advice, Brutus's family sorted through their options and chose a plan that fit their needs. They also applied, and were approved for a healthcare credit card before checking out that day. With a little one on the way, Brutus's family needed help budgeting for unexpected expenses, like a lost puppy on the side of the road. Their new health and pet care credit card allowed them to make monthly payments on Brutus's initial veterinary bill.

Three short weeks later, Brutus arrived back at ABC Animal Hospital, this time for vomiting and lethargy. The family had been delighted that their pup was spunky and active after being dewormed, but the feisty puppy had taken to destroying their possessions.

After performing a physical exam and taking abdominal X-rays, their worst fears came true—Brutus had an unusual object in his stomach. Dr. Smith explained that surgery was the only option, but it would require several days of intensive hospitalization as Brutus recovered. After being presented with the treatment plan, Brutus's family looked at each other in dismay. The father had just lost his job, and they were expecting a baby next month. Money was tight.

Discussing the situation, Brutus's family also contacted their pet insurance provider.

Reassured that the company would cover Brutus's surgery, minus the deductible, they were overjoyed to say they could proceed with the procedure. As for the deductible, they were able to use their pet care credit card to help stretch their budget with monthly payments. Without these financial options, Brutus would have likely been surrendered to the hospital or a rescue—or worse, euthanized. But, with proper financial guidance and planning, this sweet pup was able to remain with his family.



Better together: Combining financial options

When discussing financial options with clients, a vague, general statement like “Financial preparation for your pet’s care can prevent you from having to make a difficult choice,” won’t hold much weight. However, pointing out that a foreign body surgery can cost thousands of dollars, or a broken leg that requires a repair by a specialist can be equally costly, can help make the point that unexpected pet care is expensive.

While budgeting for wellness care is easier, offering your clients options for emergencies and illnesses is also essential, and may prevent finance-related euthanasias.

Generally, insurance is for planners, people who are planning to spend money at the veterinarian and want to know that they’re covered. They buy it ahead of time. Credit is usually more of an on-demand financing option. Clients are in a situation and they think, ‘I wasn’t prepared for this to happen and didn’t plan for it. I need to pull out my credit card.’ These scenarios make pet insurance and third-party financing complementary products.”

—Melissa Gutierrez

Your clients benefit

Wellness plans help clients budget for expected costs, while pet insurance can help cover emergencies and unexpected health conditions and a healthcare credit

card can help clients pay for out-of-pocket costs. Clients can use a pet care credit card to pay for insurance premiums, deductibles, and deposits, or to pay for their

entire bill, while they wait for the pet insurance company to reimburse the wellness or emergency care expenses. Once they receive the reimbursement, clients can pay off their card balance.

Your practice benefits

Wellness plans provide steady income for your practice, and ensure pets receive the wellness and preventive care they need. Healthcare credit cards and pet insurance also provide financial security for your practice. Instead of providing a payment plan for clients, your practice can quickly be paid for services rendered, without dealing with the administrative burden of practice-backed payment plans.



“Look at money like it's a three-legged stool, and I want pet owners to have all three legs under them. One is their out-of-pocket expense that they're going to hand you as cash or a card to pay today. The second is to have pet insurance in place. And the third is to have third-party financing set up. With all three legs in place, they've got full support financially for whatever healthcare decisions they're going to face with their pet.”

— Wendy Myers, CVJ

Money viewed as a three-legged stool



Getting your team on board

Getting your entire team on board when you are implementing new protocols, or ensuring they make consistent recommendations to clients, can be tough. A veterinary professional won't recommend a service or product if they don't believe in its value. Your team may hesitate to encourage owners to participate in a wellness plan if they don't fully understand the value for the owner and pet. Likewise, pet insurance can be an awkward discussion with clients, since team members may not see its value for an emergency that may never happen. Veterinary professionals often fail to purchase pet insurance for their own pets, believing staff discounts will ultimately be the cheaper route. This reactive approach to managing the cost

of care needs to change with your clients, but first you must change the outlook of your veterinary team, or you will struggle.

“Until your staff adopts pet insurance themselves, they're never going to be able to recommend it passionately to help clients understand the benefits.”

—Andrew Moffatt, DVM

One way to get your team's buy-in: Help pay for their pet's wellness plan or health insurance. You can educate your staff, but nothing is as effective for creating a positive, passionate recommendation as firsthand experience. Include wellness care or pet health insurance—or both—in your

list of team benefits, and your staff will eagerly espouse the benefits to your clients. Encouraging team buy-in will then encourage client buy-in.



Meet the Expert: Andrew Moffatt, DVM

Andrew Moffatt is the founder, CEO, and chief medical officer of VetnCare, a group of 10 AAHA-accredited veterinary hospitals. He urges his teams to recommend pet health insurance and a healthcare credit card to all their clients.

Getting your clients on board

While recommendations for care and financial options from a passionate team are certainly helpful, you may need to take additional steps to convince your clients to get on board with your suggestions.

Be consistent

Every team member should be making the same suggestions to clients, rather than sharing their personal opinions. Schedule a staff meeting that focuses on how—and what—you will recommend to clients who are looking for parasite prevention, vaccination protocols, dental care, and payment solutions. Presenting a united front underscores your credibility, and your clients will be more likely to accept your recommendations.

Be repetitive

Drive home the importance of your recommendations by mentioning them time and time again. People generally need to hear and see a message seven times to take action.

Ask your clients at each appointment if they have insurance for their pet. This not only reminds them to purchase a policy, but also reiterates that everyone in your practice believes that pet insurance is important for their pet's health.

“In an ideal world, the monthly subscription that people usually associate with wellness care would be an all-inclusive, monthly fee that covers wellness care and pet insurance. Instead of trying to convince clients of the importance of coverage for an accident or illness that may never happen, and sending them to an outside company to purchase a policy, a robust insurance policy is rolled into a wellness plan to provide comprehensive financial coverage. Offering one complete package prevents clients from having to choose between a wellness plan, which they often more easily see the benefit of, or an insurance policy, which they think they may never use.”

—Andrew Moffatt, DVM



Creating a positive payment experience for clients and veterinary teams

Today, everyone lives on their smartphones, and using technology tools in veterinary medicine makes sense. Clients want a more digital experience for every aspect of their pet's care, including payment options. When you use tech tools in your practice, you'll deliver a financial experience your clients will love.

You adapted to accepting payment with minimal contact during the COVID-19 pandemic and curbside care. Now, you must continue to use those payment strategies in exam rooms, from clients' homes, or virtually via telemedicine.

Offer contactless payment options, such as:

- Tapping debit and credit cards on approved terminals
- Using virtual payments through mobile apps
- Texting a link to make payment

Whether it's through texting or your PMS partner, add a line to your reminders that creates awareness of your financing options, to help support flexible ways for clients to manage their budget."

—Boo Larsen

Mapping their financial journey can help practices build a great client experience at every point of care and connection, soothing the sting associated with payment. Remaining transparent in your discussions about money, and providing financial options and tools to help pay for pet care, will strengthen your client relationships.

All the technologic tools at your disposal don't matter if you are not communicating effectively and using those tools to your advantage. Not only from a diagnostic tool standpoint, but also from that of a relationship-building tool."

—Jessica Vogelsang, DVM



Going beyond mere conversation

Pet owners love the communication channels that telemedicine has opened with their veterinarian, and they want to use these methods for all aspects of their pet's care. Everything from wellness care and triage, to nutrition and behavior, can be a virtual conversation.

Now is the ideal time to reset the financial experience with clients as you're reconnecting and rebuilding relationships. Workflows are evolving to offer more communication opportunities. With the whole veterinary industry doing business in new ways, there's no better time to switch the financial discussion from reactive to active, from transactional to relational.

Treatment plans and the general cost of pet ownership can also be discussed through a variety of communication channels, which now should include:

- Two-way texting
- In-app messaging
- Video chat
- Email
- Online appointment scheduling and reminders
- Social media

These channels have exploded over the past two years, and were essential for forging connections during the pandemic when in-person connection was limited. And, although personal conversations are still sometimes necessary (e.g., a terminal diagnosis or poor prognosis), discussing payment online is no longer taboo.

Phones in veterinary practices are ringing off the hooks. Many front-desk teams are short-staffed and overwhelmed. Opening all lines of communication can help ease the workload. Rather than requiring your CSRs to discuss treatment plan costs and financing options over the phone,

be transparent, and hold those time-consuming financial conversations over virtual channels. You can:

- Email an itemized treatment plan to a client.
- Send a request for payment through your practice app.
- Text a link to apply for a pet and healthcare credit card.



Having comfortable financial conversations with pet owners: Do this, not that



DO use collaborative body language

Body language plays a large role in communication, and collaborative body language helps prevent clients from shutting down, and invites them to participate in financial discussions. Standing or sitting to stay at eye level creates more engagement, as does removing physical barriers between you and the client. When you share visual information, such as treatment plans, medication instructions, and handouts, position yourself shoulder-to-shoulder or L-shaped next to the client to invite a more open, truthful conversation.



DON'T use scare tactics

Nothing turns a pet owner off more than intense, threatening language, trying to scare them into agreeing to pet care. Don't tell clients that their pet will die if they aren't protected against heartworms. Instead, say that heartworm disease is a deadly, but preventable, condition. Explain that heartworm prevention has additional benefits for pets, including intestinal parasite deworming, which is essential for keeping the entire family safe from communicable parasitic diseases.



DO invite cost discussions with open-ended questions

Rather than asking if your client has any questions, invite discussion with an open-ended question about a specific topic, such as a diagnosis, treatment plan, or cost of care, which will provide the opportunity to bring up finances.



DON'T make assumptions about what your clients can afford

All too often, veterinary teams may make snap judgements about what a client can afford based on their appearance. Offer the same financial options to every client. Don't wait for your client to ask.



DO explain services before prices

Explain the "why" behind your diagnostic and treatment recommendations before mentioning cost.



DON'T self-finance through your practice

Your sole focus should be on veterinary medicine, not financial services. The time you spend chasing down payments should be spent caring for

patients, especially during these short-staffed times.



DO start explaining financial options for clients early

Do not wait until their pet has a major emergency or serious illness to discuss financing with your clients. Instead, start before they schedule an appointment by displaying resources and options on your website, designing social media posts that highlight the benefits of pet insurance and financial planning, and including a link in app notifications where clients can apply for a healthcare credit card and get an instant credit decision. You can also discuss financial options during the initial phone call to schedule an appointment. Say, "To help you prepare for your first visit to our practice, you should know that we accept ..." Then clients will expect to pay at the time of service, and they will be reminded to have financial resources on hand.



DO present a united front

Ensure your entire practice team is on board with the same recommendations. Clients trust their veterinarian as the pet care expert and want to hear what they say, but that trust level will diminish and clients will not buy in if

every team member does not consistently reiterate your recommendations (e.g., pet insurance, parasite prevention, or nutrition).

A team effort: Presenting treatment plans to clients

Considering the do's and don'ts of talking about money with your clients, each team member can use the following step-by-step guide to tactfully and successfully present a treatment plan.

If you're a veterinarian:

Take a thorough history and perform a comprehensive exam — While the veterinary technician can gather a brief history about the pet's presenting complaint, or ask about potential issues for a wellness visit, the veterinarian should spearhead most of the initial conversation with the pet owner.



Speak up during your exam

Explain why you're checking certain areas on the pet, and discuss any issues you encounter. For example, a pet may present because they're not eating, but you may still check their ears to ensure chronic ear infections have not flared. Explaining each part of the exam shows value to the client.



Outline the treatment plan

Explain your recommendations, the "why" behind them, and the benefit to the pet, to get client buy-in.

If you're a vet technician:



Present the itemized treatment plan

Present the actual treatment plan to the client, going through each line and explaining again why the veterinarian recommended the tests or treatments. If the client voices concern over the cost the veterinarian recommended, offer to stage or break up the treatment plan if possible, so the pet and owner experience the same outcome without doing everything at once.

If you're a customer service representative:



Provide financial options

Give all your clients the same financial resources, regardless of their appearance or what they're driving. After the technician presents the itemized treatment plan and its cost, present the financial options to the client during check-out, and assist with applying for credit, if necessary.



Customize this form with your practice's logo and information.

Simply snap the QR code and you'll be directed to a download on AAHA.org.



Prepping for pet ownership: Financial and medical considerations for lifetime care

Whether you're a first-time or seasoned pet owner, being financially prepared to manage the cost of pet care is an important part of keeping your pet healthy. To estimate your pet's veterinary care costs each year, contact your veterinarian for the average costs of the following wellness services:

Physical exam

A nose-to-tail physical exam helps your veterinarian detect such abnormalities as a heart murmur, ear infection, dental disease, or flea allergy dermatitis.

Lifestyle-appropriate vaccination

Your veterinarian will tailor your pet's vaccinations to their lifestyle and exposure risk, so necessary vaccinations may change from year to year.

Parasite testing

Ensuring your pet is heartworm-free is critical for safe heartworm prevention administration, so annual testing is recommended. In addition, knowing if your pet is carrying roundworms, whipworms, hookworms, or other par-

asites can indicate potential infection risk for your family—the reason a fecal exam is important.

Parasite prevention

Depending on your location and your pet's lifestyle, they may require year-round parasite prevention.

Screening tests

All pets should receive annual screening tests tailored to their age, breed, and health status. By monitoring your pet's normal values over the years, your veterinarian can detect subtle changes early in a disease process, offering the best prognosis. Screening tests may include blood work, urinalysis, blood pressure check, and X-rays.

Spay or neuter

Having your pet spayed or neutered can prevent health and behavior problems from developing later in life.

Dental care

All young pets begin accumulating plaque and tartar buildup, and many cats and dogs require dental cleanings from as young as 2 years old. Delaying preventive dental cleanings can lead to

dental disease, which may require more expensive procedures, like extractions, down the road.

You've got options

Whether your pet is healthy, sick, or injured, here are potential ways to manage the cost of their lifetime healthcare:

Split bills between cards and cash

Veterinary practices take multiple payment forms, and you can divide a bill between a debit card, credit card, and cash.

Pet insurance

Pet health insurance provides a wide range of coverages, from accident and illness only, to comprehensive wellness and specialty care. Protect your pet by securing their insurance policy when they are young, to avoid coverage gaps because of pre-existing conditions.

Wellness plans

Some veterinary practices offer wellness financial plans that charge a monthly fee, which covers your pet's annual physical exams, vaccinations, parasite prevention, and screening tests.

Health and pet care credit card

A credit card specifically designed to cover healthcare costs—for you and your pet—can give you the financial capabilities you need for anything from wellness care and prescriptions, to emergency and specialty services. Better yet—it's a solution that can provide promotional financing options with convenient monthly payments.

Installment loans

A short-term loan or other financing option from a third-party lender can work in a pinch when your pet needs immediate care. Ask your veterinarian if they offer or accept this option.

Savings account

A savings account kept solely for pet-care costs, or to set aside an emergency fund, can provide a financial safety net and ease your mind regarding pet expenses.

Monthly budget

While you can't predict emergencies or disease development, you can add your pet's wellness care to your monthly budget. Ask your veterinarian for an estimate of your pet's expected annual costs, including exams, vaccinations, screening tests, and parasite prevention. Divide that cost by 12 to determine how much you need to save each month.

Animal charities

Breed- or condition-specific charities may assist, providing your pet meets their funding qualifications.

When you're prepared with a financial safety net for your pet's care, you have peace of mind knowing you're ready with a way to pay – no matter what life brings. From routine visits and vaccinations to unexpected illness, injury or surgery, you know cost won't get in the way of providing the care your pet needs throughout life. Isn't that worth everything?

Range of one year of expenses

Low end does not include non-basic expenses, while the *high end* does not include health insurance, wellness plans, spaying or neutering, technology purchases, or initial costs.



Dog = \$1,270 (low) to \$2,803 (high)



Cat = \$961 (low) to \$2,487 (high)

Range of 15-year lifetime expenses

Low end does not include health insurance, wellness plans, or other non-basic expenses, while *high end* includes initial costs, spaying or neutering, and end-of-life expenses.



Dog = \$19,893 or \$111/month (low)
\$55,132 or \$306/month (high)



Cat = \$15,055, or \$84/month (low)
\$45,790 or \$254/month (high)

Synchrony. Lifetime of Care Study (2021). Available at: <http://petlifetimeofcare.com>

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CARECREDIT A SYNCHRONY HEALTH & WELLNESS SOLUTION

A leader in veterinary financing solutions for 25+ years, CareCredit has been committed to empowering access to care by helping pet owners to be financially prepared for the care their pet needs over a lifetime. The CareCredit pet and healthcare credit card gives pet owners a dedicated way to pay for all types of veterinary services, procedures and diagnostics from routine wellness to unexpected illness or surgery at providers that accept CareCredit. They can use special financing options to pay over time with budget-friendly payments. Today, CareCredit is accepted at more than 24,000 veterinary hospital locations nationwide and used by millions of pet owners.

Learn more at carecredit.com/veterinary

AMERICAN ANIMAL HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

Since 1933, the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) has been the only organization to accredit veterinary hospitals according to more than 900 standards directly correlated to high-quality medicine and compassionate care. AAHA seeks to simplify the journey towards excellence for veterinary practices and lead the profession in the provision of the highest quality care for pets by improving standards of care, championing accreditation, and supporting our members in all aspects of this pursuit. Today, more than 4,500 practice teams (12%–15% of veterinary practices in the United States and Canada) are AAHA accredited or preaccredited.

Learn more at aaha.org.

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