

## **MAKING CLIENT COMMUNICATION APPETIZING: TALKING TO CLIENTS ABOUT NUTRITION**

Deborah E. Linder, DVM, MS, DACVN  
Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University, North Grafton, MA

### *Lecture description*

Client communication basics with a focus on nutrition will be discussed by a board-certified veterinary nutritionist. Strategies for obtaining and providing information in a time-efficient manner will be discussed. Strategies for increased adherence through client communication will also be discussed. Case examples will be included to illustrate tips and strategies.

### *Core strategies for communication*

There are four core strategies for communication that will be applied to discussing nutrition with owners: 1) open-ended questions, 2) reflective listening, 3) non-verbal communication, and 4) empathy (Shaw, 2006). While it may seem most effective to ask closed-ended questions to quickly obtain necessary information, open-ended questions can evoke the owner's perspective as well as information that will help develop a nutritional plan. One study revealed veterinary clients were only able to speak for a median of 11 seconds before being interrupted, which could leave owners with a sense of mistrust in their healthcare team. After asking open-ended questions, summarizing responses with reflective listening can let owners know they are being listened to, but also can redirect owners who may be getting lost in details back to the concern at hand. While having a discussion with clients, particularly in a controversial and emotional topic such as nutrition, non-verbal communication is critical to be aware of. If the discussion is positive, but an individual is frowning and crossing his or her arms, then there are mixed messages that should be explored further to ensure clear communication. Lastly, empathy with a focus on education in lieu of judgement on any previous decisions a pet owner may have made can greatly build trust in the exam room. One study revealed genuine empathy, which included providing positive feedback and normalizing concerns, was expressed in only 7% of over 200 veterinary visits studied. Employing these four core strategies while discussing nutrition with clients can help owners feel valued and respected, which can lead to increased trust in the healthcare team and improved outcomes for patients. The following sections will describe how to apply these core strategies throughout the visit in an efficient manner.

### *Getting information: saving time on diet histories*

Start by obtaining a complete diet history, where all food items fed (including treats and table food) should be included to allow for an accurate estimate of daily caloric intake or to possibly help guide further diagnostics and treatment. For example, a dietary history of chicken jerky treats may warrant further discussion about renal disease and any related clinical signs. Owners may not volunteer information if not directly asked, so it is very important to spend time accurately assessing the current diet, including supplements, treats, rawhides, dental chews, and foods used to administer medications, etc. Pet owners may also not realize that chews or bones are sources of calories, or that some human foods can be toxic to pets. Obtaining a full and accurate diet history can be time consuming, so it is helpful to have owners pre-fill out a diet history form at home (where they can easily access the names of their pet's foods and treats) and bring it to the appointment, or even fill it out while waiting in the lobby. This allows the healthcare team to incorporate reflection by summarizing the history and they can ask any pertinent follow up questions. Examples of diet history forms that can be given to owners are in the World Small Animal Veterinary Association Nutrition Toolkit (available at: [www.wsava.org/nutrition-toolkit](http://www.wsava.org/nutrition-toolkit)). Applying the core strategies by asking open-ended and non-judgmental questions such as "What treats does your pet enjoy?" may yield a more positive and forthcoming answer than "Do you feed your pet treats?" Also during this information gathering session, the healthcare team can assess the stage of change an owner may be in, especially if nutritional changes will be required for the pet (e.g., Are they interested in making changes at all for an overweight pet? Have they altered their pet's food to a recommended therapeutic renal diet but then stopped after having challenges?). Some owners who are not ready to make any nutritional changes for their pet may benefit from education only, while others who are ready or have already started making changes may benefit from specific guidance and troubleshooting when they experience setbacks.

### *Giving information: clear and specific guidance*

After obtaining a diet history and assessing the client's needs, clear and specific nutritional recommendations should be provided. One study showed that a little more than half of pet owners agreed that their veterinarian communicated in language they understood. Avoiding jargon and asking owners "How can we best communicate information?" can help to decide whether diagrams, written pamphlets, or demonstrations will be the most

effective method of providing information. Employing non-verbal communication can help decipher if an owner does not understand or may need rephrasing of the information being provided. Avoid vague statements such as 'Your cat could lose a few kilograms,' and replace them with clear and specific statements such as 'Your cat is 2 kilograms overweight, which predisposes her to conditions such as joint problems and diabetes. We can work together to adjust her diet to keep her healthy and happy for as long as possible.' This describes the medical problem, the consequences, and sets up a team-based approach to reach a common goal, keeping the cat healthy and happy. Feeding directions can have wide ranges and may not be applicable to each individual pet, so pet owners should be told how many calories their pet needs per day, given a specific diet recommendation, and prescribed a specific amount to meet those calorie needs, incorporating treats if requested. These calculations can be done quickly with the use of recent toolkits from nutritional guidelines.

#### *Giving information: utilizing resources*

The World Small Animal Veterinary Association Nutrition Toolkit has non-branded handouts on calorie charts for cats and dogs, body condition scoring charts, and educational handouts on how to select a pet food and how to evaluate nutrition information from the internet. Many owners find the depth and variety of information on the internet overwhelming and rarely know how to find trusted sources of credible and evidence-based nutritional information. Providing owners with vetted websites minimizes confusion and inadvertent non-adherence because of misinformation owners may have garnered from their own online searches. Hospitals can create their own frequently asked questions handout/website on 'hot topic' areas such as raw food, ingredient questions, calories, and treats. One example is the Tufts Clinical Nutrition Service Petfoodology website ([www.petfoodology.org](http://www.petfoodology.org)).

#### *Developing a plan as a team*

If a pet requires a change in their diet and owners are ready to initiate change, understanding the pet-owner relationship can help individualize the plan. Owners who are highly attached to their pets may be more apt to provide more time or financial resources to their care, however, that attachment may also result in reluctance to change food or treats that define that relationship with their pet. Asking about the relationship between the pet and all members of the household may elicit 'non-negotiable' aspects of the human-animal bond that can be included in the plan to increase adherence. Example questions such as 'Is there anything you feel strongly about including in the plan?' or 'Could you describe your daily routine with your pet?' can help veterinarians develop a plan both the owners and healthcare team feel comfortable with. Using a dialogue rather than a lecture format helps owners take an active role in their pet's health. Continued use of reflective listening and empathy will help to create a treatment plan that further strengthens the owner's commitment and facilitates adherence.

#### *Ongoing support and follow up*

All members of the veterinary healthcare team can help to create and reinforce a nutritional plan. For example, after a veterinarian and pet owner decide on a therapeutic diet, technicians can further discuss client expectations (e.g., increased stool production if a higher fiber diet), and front desk staff can set up delivery of the diet or follow up appointments to renew prescription refills. Active efforts to reach out to clients will reinforce recommendations and show support while strengthening the bond between clients and the veterinary healthcare team.

#### *Summary*

Understanding the impact of effective communication, communication strategies, and nutrition-specific applications can lead to improved client adherence and patient care.

#### *References*

Shaw JR. Four core communication skills of highly effective practitioners. *Vet Clin North Am Small Anim Pract* 2006;36(2):385-396.

#### *General pet nutrition resources*

American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN) Website: [www.acvn.org](http://www.acvn.org)

Resources for pet owners, veterinarians, and a listing of all board-certified veterinary nutritionists.

World Small Animal Veterinary Association Nutrition Toolkit: [www.wsava.org/nutrition-toolkit](http://www.wsava.org/nutrition-toolkit)

Note that this site has resources for pet owners and for veterinarians on pet nutrition topics.

Tufts Clinical Nutrition Service Petfoodology Website: [www.petfoodology.org](http://www.petfoodology.org)

University website created by board-certified veterinary nutritionists with frequently updated blogs on pet nutrition.