



AAHA Nutritional Assessment Guidelines for Dogs and Cats
Building Awareness and Promoting Implementation

Evolving to a Culture of Prevention:

Implementing Integrated Preventive Care



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Dear Colleague:

Welcome to the final section in a special three-part series focused on making preventive care a priority in your practice.

The *AAHA-AVMA Canine and Feline Preventive Healthcare Guidelines*, along with the *AAHA Nutritional Assessment Guidelines*, provide a strong foundation to help you re-emphasize the importance of preventive care, and the basis upon which to build a culture of prevention in your practice. With that being said, do not think of these *Guidelines* as just check-lists of procedures, but rather as best practices to help your team build outstanding client relationships, improve client communication and provide the highest-quality patient care.

This section of the series focuses on the steps necessary to help the entire practice team implement the *Guidelines* and help evolve the practice culture to emphasize prevention. By preparing and educating yourself and your team on the importance of preventive care, you'll have the ability to clearly and confidently get the message across to your clients.

This booklet will show you how to make implementation of the *Guidelines* a fun, team-building activity. You'll learn how to challenge your staff to reach goals and then reward them when those goals are met. You'll also learn talking points and role-playing scenarios for staff meetings so every team member, from front-office staff to technicians to kennel assistants, can comfortably explain your practice's preventive care plans to clients.

All pets, regardless of their life stage, deserve the best care possible. Implementing the *Guidelines* will help you and your practice team work together with your clients to provide their pets with the preventive care they need and deserve so “the bond” can continue to flourish—a win for clients, patients and your practice.



Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP
AAHA Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer



The Convergence Protocol: A Blueprint to the *Preventive Healthcare Guidelines*

COMPANION ANIMAL VETERINARIANS HAVE AT their disposal at least 20 approved clinical *Guidelines* or consensus statements. These include recently published *Canine and Feline Preventive Healthcare Guidelines* jointly developed by AAHA and AVMA.¹ Ilona Rodan, DVM, a member of the task force that wrote the *AAHA-AVMA Preventive Healthcare Guidelines*, explains how the multitude of clinical *Guidelines* can be integrated efficiently at each patient exam.

“The *2011 Preventive Healthcare Guidelines* should be considered as foundation guidelines, to be used at every regular exam,” she says. “The other, supporting, *Guidelines* are evidence-based and more complete. They contain the additional information needed for comprehensive care, but they don’t have to be reviewed in their entirety at each exam. As practitioners go through the exam sequence outlined in the *Preventive Healthcare Guidelines*, the individual patient’s presentation will identify which of the supporting guidelines should be consulted on a selective basis. This is what we call the Convergence Protocol” (pages 14–15 in *Moving from*

Problem Solver to Problem Preventer: Integrating Nutrition, Preventive Care and Life Stage Guidelines, a supplement to the October 2012 issue of *Trends magazine*).

Using a preventive healthcare exam as the starting point, the Convergence Protocol makes applying the many clinical *Guidelines* a manageable process that is integrated into every regular exam. A basic action plan (see page 5) will convert integrated preventive healthcare from a concept into your practice’s standard procedure for every exam.

First, make a leadership commitment

Integrating preventive healthcare into your practice’s culture requires an explicit commitment by the practice’s leadership. This is the single most important success factor in adopting disease prevention as the pathway to optimum pet health, a strong client–pet relationship and a long-term client relationship with the practice. Leadership commitment occurs when the practice’s veterinarians apply the principles of preventive care, as defined by

the *AAHA-AVMA Preventive Healthcare Guidelines*, to every patient at every exam. Communicating the importance of disease prevention to clients and other staff on a regular basis creates the expectation that preventive healthcare will be implemented.

Obtain a commitment from the healthcare team

Obtaining a team commitment to preventive healthcare is essential to implementing this approach successfully and consistently throughout the practice. To ensure that preventive healthcare is applied on an every-patient, every-exam basis, and that it is integrated with supporting clinical *Guidelines*, healthcare team members should:

- Understand the medical rationale for the primary role of disease prevention in pet health.
- Place the role of medical “problem preventer” on an equal footing with medical “problem solver,” i.e., prevention is considered critical to minimizing the incidence and severity of acute disease.
- Know how to apply the *AAHA-AVMA Preventive Healthcare Guidelines* as the convergence point for all other supporting clinical *Guidelines* used in companion animal medicine.
- Exchange regular feedback with practice leadership and other healthcare team members on how improvements can be made to preventive healthcare delivery, both individually and on a collective basis.

Identify the “critical few” components of supporting *Guidelines*

“The various supplementary *Guidelines* available to veterinarians are important because they are the sources of in-depth information on diagnosis, treatment and prevention that go beyond the primary, *Preventive Healthcare Guidelines*,” Rodan says. She notes that the supplementary *Guidelines* define “best practices” in veterinary medicine and are invaluable resources for delivering complete, optimum healthcare.

“If these comprehensive *Guidelines* are marginalized because of their complexity or because they are too numerous to assimilate, they lose their value,” she

explains. “A helpful approach is to identify the ‘critical few’ components of each of the *Guidelines* that have the greatest importance. What has worked in my practice is for the staff to identify the two or three most important points from each relevant supplementary guideline, and identify them in a standard operating procedure (SOP) that we incorporate into the *AAHA-AVMA Preventive Healthcare Guidelines* on a single sheet.

“For example, in the case of a newly adopted kitten, the *AAFP Feline Retrovirus Management Guidelines* will specify when and how the patient should be tested. Referral to the *Retrovirus Management Guidelines* would be triggered by the prevention plan component of the *Preventive Healthcare Guidelines*. This integrated approach allows us, within a reasonable amount of time, to conduct an exam that is both comprehensive and individualized.”

Similarly, the *AAHA Nutritional Assessment Guidelines for Dogs and Cats* contains a description of nutritional risk factors. A working knowledge of this key information from an essential supplementary clinical guideline can be applied on a discretionary basis to provide individualized patient care.

Define roles, conduct regular staff training

Every team member has a role in implementing integrated preventive healthcare. A “doorknob-to-doorknob” approach, whereby the client encounters an informed staff member committed to preventive healthcare from time of presentation to time of departure, is discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Trends magazine* (see “Deploying Your Team to Implement Preventive Healthcare”). Individual roles for implementing preventive healthcare should be specified in writing—for example, in job descriptions, SOPs or protocols.

Delivering preventive healthcare on a continuing basis should be part of the practice’s regular in-service training program. The practice owner should conduct progress checks to ensure that the *Preventive Healthcare Guidelines* and all relevant supporting *Guidelines* are being properly applied using the Convergence Protocol. Communication skills used to counsel clients in

ACTION PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING INTEGRATED PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE

STEP

1

Make a leadership commitment

STEP

2

Obtain a team commitment

STEP

3

Identify the “Critical Few” components of the supporting healthcare *Guidelines*

STEP

4

Define the role of every healthcare team member in delivering integrated preventive healthcare

STEP

5

Conduct regular staff training

BENEFITS

- Efficient application of multiple clinical *Guidelines*
- Patient care that is both individualized and comprehensive
- Change that is managed for continuous improvement
- Learning environment
- Development of a high-performance team

preventive healthcare should be a prominent focus of role-play exercises and training discussions.

Reaping the benefits

Implementing preventive healthcare in your practice has important benefits, including some that go beyond clinical medicine. The obvious clinical benefit is a systematic, efficient application of multiple clinical *Guidelines*, thereby addressing a challenge that every practitioner faces. The net effect is to deliver prevention-based healthcare that is both individualized and comprehensive.

Transitioning to an integrated preventive healthcare approach from more traditional models based on acute care is also an exercise in change management. Implementing change using a logical process understood by the entire healthcare team can be a valuable growth experience for the practice. Implementing

change will keep your practice current at a time when veterinary medicine is evolving in ways that demand new approaches and a new service model that relies on regular healthcare visits for practice growth.

Implicit in embracing change is a learning environment. A learning organization with an expectation of continuous improvement is the hallmark of a high-performance team. That is the type of organization that inspires its clients to embrace regular preventive healthcare as the pathway to extending the life and enhancing the well-being of their pets.

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Early Discovery of Diabetes Benefits Dog and Owner

by Edie Jarolim

“I’m so sorry. We just had to put our dog down, too,” consoled a friend. She was responding to the news that my 10-pound terrier mix, Frankie, had been diagnosed with diabetes mellitus.

It was December 2007 and Frankie was eight years old, far from geriatric for a small dog. He had been drinking more water than usual and had had a few accidents in the house, but was generally his perky, mischievous self. Euthanizing the little guy was the last thing on my mind.

Still, I admit that when I got the diagnosis, I feared my life as I knew it was over. Frankie is my first dog, ever. I grew up in a small Brooklyn apartment with a mother who feared all creatures, great and small. It wasn’t until I was an adult and settled into a house with a large yard in Tucson that I gave in to my hankering for canine companionship—not to mention to the nudging of a dog-rescuer friend.

*Frankie was never fat:
ergo, I thought he couldn’t
possibly be diabetic.*

I was a nervous-come-lately dog person. I read lots of books and asked my canine-savvy pals lots of questions. So I knew that dogs could get diabetes and I even knew that excess water drinking was one of the signs of the disease. Frankie was never fat: ergo, I thought he couldn’t possibly be diabetic. We live in the desert—maybe the dry heat was getting to him, I rationalized.

I might have remained in a state of denial for a long time. Luckily, one of the things books and friends alike emphasized was the importance of regular veterinary visits. I already had one scheduled when the water guzzling began. Blood and urine tests soon confirmed my worst fears.

I cried. I kept peering at Frankie’s eyes, expecting him to go blind any minute, having read that cataracts are often a first sign of diabetes. Then I settled down and worked with my veterinarian to get Frankie’s blood sugar regulated. Many glucose curves and diet adjustments later, we settled into a routine. And I got some perspective.

It’s never pleasant when a loved one has a chronic disease. And yes, I will have to give Frankie two shots of insulin each day for the rest of his life. (He’s proved resistant to self-injection; it must be the terrier in him.) But I realize I was lucky to have found out sooner rather than later, before a manageable condition turned into an expensive medical emergency.

More than four and a half years after the initial diagnosis, Frankie and I are both doing fine. His eyes are a little cloudy, but he’s approximately 13 years old; my mother had cataracts at the equivalent age. His care has not only become routine, but has proved to be unexpectedly rewarding.

Advised by my veterinarian that regular exercise is important, I drive Frankie to a riverside trail early each morning for a long stroll before the desert heat sets in. The air is cool and fresh, and we’ve made friends with other regulars, canine and human.

Bottom line: Pesky shots aside, regulating diabetes pretty much boils down to paying careful attention to your dog, watching his diet and providing regular exercise—precisely the things every good dog owner should do anyway.

But who knows what would have happened if we had not caught this early, all because I believed in regular checkups with my veterinarian?”

Edie Jarolim, author of *Am I Boring My Dog: And 99 Other Things Every Dog Wishes You Knew* (Alpha/Penguin), lives in Tucson, Arizona, where everyone on the trail greets her small terrier-mix, Frankie, while ignoring her.

Deploying Your Team to Implement Preventive Healthcare

THE MOST EFFICIENT, SYSTEMATIC WAY of ensuring a long and healthy life for your patients is to use the Convergence Protocol, discussed in the article “Integrating Pet Healthcare Guidelines: A Convergence Protocol” (pages 14–15 in *Moving from Problem Solver to Problem Preventer: Integrating Nutrition, Preventive Care and Life Stage Guidelines*, a supplement to the October 2012 issue of *Trends magazine*).

Simply put, the Convergence Protocol uses the *AAHA-AVMA Preventive Healthcare Guidelines* for the primary exam and as a blueprint for determining when to use the various specialized canine and feline *Guidelines*. Selective and targeted use of the extensive supporting *Guidelines* makes them manageable, while preventive healthcare establishes disease prevention as the principal pathway to optimum pet health and longevity.

Now it's time to implement this integrated approach. To do that, everyone on the healthcare team has a role!

Why the whole team should participate

There are several benefits of adopting a team approach to the practice's mission or any of its specific programs. A group effort increases organizational efficiency by distributing the workload needed to deliver integrated preventive healthcare. No one can or should do it all. Delegating authority for specific aspects of integrated preventive healthcare increases individual motivation to accomplish results. Conversely, if everyone is responsible for a specific task, in reality no one is responsible. Finally, clients receive a consistent message about the value of preventive healthcare when the entire team is committed to its implementation.

Adopt a “doorknob-to-doorknob” approach

Deploying the entire healthcare team to implement preventive healthcare involves a “doorknob-to-doorknob”

approach. That means, from the moment the client enters the clinic to the time of departure, each healthcare team member is trained and prepared to educate the client or deliver some aspect of disease prevention as the practice's overarching philosophy. Examples include:

- **Receptionist**—Ensures pre-exam paperwork is complete; answers commonplace questions.
- **Technician**—Provides client education and counseling; initiates patient history and selected components of the physical exam.
- **Veterinarian**—Conducts medical exam and assessment; develops diagnostic, therapeutic and prevention plan; and reinforces the practice's commitment to preventive healthcare.
- **Hospital or practice manager**—Audits follow-up by staff; develops marketing plans that promote preventive healthcare.

For a more detailed example of the doorknob-to-doorknob approach, see “How to Ensure the Entire Team is Working Together to Implement the Guidelines” on page 16 of *Nutrition: The First Step in Preventive Care*, a supplement to the September 2012 issue of *Trends magazine*.

Ensure continuous improvement

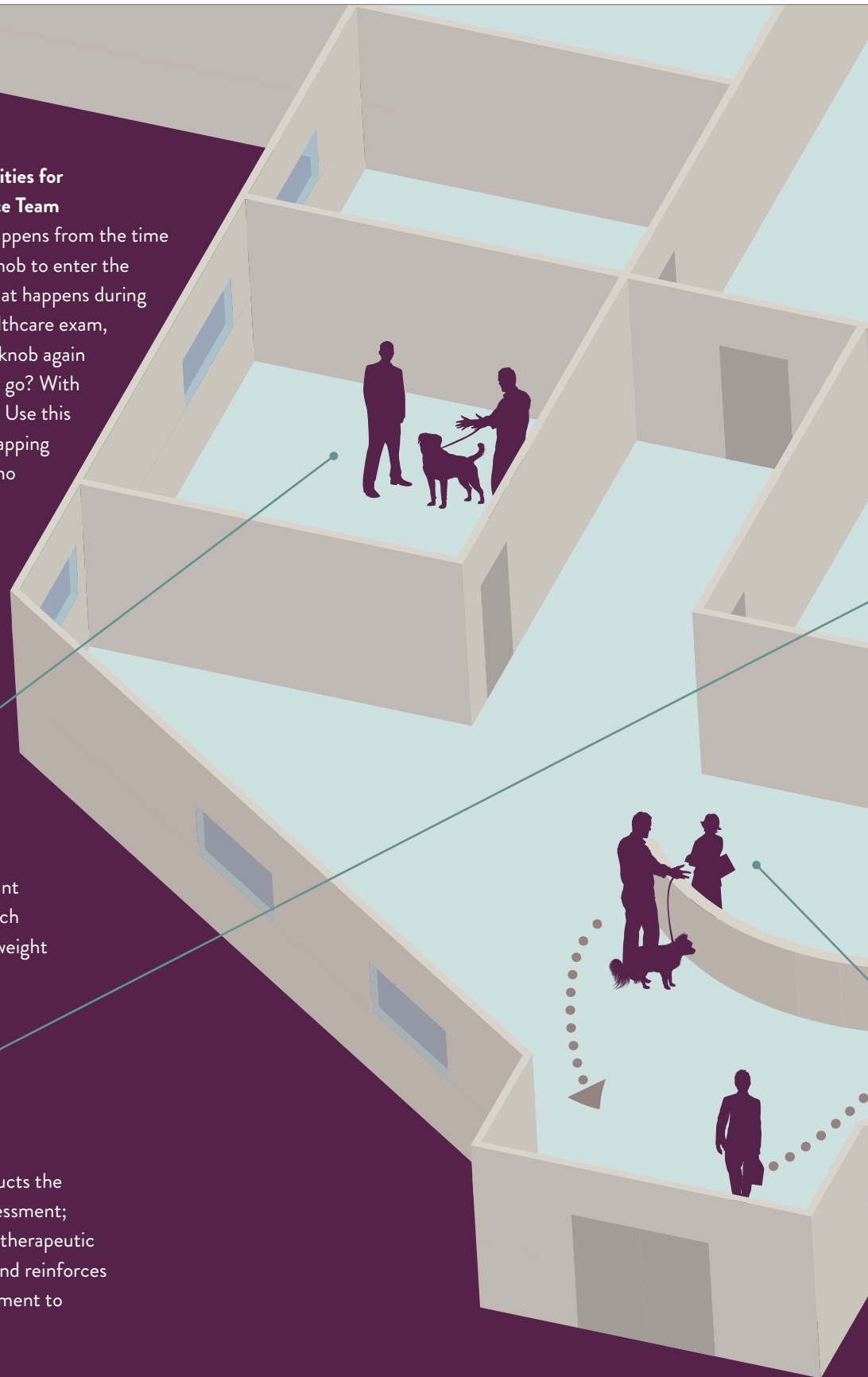
Once integrated preventive healthcare has become part of your practice culture, a deliberate continuous improvement process will evaluate and refine your procedures. Conducting regular reviews of what is working and what is not, discussing challenges and best practices, and celebrating successes among the healthcare team are continuous improvement methods that can be readily implemented. Continuous improvement is the hallmark of a high-performance team, and will further enable your practice to deliver optimum healthcare with disease prevention as its foundation.

Developing Responsibilities for Members of the Practice Team

Think about the what happens from the time a client turns the doorknob to enter the clinic, and everything that happens during a typical preventive healthcare exam, until they turn the doorknob again to leave. Where do they go? With whom do they interact? Use this concept to develop a mapping process to determine who does and says what and when. It is really pretty simple, but you do need to think about it step by step.

A technician or assistant weighs every pet at each visit, and records the weight in the health record.

The veterinarian conducts the medical exam and assessment; develops a diagnostic, therapeutic and prevention plan; and reinforces the practice's commitment to preventive healthcare.





TIPS FOR TRAINING YOUR TEAM TO DELIVER INTEGRATED HEALTHCARE

- Assign specific people to perform specific tasks for implementing preventive healthcare, with explicit timelines and outcome measures.
- Train designated healthcare team members for specialized roles (examples: nutrition, behavioral counseling, dental care, senior care) based on their individual skills, background, interests and expressed desire to acquire new expertise.
- Put primary emphasis on developing communication skills involving the client.
- Coach team members to always explain to each client the *medical rationale, benefit and value* of any preventive healthcare recommendation.
- The *Partners for Healthy Pets* website is an excellent resource for training strategies and materials for use in a veterinary practice (see the Resources Toolbox link). For example, there are several tools within the “Guidelines Implementation” and “Communication” tabs that can help your team implement and accomplish many of the suggestions contained in this article.

The receptionist reviews the invoice, may distribute educational materials, and books the next appointment.

The receptionist ensures the pre-exam paperwork is complete, verifies the purpose of the visit, and asks the client if he/she has any questions.

Illustrated by Kimberly Lamb

Techs Take Charge: Proposing a Nutrition, Preventive Care or Life Stage Program for Your Practice

TECHNICIANS ARE KEY PLAYERS IN the client-pet-practice relationship and integral parts of the patient care team. So who better to advocate for pets' wellness? If you have a passion for nutrition, preventive care or life stage wellness and want to implement such a program in your practice, here's how to present a convincing proposal to get the go-ahead from managers and owners.

Start with a self-assessment, says Rebecca Rose, CVT, co-author of *Career Choices for Veterinary Technicians: Opportunities for Animal Lovers* (AAHA Press 2009).

"Ask yourself, 'Can I properly manage my time to take on this added task in which I may need to train my fellow technicians and update the program as needed? Am I able to adequately dedicate enough energy to this program and maintain my current level of duties? If not, what can be delegated (redirected) or turned loose? Are my communication skills strong enough to speak with management, clients and fellow team members about the program and move it forward in a positive, continual manner?'"

If you can answer yes to these questions, then you're ready to develop a professional presentation.

"Create a well-defined, written plan that answers what is the benefit to the pet, the pet owner, the veterinary hospital and the technician and/or the team," Rose said.

And practice your presentation before your meeting. "Consider speaking with a colleague and talk them through the plan," she said. "Use that person as a sounding board. Verbally talking it through will be beneficial when it comes time to approach the owner."

Focus on benefits

Rose recommends technicians remind owners and managers that "by properly following healthy protocols

(as defined by that veterinary hospital), together the veterinary team can help a pet owner offer his pet the best quality of life, free of preventable diseases." She also suggests technicians emphasize the importance of optimum weight, alleviating the problems associated with obesity.

As far as how a new program will benefit the pet owner, Rose says technicians should point out that, "It seems logical that a pet owner, under our care and guidance, following our recommendations for vaccinating, spaying/neutering, appropriate diet and exercise for the life stage of the animal, will most likely have a longer, healthier lifetime with their cherished pet. With a solid understanding of preventive health [care], they will be able to identify earlier stages of disease (dental disease as an example), allowing for earlier diagnosis and treatment," which obviously benefits their pet.

Rose says it's important that technicians wanting to implement a new program note to owners or supervisors that offering stellar client service is absolutely best for the veterinary hospital, and the new service is part of stellar client service.

"With prevention and wellness care, the pet is getting the best pet care, the pet owner is having an engaged, satisfying experience, returning for more services, and the hospital is reaching its goal of offering quality medicine in the form of preventive healthcare. This is a win/win/win situation," Rose said.

Another tip from Rose is to focus your argument on what the owners or managers are most interested in. If you know your management is all about patient care, take that angle, she said. "Maybe management is all about client service; [if so,] approach it from that perspective."

And don't forget to tie the idea into the mission/vision/values of the hospital. "Maybe a vision statement reads,

'Every client educated.' Great, now techs can point out how can the *Preventive Healthcare, Nutritional Assessment and Life Stage Guidelines* can help educate clients," she said.

Get specific

But it's not just enough to lay out the benefits. If technicians want higher-ups to sign off on their ideas, they should get specific, says Abby Suiter, practice manager at Daniel Island Animal Hospital in Charleston, S.C.

"I love seeing technicians taking an active interest in enhancing our client education programs," Suiter said. "There are a lot of great ideas out there, but problems often arise in the logistics of implementation. I would like to see a plan that addresses the who, what, where, when and how much questions. This allows me, as a manager, to simply fine-tune the program (if necessary) and give my blessing to move forward. If a tech relies on me to figure out the answers to all those questions, it's likely to sit on my desk longer than anyone would like."

Suiter urges technicians to be armed with as much knowledge as possible. "The tech should know statistically what areas of prevention we are succeeding at and which could be improved," she said. "A current statistic and goal are always a good idea, and information on how that data compares to national averages [is also useful]."

Technicians should be prepared to answer questions about specifics, like which staff will be involved, whether new equipment will be needed and how the

new service will be marketed. And, of course, how much it will cost and how much it will earn.

"I would like to see how the topics that are discussed are directly related to our revenue," Suiter said. "Will this increase sales? Would we charge for the consultation? Sometimes the answer is no to both, but if a compelling argument can be made that these services would strengthen our bond with clients and increase trust, loyalty, etc., I would still consider the proposal."

Suiter says technicians also should be prepared to demonstrate that they are ready to take on something new.

"The tech taking on this project should already be well-versed in the basics of her job description before taking on additional tasks. Specific CE [continuing education] on the topic is definitely a plus."

Rose also says that technicians need not be shy about mentioning the benefits of a new program for themselves. Being a technician is a high-burnout career. Finding ways to stay involved in the practice and passionate about the field can help combat burnout and enhance loyalty to the practice. In fact, conversations about starting a new program can begin during performance reviews, she said.

"When technicians are allowed, encouraged and supported to follow their passion(s) within veterinary medicine, they take ownership of the program they are designing," Rose said. "Setting and achieving goals is rewarding, no doubt about it. To take charge of your career is worthwhile and gratifying."

Finding ways to stay involved in the practice and passionate about the field can help combat burnout and enhance loyalty to the practice.



Marketing Integrated Preventive Healthcare

SUCCESSFUL, GROWING COMPANION ANIMAL PRACTICES realize the importance of integrating the traditional acute-care “problem-solver” healthcare model with the “problem-preventer” model that emphasizes disease prevention.

While skilled acute care showcases the veterinarian’s healing skills, it is regular preventive care that is the key to maintaining optimum pet health. Unfortunately, many veterinarians fail to adequately market preventive healthcare to their clients.

The recent Bayer veterinary care usage study found that a third of pet owners would take their pet to a veterinarian *only* for acute care, and *nearly half* believe that routine checkups are unnecessary.¹

There are proven ways for veterinary practices not only to market themselves more effectively, but to also place special emphasis on preventive healthcare, the driver of a long-term veterinarian–client–pet relationship.

The best marketing tool—your healthcare team

The best marketing tool for any veterinary practice is a high-performance healthcare team. In fact, the leading cause of customer defection is dissatisfaction with the staff.

Customer service expert Michael LeBoeuf notes that 68% of customers leave a business because of indifference by the staff toward them, compared to only 14% who leave because of dissatisfaction with the product.²

A tip for leveraging the value of your healthcare team is to include compelling biographies of your staff, their expertise and credentials on your website. For a veterinary practice that makes disease prevention its primary focus, it is also important that all healthcare team members have a specific role of some kind in the delivery of preventive healthcare to your clients (see “Deploying Your Team to Implement Preventive Healthcare” on page 7).

Core messages from a prevention-first practice

The culture that binds the healthcare team together in a common cause is known by various names—its mission, brand or identity—to name several. A veterinary practice that makes preventive healthcare its first priority should market that core message at every opportunity. At each exam, the healthcare team should emphasize:

- The *benefit* of preventive healthcare to the animal (better quality of life, longevity)
- The *value* to the owner (a strong and enduring owner–pet relationship, lower healthcare costs over time)
- The *rationale* for regular wellness exams (prevention of chronic disease, early disease treatment resulting in better outcomes, avoidance of pet suffering)

In addition, preventive healthcare should be a central theme of the practice’s website and other online marketing initiatives.

Using online marketing

Michael Warren, DVM, executive director of DVMelite Web Development, has devoted his business to helping veterinarians market themselves better online. “Practices in this digital age are less and less likely to grow without a good website in place,” he says. “You need a compelling online presence to convert Internet browsers into active clients, and to keep the clients you have coming back.”

Warren notes that pet-owning consumers are far more likely to use the Internet to find goods and services than they are to use the yellow pages. “Most veterinary practices have a website. It’s the virtual ‘front door’ to the practice. However, at least three out of four websites that we evaluate are not very well done.”

Warren explains that effective online marketing can be depicted as a pyramid, with a core message as its foundation (see page 15).

“The core message reflects the values and image that distinguishes the practice. For most veterinarians, that message is skilled, compassionate care for animals, or pet healthcare that promotes a strong human-animal bond,” Warren says.

“Preventive healthcare is certainly a worthwhile part of any core message. That central theme should be the focus of your online marketing and needs to be in evidence throughout the practice’s website,” he adds.

The website itself should have a visually appealing, functional home page, a shortcoming of many veterinary websites in Warren’s opinion.

“Statistics show that an Internet visitor draws an impression of your website in just seven seconds and spends an average of one minute at a site,” he says. “If you don’t captivate potential clients in that short time, they move on to another site. It’s tantamount to a lost client. So, it’s critical that your home page make a favorable first impression. Common mistakes include a website that is text-heavy, overly busy, has poor navigation or doesn’t convey staff expertise or compassion for animals.”

A key to building a compelling website is liberal use of photos of staff members with animals (“sterile” facilities shots devoid of pets and staff are turn-offs).

“The ‘About Us’ page is the most popular location on the website after the home page, and should contain biographies that convey the staff’s commitment to compassionate pet care,” Warren explains. He adds that the site should include a call to action—namely, guiding the pet owner how to make an appointment to resolve any pet health issue.

“Search engines, such as Google, will index blogs that have been regularly posted to the practice website,” he continues. “Typically, blogs are articles on current pet health topics, written by a staff member. When a search engine indexes your blogs, that action funnels visitors to your site. This is an excellent way of keeping your site up to date and well ranked with the search engines. Blogs play a large role in driving the growth of your practice.”

E-mail and social media have supporting roles at the top of the online marketing pyramid by ultimately directing current and prospective clients to the website. Warren recommends using e-mail and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, as a way to engage pet owners.

For example, “A practice can send out an e-mail blitz to the client base that announces a particular program or service. This can be a driver of preventive healthcare by promoting specific disease prevention initiatives, such as parasite control, senior care exams and dental health,” he explains.

On the other hand, social media is a great way to form a community with current and prospective clients, and allows you to have an ongoing conversation with them, including regularly promoting the importance of preventive pet healthcare.

What preventive healthcare marketing can accomplish

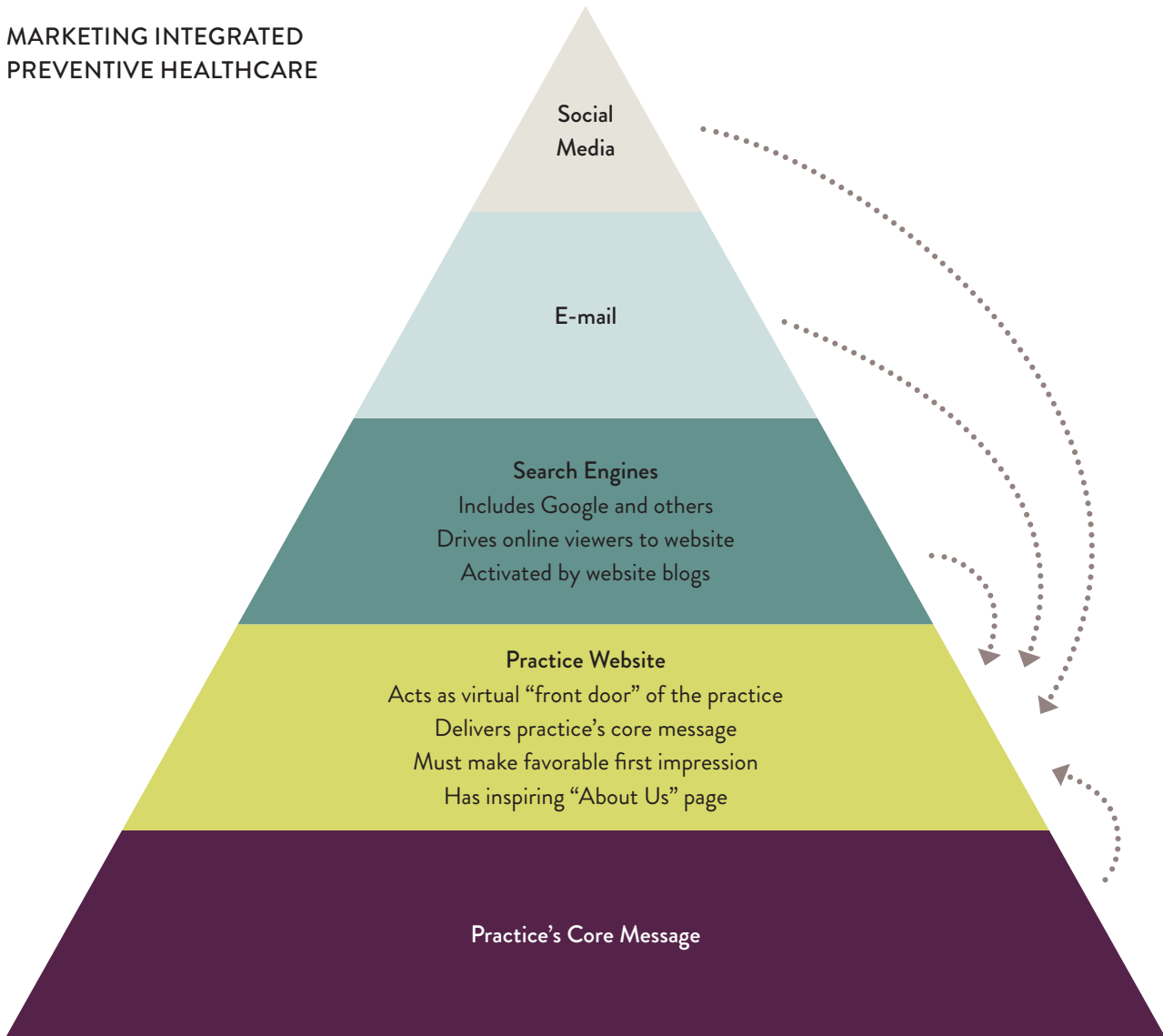
Successfully marketing preventive pet healthcare will motivate your clients to maintain a strong veterinarian-client-pet relationship with your practice. That kind of client loyalty results from a high level of long-term pet wellness, an outcome that can occur only from regular preventive healthcare visits.

A recent, large-scale survey found that 72% of more than 2,800 consumers said they trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations.³ Favorable client reviews, appearing online or in e-mail messages that can be posted to your website, will be an unmistakable sign that your marketing strategy is working.

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**MARKETING INTEGRATED
PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE**



Using online and social media to market your veterinary practice begins by defining your practice’s core message, also known as its mission, values or brand. The core message becomes the foundation of your online marketing program and a central theme of the website.

The website is the virtual “front door” of your practice and the hub to which other online media are directed.

Search engines, driven by blog articles posted to the website, direct Internet browsers to the site.

E-mail outreach and social media, at the apex of the pyramid, are supporting types of stand-alone messaging that also encourage existing or potential clients to visit the website.

Courtesy of Michael Warren, DVM, GCP, director of DVMelite Web Development.

What Gets Measured Gets Managed

YOU'VE DECIDED TO LAUNCH A nutrition center as part of your veterinary practice. You've spent weeks setting up a computer system, gathering documents for clients and staff, choosing a food or foods that match the needs of your clients and getting everyone up to speed to answer questions and provide advice. You let your clients and the greater community know about the new services, started taking appointments, flung the doors open... and now what? How do you measure whether the new center is a success?

The simple answer to that question is to set metrics and track them. But it's not as cut-and-dried as that. Those who've done it say there are two sets of metrics to use—staff and practice. Moreover, while they may seem to be the same thing, measuring both is the best way to ensure the success of a new program or service.

Staff success

Patricia Collins, DVM, co-owner of the AAHA-accredited Valley Cottage Animal Hospital in Valley Cottage, N.Y., says one of the ways she measures staff success at her center is very simple: She keeps her ears open to ensure staff are communicating the proper messages to clients.

“We can see what they're doing,” she says. “When we have a wellness appointment, we expect staff to ask what food clients are feeding their pets. It's easy for us to assess whether they're asking that question.”

Debbie Boone, CVPM, owner of 2 ManageVets Consulting in Greensboro, N.C., says an important metric is what staff learn. That, she says, can be tracked through meetings and educational events.

“I think it's important to set as a goal learning new things,” she says. “It's one of the biggest goals—‘here's a stretch for you' or ‘here's a new thing you need to learn.’” Attendance in classes, seminars or training modules makes this simple to measure, particularly if there's a test at the end.

“If you're talking about nutrition, offer a reward for whoever becomes a Hill's Nutrition Specialist,” she says. “It's a very complicated test with 30 modules. Once you know that, you are very astute at nutrition.”

Boone recommends offering staff a visible reminder of what they've accomplished, such as pins they can wear on their uniforms that designate a new area of expertise. “In my practice, we had different training modules for staff to learn different things,” she says. “If they passed a test, they got a raise and a bronze paw print they got to wear as an indication of that knowledge.”

Measuring progress on those goals...is a great way to keep staff engaged and the practice on the right track.

Boone notes, though, that it's important to explain why each piece of knowledge is important. "You can't say, 'Do this because I said so,'" she says. "It won't work for your children, and it won't work for your staff. You have to teach the why, make them understand why we want to do these things."

Practice success

Along the same lines, there are metrics to indicate whether a practice is successful in its preventive care. One of those is the amount of food being sold. "Keep an inventory," advises Jessica Downing, DVM, a veterinarian at Valley Cottage Animal Hospital. That not only helps you manage supplies, but it can indicate how well the practice is doing to ensure pets receive appropriate nutrition.

When a practice is doing a good job of performing nutritional assessments and making and explaining dietary recommendations, then it is likely the practice will see an increase in food sales. Selling more food is one indicator that more clients are committed to providing appropriate foods for their pets. Usually, when food sales go up, more pets are getting better nutrition.

Her practice has started offering clients food by mail, and has seen sales jump because of it. "It's nice to be able to pick up food at 3 a.m., but the vast majority of practices aren't able to do that," she says. "We'll deliver the food to [clients], and that helps."

Measuring whether clients receive follow-up can make a big difference. Amy Hoyumpa Vogt, member of the AAHA/AVMA *Preventive Healthcare Guidelines* Task Force and owner of the AAHA-accredited Friendship Animal Hospital in Richmond, Texas, says the practice's computer system generates reminders for follow-up calls to clients who may have been given

recommendations for a certain treatment or option, but not made a decision on it when they left the office.

"We call them the next week or the next month, or after their vacation, because that's what they said [to do]," she says. "It's unusual for them to do everything we say at one visit, so this allows them another opportunity to set up that care."

Before any of that, though, measuring whether a baseline was recorded for each client can be a huge help. Recording a starting point will tell whether the practice's messages and recommendations are getting through later. She notes that it's very important to find out what clients are feeding their pets.

Boone agrees, adding that a new center needs to track both client and practice baselines. "You need to know what your baseline is so you know where you stand," she says. "You might be sending home prescription diets with 2% of the patients for whom the doctor has recommended one. So the goal might be to increase that to 10%. And then you look at those metrics and decide whether you want to increase to 15%."

Keeping those goals small and incremental is important, she says, so they're attainable. But the baseline is critical.

"You've got to know where you are," she says. "It's a huge problem if you don't know your baseline. Find out what it is—measure where you stand right now—and then have a conversation with your team and your medical staff. Ask them, 'What are things we can do as a hospital to reach our goal? And what is a reachable goal?'"

Measuring progress on those goals, she says, is a great way to keep staff engaged and the practice on the right track.



What Would You Say to This Client?

FOR COMPLIANCE TO SUCCEED, MEDICAL and support staff must understand that it's important not just to give a recommendation, but also to tell clients why it's important. Communicate the value and benefits of preventive care.

Below are some questions about preventive medicine and answers suggested by Jane Shaw, DVM, PhD, a veterinarian and director of the Argus Institute at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colo. The Argus Institute performs research and provides services to strengthen veterinarian-client-patient communication and support relationships between people and their pets.

Shaw recommends using a “chunk and check” method to encourage dialogue. A chunk is one to three sentences of information; a check invites the client to respond, which helps you move toward mutual agreement.

Staff training tip: Cut apart the boxes and use these flash cards as a training game at your next staff meeting to encourage colleagues to role-play. Determine who will play the role of the client or the vet. The client reads the statement or question, and the vet responds. Follow with an invitation for feedback and discussion, and then give it another try.

It's such a pain to bring Fluffy in
for routine **check-ups**

I know it's wrong, but it's easier to wait
until she seems like she's not well and
I'm **forced to bring her in.**

1

What would you say to this client?

Why does Jax need
different tests
than Sky?

2

What would you say to this client?

I give Bo chew sticks all the time
and his teeth
look white,
so I think we can skip the cleaning.

3

What would you say to this client?

All these tests seem so **expensive.**
Are they really
necessary?

4

What would you say to this client?

My dog/cat lives indoors, so she
doesn't need shots or parasite
medicine.

5

What would you say to this client?

But Daisy is young and healthy.
Why do I need to bring her in for
routine exams?

6

What would you say to this client?

“That is a good question [compliment]. As pets age, their care needs to change, just like for you and me. As Jax is now a senior, we need to be more watchful. The earlier we catch a problem and intervene, the more likely we can help Jax get better [chunk]. Would you like to proceed with the blood tests for Jax today [check]?”

2

Suggested Answer

“I hear your concerns about transporting Fluffy to the clinic; it is stressful for both of you [empathy]. During her check-ups, we spend time getting to know Fluffy and help her adjust to going to the veterinarian, so it will be less distressing for her. I am worried that if you wait until she is sick to bring Fluffy into the hospital, she may be even more stressed and fearful of the hospital [chunk]. How do you think Fluffy would do with regular visits [check]?”

1

Suggested Answer

“Yes, they are expensive [empathy]. They will give us key information on Bo’s health. The physical exam helps me look at Bo from the outside, and then the blood work helps me see his organs on the inside. The tests will help me identify any changes early, so we can get a head start on treating anything of concern to keep him healthy [chunk]. How can we work within your budget today [check]?”

4

Suggested Answer

“I personally learned the hard way after I skipped cleaning my teeth and got gum disease; the treatment was painful. I now get my teeth cleaned twice a year and floss every day [self-disclosure]. If we do Bo’s teeth cleaning now and you work on brushing his teeth, we can optimize his oral health and minimize the dental cleanings he will need. Just like for you and me, regular dental care is essential for Bo’s good health [chunk]. I am wondering if we can schedule a dental cleaning for Bo today [check]?”

3

Suggested Answer

“The most important parts of Daisy’s routine exams are 1) your report card on her health and how she is doing at home; 2) my physical examination to evaluate her health; and 3) our discussions about her general health, such as her body weight, dental hygiene, behavior, activity level and grooming. It is an opportunity for us to work together to ensure that Daisy is on a path to good health [chunk]. I look forward to seeing you both again for Daisy’s check-up [check].”

6

Suggested Answer

“That seems to make sense, as her exposure is reduced by being inside [reflective listening]. What concerns me is that diseases can be carried inside by other pets or animals. For instance, a few years ago I found bats living in my attic, which can carry rabies. We don’t like to think about it, but just coming and going from the house can let in mosquitoes that carry parasites and disease [chunk]. How do you think we can best protect her [check]?”

5

Suggested Answer

There is an easy step-by-step approach to launching a nutrition center in a veterinary practice.

Five Easy Steps to a Successful Nutrition Center

EMPHASIZING NUTRITION AND PREVENTIVE CARE are to veterinary practices today what dental care was five or ten years ago. Dental care, of course, is now a standard and very accepted part of pet care, and experts say that placing a high priority on optimum nutrition and preventive care is well on its way. As a result, many practices are expanding to include those services in their routine care.

As with any new service, though, getting started can seem a bit daunting. With so many pet food providers competing for business, so many questions about food and so much information floating around that may or may not be good, where to begin can be overwhelming.

Thankfully, those who've seen success say there is an easy step-by-step approach to launching a nutrition center in a veterinary practice, as described below.

1. Research different food brands

“Do your research,” says Jessica Downing, co-owner of the AAHA-accredited Valley Cottage Animal Hospital in Valley Cottage, N.Y. Nutritional counseling is a basic part of what the doctors at this hospital do, but Downing says early research set them on the proper path.

“There are many different brands of food out there,” says Downing. “Not all are created equal. You need someone to do the homework—research and select a brand or brands that meet your patients’ needs.”

She says selecting a brand helps animals stay healthier and reduces confusion among clients and staff. Recalling the hospital’s early nutrition counseling days, Downing remembered, “If someone came in here with a new puppy, one doctor would recommend one food,

and another doctor would recommend another one. We had to make a decision as to which diet we agreed upon. It was a consistent message for our clients [we wanted to give].”

2. Educate your staff

Once the food or foods are selected, Downing says it’s critical to get every staff member on board with enough information to answer questions clients may ask. “We have people who are leaving and they say to the receptionist, ‘The doctor says I should try this food for my dog, but what do you think?’” Downing says. “Sometimes, it’s really what the receptionist says that convinces clients that they should follow the doctor’s recommendation.”

“Staff buy-in is one of the most important components of any preventive care program,” agrees Amy Hoyumpa Vogt, DVM, owner of the AAHA-accredited Friendship Animal Hospital in Richmond, Texas. “Clients need to hear recommendations not just from veterinarians, but from other team members as well. When everyone hears the same message, it’s very clear, it’s very concise, and the owners are more likely to understand and therefore comply.”

She hosts weekly staff meetings to ensure that everyone understands and is on board with nutritional recommendations.

3. Make it easy to do

One of the best things veterinarians can do to enhance their preventive care practice, say experts, is to write down blanket recommendations that can be handed out in person, e-mailed or posted to a website.

“This is one of the top things I think people should do,” says Vogt. “Three years ago, I developed a bullet list for each life stage of each species we treat. I made sure it was presented to the staff, with the opportunity for them to ask questions and really, fully understand what was being communicated.” They, in turn, could either pass out the list or communicate its information to clients verbally.

“We give the list to clients,” she says. It’s also incorporated into the practice’s front desk system, so that when client comes in for a coded reason, the list prints out automatically at the end of their visit and can be taken home.

“We automatically print preventive care recommendations for each species and each life stage,” Vogt says. “The staff member is able to go through the list with the client, and then hand it to the client to take home.” The lists are also on the hospital’s website along with other handouts.

“We make those lists available to people who may have lost theirs or to people who are new to us and are just checking us out,” she says. “If they have a new pet and aren’t sure what to expect in terms of medical care, they can find it quickly on our website.”

4. Implement preventive healthcare plans

A preventive healthcare plan is a comprehensive package of veterinary services intended to keep a pet healthy and to detect diseases or conditions early in their development.

All preventive healthcare plans have two things in common: a suite or bundle of services and a predetermined fee.

Common services include routine diagnostics, essential vaccines, nutritional assessments, dietary recommendations, pain assessments and more. Some plans may include breed-specific or age-specific services as well (but they are not insurance plans).

Payment plans can also vary, either annually or monthly.

In essence, a preventive healthcare plan represents a clearly stated, shared commitment on the part of the veterinary practice team and the client to ensure each pet receives the care it deserves.

To learn more about preventive healthcare plans and how to implement them in your practice, go to PartnersforHealthyPets.org and click on the Resources Toolbox. Log in; click on the Preventive Pet Healthcare Plans tab; and explore the overview, implementation manual and team training manual.

5. Spread the word

The last step is the most difficult for some practices: Market the new center and make sure people know about it.

“You have to decide how you’re going to get your message out,” says Christina Materni, a financial analyst with Wutchiett Tumblin and Associates in Columbus, Ohio. “Are you going to use your social media community? Print? E-mail? Phone? Very few practices have a marketing plan mapped out.”

Vogt says that while her practice doesn’t advertise in the traditional sense, it does post nutritional information and preventive care points on its Facebook page and its website. “We try to have as many touch points as possible,” she says.

“Educating the public is extremely important,” says Downing. “We use different avenues to do that, including brochures, articles and the practice’s website.”

“There’s a lot of misinformation out there,” she notes. “The fad diets we’ve seen haven’t been in an animal’s best interest.”

Following these simple steps, experts say, can make a huge difference in the success of your new nutrition center.

What Preventive Medicine Has Done for Our Practice

by Rob Graham, CVT, practice manager at Animal Health Services

In 2009, Animal Health Services, Cave Creek, Arizona, implemented a comprehensive preventive medicine program to help improve patient care through awareness, education and compliance. Most practice managers may think that sounds like one of those great ideas that could never be implemented. However, by using *Guidelines* established by AAHA, we have been able to achieve our goal. Each pet is assessed based on its age, nutritional needs and preventive needs.

One of our primary focuses with this program is nutrition. Nutrition has become an easier subject to discuss with clients, considering all of the recent and past pet food recalls.

That being said, I don't know how many times a client will come in and tell us that the cashier at a "big box" store recommended a certain diet and that's why they're feeding their pet that food! This really hurts because it means we have never made a recommendation for that pet.

To address this issue, we have incorporated the fifth vital assessment (5VA) into each SOAP form. In addition to the TPR, Pain Scale and Dental Scale, the technician will discuss the pet's current diet, weight and feeding schedule. By obtaining this information, it opens the window for the veterinarian to discuss specific nutritional needs and then make a recommendation based on each pet's specific needs.

Just to give you an idea of how this affects your bottom line, in 2009 we sold 44% more volume in pet food than over the previous year. Our average profit for pet food is 38%. How many profit centers make the hospital 38%?

In addition to nutritional counseling, we recommend biannual wellness exams, biannual intestinal parasite screening and yearly heartworm testing. It is easy to get a client to say yes to internal parasite testing using visual tools, such as brochures and/or videos provided by AAHA.

We saw nearly a 100% increase in sales for intestinal parasite screenings from 2010 to 2011 after implementing our preventive medicine program. We saw an overall increase in net profit of 8% during the same time frame. Not too shabby! But more important, we are providing the highest in preventive medicine for our patients.

Implementing a comprehensive preventive medicine protocol can have its challenges with the staff at first. Some of the team members may complain that they feel like used car salesmen. However, by taking the training approach that we are advocates for the pet's health and not "salesmen," employees understand why it is important to provide clients with the preventive recommendations so clients can make an educated decision.

Today, each team member knows they are pet advocates, *not* salesmen. There is no doubt that our preventive medicine program has given team members more pride in their job and has allowed our clients to become more actively involved in their pet's welfare.

While preventive medicine may not appeal to all pet owners, the majority of our clients have embraced this program. The clients that choose not to provide preventive care understand that we will discuss it with them *every* time they come in. Eventually, we'll get them to convert!

Our preventive medicine program has been beneficial to our hospital in many ways. We have been able to improve the health of our patients, plus increase revenue, awareness and compliance. The program, along with the educational process, has brought our hospital team members together as one. Thanks to the AAHA *Guidelines*, any hospital can achieve the same success we have by focusing on preventive healthcare in their hospital.

Rob Graham, CVT, is practice manager at Animal Health Services in Cave Creek, Arizona.

