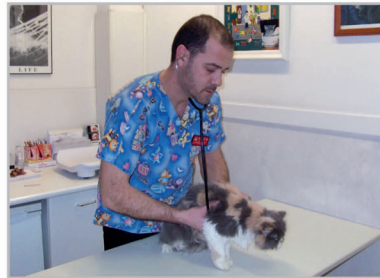


VETERINARY focus

Special edition

The worldwide journal for the companion animal veterinarian



How to develop your cat business



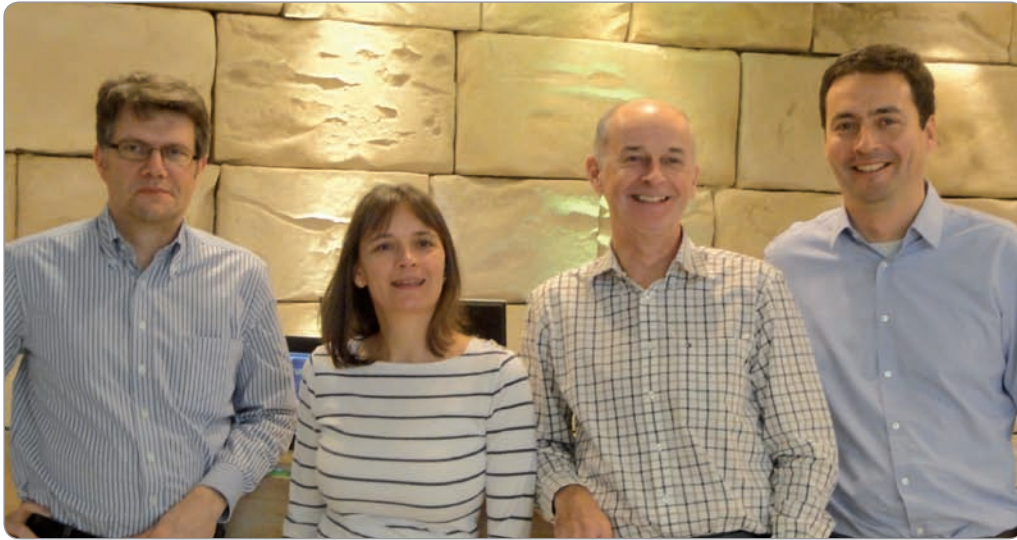
Philippe Baralon
Antje Blättner
Geoff Little
Pere Mercader

How to develop your cat business

Table of contents

The authors	3
Introduction	5
1 Cats are the veterinarian's future	7
2 Strategic options to increase your cat business	15
3 How to make your practice cat-friendly	26
4 How to implement a cat marketing plan	40

The authors



From left to right: Philippe Baralon, Antje Blättner, Geoff Little and Pere Mercader

Philippe Baralon

Philippe Baralon graduated as a veterinarian from the National Veterinary School of Toulouse in 1984. He also studied Economics (Master of Economics, Toulouse, 1985) and Business Administration (MBA, HEC, 1990). He founded his own consulting group, Phylum, in 1990 and remains one of its partners to this day.

Philippe Baralon acts as a veterinary practice management consultant in the areas of companion animals, equine practice and animal production. His main areas of specialisation are strategy, marketing and finance. He is also involved in benchmarking the economics of veterinary medicine in different parts of the world.

Philippe Baralon has authored some fifty articles on veterinary practice management; he also designs training sessions and gives lectures in France and abroad.

Antje Blättner

Antje Blättner graduated from Ludwig Maximilian University in 1988 after studying Veterinary Medicine in Berlin and Munich and currently practises part-time in a small animal practice.

After teaching Veterinary Nurses, she started giving lectures to German Veterinarians and Veterinary Nurses on client communication, marketing and other management-related topics.

In 2001 she took part in a post-graduation course on training and coaching at the University of Linz, Austria and founded "Vetkom" with her colleague Dr. Wolfgang Matzner. Vetkom is a company dedicated to educating Veterinarians and Veterinary Nurses on practice-management through lectures, seminars and providing in-house training for practices and clinics.

Antje Blättner has been the editor of "team.konkret", a German professional journal for Veterinary Nurses since 2005.

Geoff Little

Geoff Little qualified from Trinity College, Dublin in 1973. He was a partner for 35 years in a small animal practice that developed into a multi-vet business working from 2 hospitals and 4 branches. He retired from the partnership in 2002.

He was a Director of Centaur Services Ltd. for 20 years, one of the UK's largest veterinary wholesalers.

Currently he is a veterinary business advisor for Anval Ltd., a UK management and finance service for the veterinary profession and the Communications Training Associate for the Veterinary Defence Society. He is also a Director of MyVet Network in the republic of Ireland.

He has spoken on, and published many articles, and contributed to books on various aspects of Veterinary Practice Management both in the UK and abroad, including the following congresses, BSAVA, WSAVA, VPMA and SPVS.

He is a former President of the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons.

Pere Mercader

Pere Mercader graduated as a veterinarian from UAB (Barcelona) in 1988 and obtained a MBA from IESE Business School in 1991. He started his career in a global pet care corporation, where he spent 10 years holding different marketing management and marketing research positions.

In 2001 he became an independent practice management consultant, providing business advice to a number of Spanish and Portuguese veterinary centres.

Pere Mercader has also contributed to the design and analysis of profitability and pricing studies in the veterinary profession. He currently coordinates the Marketing and Strategy modules of the Veterinary MBA course organised by AVEPA (Spanish national veterinary association) and the University of Barcelona (UAB).

He is also a founder and a managing partner at Veterinary Management Studies (www.estudios-veterinarios.com), a market research firm specialising in the small animal veterinary practice channel.

Pere Mercader is the author of "Business solutions for veterinary clinics".

Introduction



Veterinarians have always been at the forefront of scientific change, acting as drivers of medical and surgical progress, and quick to implement the latest innovations and discoveries in their daily activities. This ongoing evolution has frequently called for financial and human investment and the veterinarian's propensity to adapt to new challenges clearly exemplifies the strategic mindset that pertains to this challenging profession.

The adaptation of rural large animal practices to pet owners' newly identified needs goes to show this great ability to adapt. In a few decades only, new facilities evolved and new "canine" staff were trained to better handle companion animals. In many rural regions of Europe, this evolution marked a real change, with a partial erosion of large animal veterinary activity as we knew it...

Similarly, contemporary veterinarians are faced with a new challenge: that of answering cat owners' specific expectations, as all data foresees a growing place for cats in modern societies.

One wonders why, with so many cats about, they account for such a small part of the veterinarian's workload? To answer this question, we have asked a team of veterinarians, specialists in practice management, to analyse the "cat paradox", so as to best prepare yourself for the future trends and changes...

We hope this Focus Special Edition will help you increase your veterinary practice's "felinity".

Philippe Marniquet,
DVM, Dipl. ESSEC
Royal Canin

1. Cats are the veterinarian's future

> SUMMARY

Although the worldwide cat population trend is upwards, the revenue from cat owners represents a relatively small percentage of a veterinary practice's revenue compared to that derived from dog owners. This is the "cat paradox". Owning a cat presents a lot of difference to owning a dog. For instance, many kittens are given for free and not purebred; the cat has the image of being more resistant to disease than dogs... However, relatively speaking, cat owners spend more money on feeding their pet than do dog owners.

In this chapter, the authors list the main reasons for the underdevelopment of feline veterinary business.



1/ Cats: A golden opportunity for dog vets

A) Quantitative aspects

Small animal veterinary medicine developed progressively from the second half of the 20th century and in the early days was primarily aimed at dogs. This is illustrated by the formation of the various small animal veterinary associations across the world: the United States led the way with the creation of the American Animal Hospital Association in 1933; Europe followed suit towards the end of the 1950's with the creation of the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) in the United Kingdom in 1957 and the Association Française des Vétérinaires pour Animaux de Compagnie (AFVAC) in France in 1958 among others. The World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) was created in 1961.

This coincided with the increasing importance of dogs within the families of developed countries to become fully-fledged family members in their own right. Veterinary teaching adapted rapidly to provide high-level training that has never ceased to evolve. However, feline medicine was still embryonic, the cat often being considered as a simple commensal and not a true member of the family. It was only from the 1970's that feline veterinary medicine truly developed scientifically, technically, and economically. The creation of the American Association of Feline Practitioners in 1974 marked an important step (although the Feline Advisory Bureau had been up and running since 1958 in the UK). Feline medicine continued to develop strongly, becoming more structured through the 1980's and 1990's and beyond.

This evolution is simply a response to demand. Indeed, since 1980, in the majority of developed markets the feline population has been growing faster than the canine population, and in North America, as in Europe, there are now more cats than dogs.

Figures 1 to 5 illustrate the comparative evolution of canine and feline populations in five major countries, United Kingdom, France, Germany, USA, and Japan.

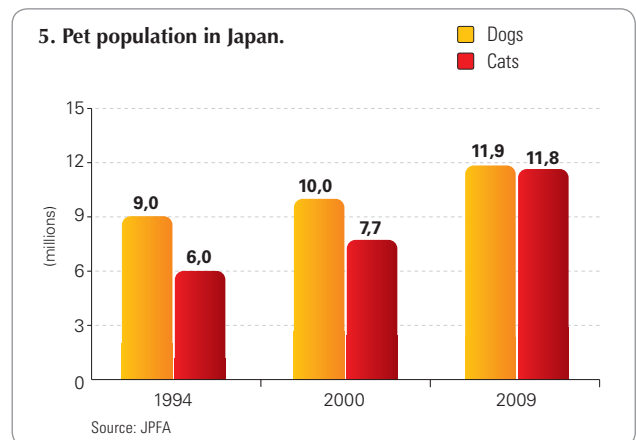
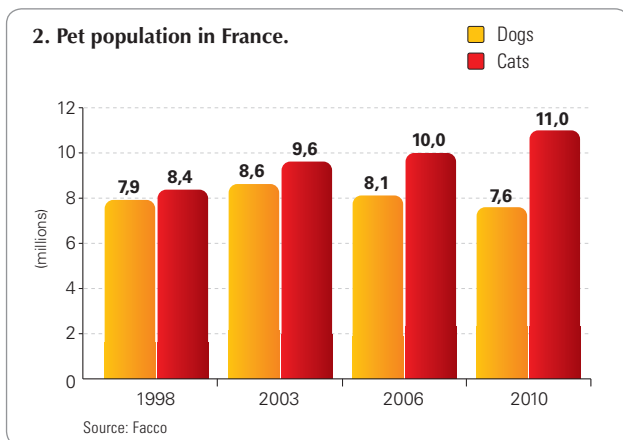
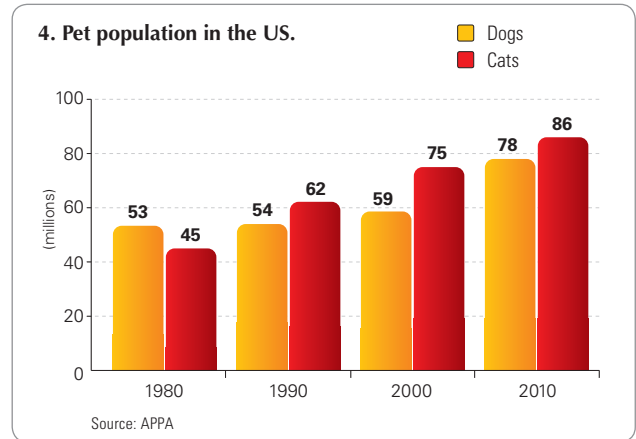
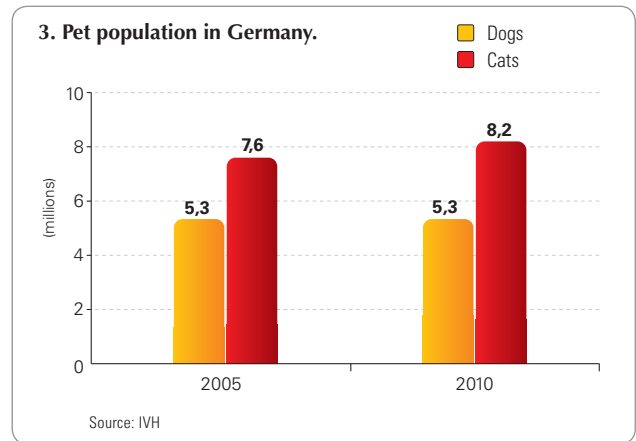
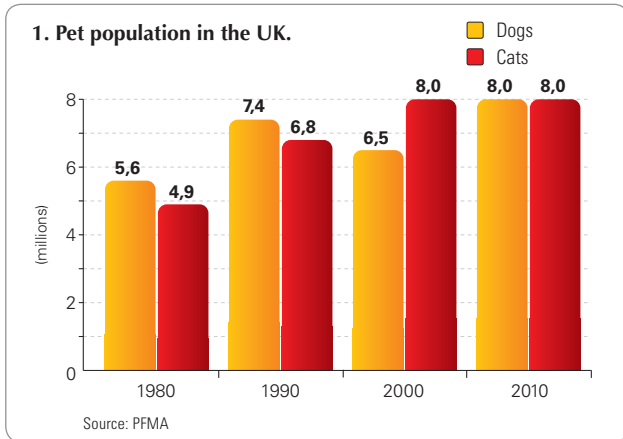
These results were obtained from surveys, but the statistics in these graphs are not as precise as those taken from human population censuses and should be considered as approximative. It is clear that the feline population is increasing at a higher rate than the canine population in all of the countries studied, although in the last 10 years, in the US and UK, the dog population has been on the increase again.

If one considers the most recent data, only Japan and the UK maintain similar cat and dog populations. In Germany and France, the feline population is increasing significantly whilst the dog population is stable to decreasing.

However, there are still significant differences between one country and another. The data provided by the Euro-

pean federation of the pet food industry (FEDIAF) enable a more in-depth analysis of the demography of dogs and cats in 18 European countries (**Figure 6**).

This analysis combines two criteria: the percentage of cat ownership (number of cats/human population) and the



ratio between the feline and canine populations. This highlights five main categories of countries:

- The two countries of the Iberian Peninsula, Spain and Portugal, along with Ireland have an ownership percentage that is lower than average and a much smaller feline than canine population.
 - In three central European countries, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, dogs are also predominant, but cat ownership is higher than the European average.
 - Four countries, Denmark, Finland, Italy, and the United Kingdom, have similar canine and feline populations with cat ownership percentages that are close to the average.
 - A group of 7 countries, Austria, France, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium and Switzerland, have a dominant feline population and a higher than average cat ownership percentage.
 - Germany differs from the rest with a low cat ownership percentage but a very dominant feline population.
- Figure 7** presents the same data for 10 world areas. Emerging countries tend to fall into the “low possession,

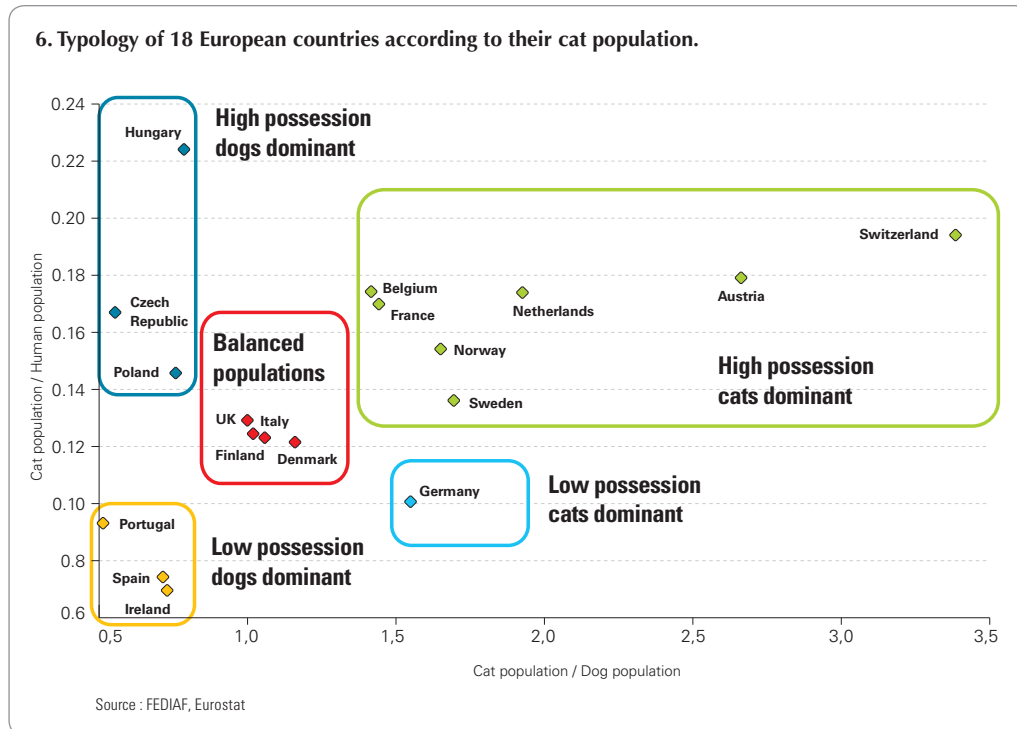
dog dominant” group compared with Western Europe, North America and Russia where the possession rate is much higher and the cat population tends to prevail upon dog population.

Beyond historical and cultural differences (low pet ownership percentages in Spain, Germany or Latin America, domination of dogs in central Europe, in the Iberian Peninsula or South Africa), there is a clear emerging trend in countries with a relatively old and well-structured small animal veterinary service towards a significant and rapid development of the feline population.

B) Qualitative aspects

We have combined this quantitative analysis with a qualitative breakdown. Several differences between dog and cat owners become apparent in those countries for which detailed studies are available (FACCO, PFMA, APPA, JPFA).

- Cat owners have more cats than dog owners have dogs: 2.2 compared with 1.7 in the USA, 1.8 vs. 1.4 in Japan, and 1.6 vs. 1.3 in France. It is therefore more common for cat owners to have more than one pet than for dog owners



(60% of cat owners in the USA have more than one cat compared with only 40% of dog owners, 32% in France compared with 19%).

- In term of acquisition, cats are purchased less often than dogs (for example 7% vs. 55% in France, and 15% vs. 47% in the United Kingdom) and they are less often purebred (for example 8% vs. 75% in the United Kingdom, and 5% vs. 49% in France).
- Overall, compared with the dog, the cat is slightly more urban, lives more often in flats, less often in families, and in slightly superior socio-professional categories.
- Cat owners are more likely to buy pet food than are dog owners (89% compared with 76% in France). Relatively speaking, cat owners spend more money on food: for example in the USA, cat owners devote almost as much money to feeding their cats as dog owners do for their dogs, even though their animals are far smaller in size (\$220 per year for a cat compared with \$248 for a dog).
- Cat owners consult the veterinarian less often than do dog owners. For example in the USA, in a 2010 survey, the AAHA found that 70% of domestic carnivores seen in

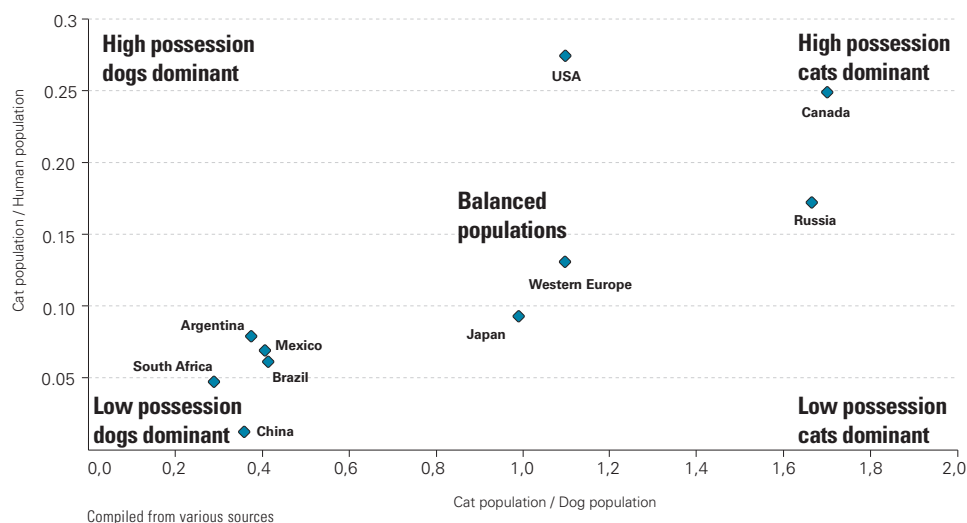
veterinary clinics were dogs, generating 79% of the income, whilst cats represented 52% of the population. In France, 84% of dogs visited the veterinarian at least once over the previous 12 months compared with 57% of the cat population.

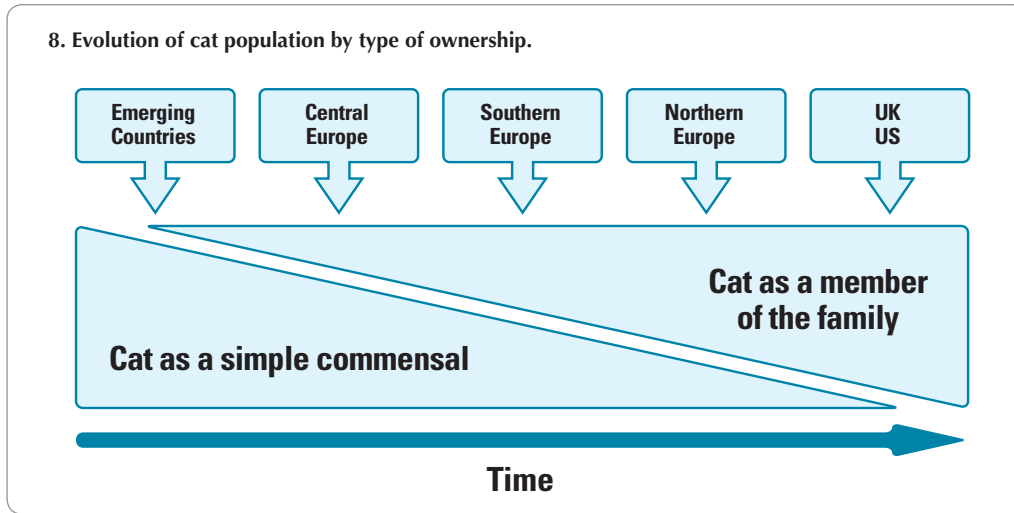
- The motives for consultation were also different: in the USA cat owners spend 5% more for disease or injuries in their animals but 13% less for preventative medicine. Finally, in nearly all the countries in the world, the sterilisation rate is higher in cats than in dogs (88% versus 78% in the USA, 75% versus 33% in France).

On an international level, the evolution of the feline population is following a similar pattern, the only differences being in terms of timing. To understand this, we can distinguish between a developing market during which the cat is regarded as a “simple commensal”, and the mature market, which sees the cat become a “member of the family”.

- The “simple commensal” cat lives within a family, which feeds and houses it, but this is not accompanied by any significant emotional investment. Of course, the members of the family love their cat, but its death is an eventuality that is always present, and which is easily resolved by

7. Typology of 10 world areas according to their cat population.





getting another one within a very short space of time. The family does not project the relationship with the cat over any length of time. Sensitivity to nutritional recommendations along with sterilisation, and medication rates are low in this population.

- On the contrary, the owners of “family member” cats project the relationship with their pet over the long term. This is seen as an emotional investment. This leads to a profound change in the modes of consumption linked to the pet, in terms of feeding - with a high sensitivity to nutritional recommendations - and especially for health. The sterilisation and medication rates are very high in this population.

Figure 8 illustrates the change over time between these two stages and the relative position of the different groups of countries. It is therefore possible to predict the quantitative and qualitative development of the feline clientele for practising vets worldwide. In some cases this is already possible, for some an imminent perspective, and for others a far-flung dream. However, throughout the world, even where the feline population has already noticeably changed, cats still represent an enormous potential for the veterinarian as what they currently offer falls short of the needs of demanding owners and of overcoming the consequences of the historical evolution that we have just described.

2/ Cats and veterinary practices: current situation

Let us imagine you are visiting a colleague’s veterinary practice abroad, and she explains her business situation, which is making her confused and frustrated:

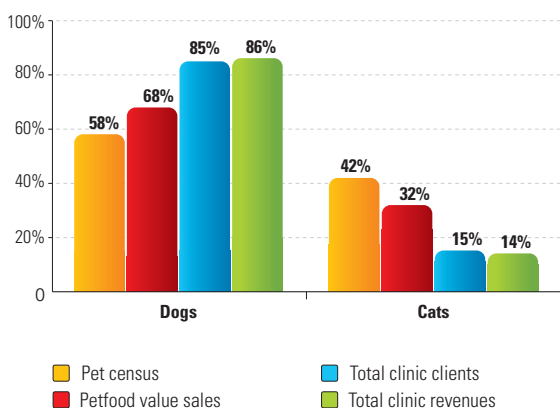
“Cats are becoming very popular and widespread as companion animals in this country. Official statistics talk about a 60/40 ratio between the number of dogs and cats living in households. Pet food manufacturers declare that 32% of their sales in value are derived from cat products. However, when I look at my patient files and at the economic statistics provided by my software, I realise that my feline patients generate less than 15% of the revenue of my clinic... am I doing something wrong?”

A) Special case study: Spain

In fact, the figures used in the previous example correspond almost exactly with the situation observed in the Spanish market. **Figure 9** summarises some key ratios.

This strong data suggests that cats and veterinarians do not seem to be well acquainted: for whatever reason, a significant percentage of cats do not visit the vets on a regular basis.

9. In Spain, cats represent 42% of the pet population but only contribute to 14% of the total clinic revenues.



Sources: ANFAAC (pet census in Spain, 2009), ANFAAC (commercially prepared petfood sales, year 2010), VMS (weight of feline patients and weight of revenue from feline clients in a sample of 329 veterinary practices, 2011)

However, let us analyse the behaviour of those cat owners who do visit the veterinarian:

- Are there any relevant behavioural differences between those of dog owners?
- Do they visit the practice more or less often? Do they spend less or more? Consequently, do we see them as better or worse clients from a financial perspective?

A quantitative research project conducted by VMS (Veterinary Management Studies) in 329 Spanish veterinary practices, analysing the transactions of canine and feline clients that took place between July 2010 and June 2011 may shed some light on this matter. Some methodological considerations to keep in mind when interpreting the results of this research:

- In order to better analyse the differences between cat and dog owners, the analysis only took into account the transactions of “solely dog owners” and “solely cat owners” (meaning that the information from clients owning both dogs and cats was not included).
- So-called “Product transactions” are 100% based on the purchase of products and mostly influenced by the support staff.

- So-called “Service transactions” are mostly based on clinical services but may include a small percentage (5-10%) of prescription drugs. These transactions are mostly mediated by a veterinarian.
- Economic figures include VAT (currently 8% for veterinary services in Spain) (Figure 10).

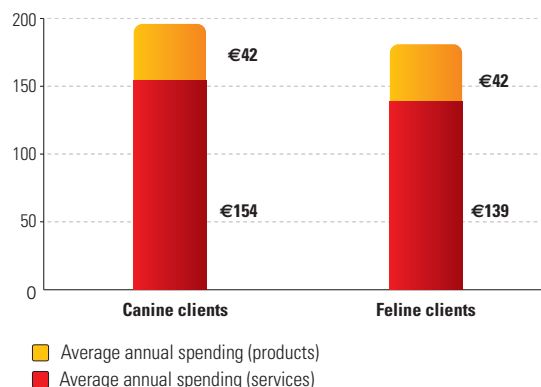
According to this data, on average, feline clients spend slightly less in the veterinary practice than their canine counterparts; this difference is due to a 10% lower expenditure on clinical services (€139 per year for feline clients versus €154 per year for canine patients).

A more detailed look at the number and nature of transactions for both species, reveals that the lower expenditure on veterinary services observed in cats is due to a lower number of transactions (fewer consultations). Feline clients generate almost one clinical transaction less per year (2.9 for cats vs. 3.7 for dogs) (Figure 11).

However, when we look at the average value of these transactions, we see that on balance feline clients spend more per transaction in each category (Figure 12). In summary:

- A significant percentage of Spanish cat owners do not visit a veterinary practice regularly. This percentage is significantly higher than for dog owners. This results in a low representation of feline patients in the client base of most Spanish veterinary practices.

10. Split of average annual spend at the veterinary practice (VAT included).



Source: VMS (based on 329 Spanish veterinary practices)

- Cat owners who visit the veterinarian spend approximately the same on their pets as dog owners. However, their consumption behaviour is different: fewer transactions of higher economic value.

B) Comparison with the US situation

Even in the US, where cats are the most popular pets (according to AVMA statistics, in 2007 there were 82 million

cats and 72 million dogs), cats and veterinarians are not fully acquainted. According to the "AAHA 2010 state of the industry review", cats were clearly underrepresented both in the patient count and in the revenue obtained by veterinary clinics in the country (Figure 13).

C) Reasons behind the figures

After a thorough review of all relevant data about cats and their difficult relationship with veterinarians, we now need to address the key issue:

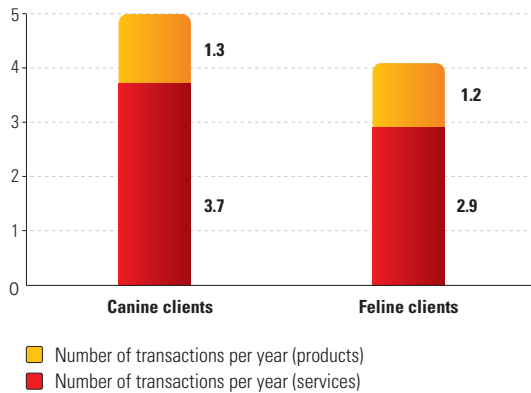
Why do cats visit the veterinarian less often than dogs?

Most likely, there is no one simple, generalised answer to this question. Some factors may be related to the owners: their attitudes and beliefs about the need for veterinary care; their previous experiences when visiting the veterinarian... while other factors may be more related to the veterinarian.

1) Common misconceptions amongst cat owners concerning veterinary care

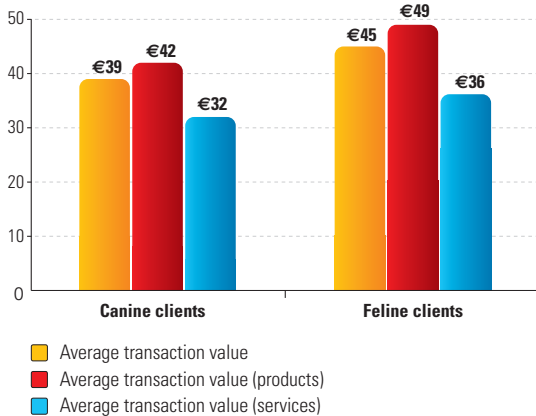
There is a widespread belief that cats need less veterinary attention than dogs. The perception of cats as more independent pets, the fact that many of them live indoors most of the time, the lack of regular vaccination... all of

11. Feline clients visit their veterinary clinic less frequently than canine clients.



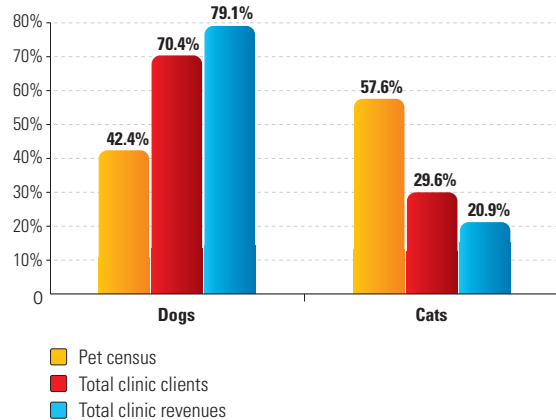
Source: VMS (based on 329 Spanish veterinary practices)

12. On average, feline clients spend more per transaction than canine clients.



Source: VMS (based on 329 Spanish veterinary practices)

13. In the US, cats represent 58% of the pet population but only contribute 21% to the total clinic revenues.



Sources: APPA, AVMA, AAHA

these reinforce the misconception that cats do not need to visit the veterinarian as often as dogs. Moreover, it is often more difficult to detect the early signs of disease in cats than in dogs and as a result cats are taken to the veterinarian later. According to Banfield's "State of Pet Health" report (2011), close to 70% of juvenile (0-1 year old) dogs were healthy when examined at their practices, while this was the case in only 57% of the kittens.

2) Previous negative experiences when visiting the veterinarian

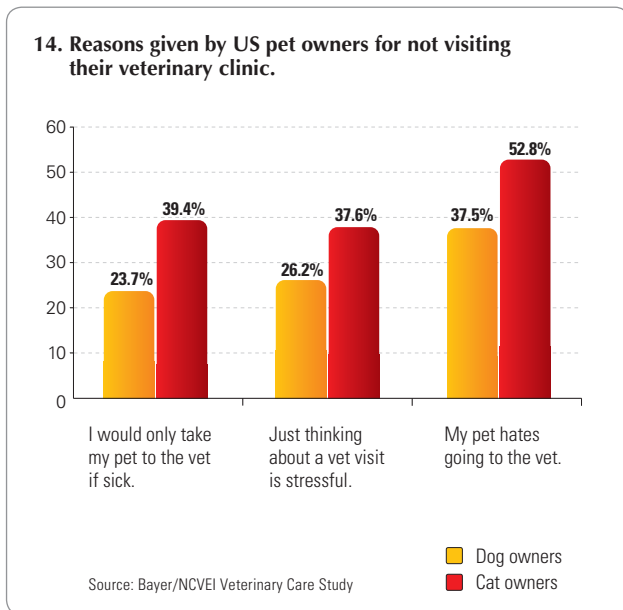
In a typical scenario of a self-fulfilling prophecy, since cats do not go to the veterinarian very often, and as they represent a smaller percentage of business, veterinarians do not put a lot of effort into making their clinics cat-friendly. This often results in an unpleasant experience for both the cat and its owner, and they tend to go less and less frequently. In all fairness, these bad experiences are not always the veterinarian's fault, since they start before the cat actually arrives in the clinic, when travelling in the car or on public transport. However, from the cat owner's perspective, regardless of who is to blame for the problem, the conclusion is clear: visiting the veterinarian is not good news. **Figure 14** clearly illustrates the problem.

3) Lack of interest on the veterinarian's side

Historically, for many small animal veterinarians cats are an unwelcome challenge. They are special, different, demanding patients. They require a different approach: different handling, adapted premises or equipment, specific technical knowledge, etc. They also require more patience and more time.

As long as cats represent the smaller proportion of the overall patient base, they are not perceived as a real priority. However, the worldwide trend clearly shows a sharp increase in the proportion of cats within the general pet population and, eventually, within the patient base of veterinary clinics. This is why many veterinary clinics have already adapted their premises, staff, and protocols to suit the ever-increasing cat population. Nevertheless, much still needs to be done in this respect and in most small animal practices, cat owners do not receive the level of service they would like.

Clearly, in most countries worldwide, it is an obvious priority to design and implement an action plan to improve the level of service offered to cat owners.

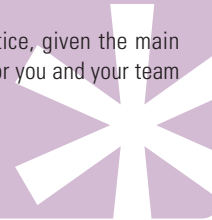


2. Strategic options to increase your cat business

> SUMMARY

If seeking to increase its feline business, it is vital that a veterinary practice investigates and evaluates all possible strategic options. The authors analyse 5 of them: focus on cats (either by opening a “cat-only” practice or by moving to that status within a defined period), develop a domiciliary service, create a “feline unit” inside your practice or finally, improve the services currently on offer to cat owners.

In this chapter the authors propose a self-evaluation of the “felinity” of your practice, given the main lessons learned from the cat-only practices they visited and propose a methodology for you and your team to come up with your own strategic plan.



1/ Five possible scenarios

Given the difficulties faced by vets in maximising the full potential of the feline population in the majority of developed markets and certain developing markets, it is important to approach the problem from a strategic point of view to minimise the gap between the demands of this clientele and the services offered by the clinic.

Several possibilities are available. Schematically we will concentrate on five, from the most radical to the most simple: turn an existing clinic into a specialist cat-only clinic; open a new clinic dedicated to cats; propose a home-visit service notably for cats; organise a “feline unit” within an existing clinic; and lastly improve the services intended for cats within an existing clinic.

A) Scenario 1

The transformation of an existing clinic into a feline-only

practice is possible; several examples can be found in different countries.

The main advantage of such a transformation is to offer cats and their owners a completely dedicated site, team, and range of services and products. This makes it possible to provide this clientele with the two key elements they are particularly concerned about:

- A calm, comfortable, and “cat-friendly” atmosphere, mainly characterised by the absence of sudden noises, odours, and bustle, *i.e.* no dogs!
- A perfectly well-tuned team in their approach to cats, the way they are handled, examined, and by offering a range of services, products, and advice that are perfectly adapted to these pets and their owners.

However, the conversion of the clinic presents a large number of difficulties. Here are the main concerns:

- Exclusion of a significant portion of the current clientele;

- Sudden loss of a significant share of the activity and revenue;
- The need to train the team with a significant risk of not being able to retain certain individuals with the associated problems;
- The need to adapt and update the premises and equipment.

In short, this first option can only be advised in structures that are already primarily geared towards cats, notably in urban centres in countries where the feline population is very dominant (the cat dominant groups represented in **Figure 6** on page 9 and **Figure 7** on page 10).

B) Scenario 2

The second strategic option – opening a new clinic exclusively designed for cats – makes it possible to maintain the advantages of scenario one whilst minimising the disadvantages. This either involves creating something from nothing where one suffers the disadvantages of

any new veterinary business venture (slow to develop, difficulties in sizing the clinic from the start to the right level, managing initial recruitment, managing growth, etc.).

Alternatively, the creation of an additional site adjacent to an existing clinic; here one is hoping that the additional business, brought about by the increased attractiveness to feline clientele will compensate for the extra cost of opening the new site (increased costs of personnel, renting the premises and equipment). In the latter case, it is possible to only provide general services on the feline site, whilst maintaining all emergency work (out of hours, Sundays, Bank Holidays) on the existing site.

In summary, this option should be considered by all practices that already have a “group” of three or more clinics within the same catchment area and that are considering their potential for growth. The larger the catchment area and the higher the percentage of cat ownership, the more attractive this option becomes. Considering the hypothesis that a cat-only clinic could attract 10% of the feline clientele in its catchment area, and that one needs 2,000 patients to make this kind of

? QUESTION TO A CAT-ONLY PRACTICE OWNER

Why did you choose to open a cat-only practice?



Dr. Michael Streicher, veterinary and owner of a cat-only practice in Oberursel near Frankfurt/Main Germany.

“I opened my cat-only practice in June 2009 after working for approximately eight years in several small animal clinics in different regions of Germany. During this period I recognised that I couldn’t and wouldn’t be a good veterinarian if I carried on being a “small animal all-rounder”. I strongly believe that you can’t be a “small animal general veterinarian”, meaning that it is impossible to be an equally good veterinarian for dogs, cats, birds, reptiles, rodents and so on – from a medical, technical and personal point of view. I also think that I can better satisfy my clients’ needs by focusing on a specific client group. My clients know about our specialisation by word of mouth and we often get the feedback that being a cat-only practice is the main reason why they bring their pets to us.”

clinic work (with two full-time equivalent veterinarians), such a strategy is theoretically possible when the population within 20 minutes of the site is greater than 120,000 inhabitants in France (cat ownership rate of 16.9%), more than 100,000 in Switzerland (cat ownership at 19.4%), and more than 200,000 inhabitants in Germany (ownership 10%), or more than 280,000 in Spain (ownership 7.4%).

C) Scenario 3

The creation of a home-visit service provides a good solution to a specific concern of cat owners and cats: their particular aversion to visiting the clinic. By conducting the veterinary consultation at the owner's home, in a familiar environment for the pet, one can hope to overcome this

problem. The fact remains that there are very few such models in the world and when they do exist, they are rarely financially rewarding. This can be explained by two major disadvantages:

- The standard technical difficulty of any at-home service: it is difficult to produce a quality service in the absence of a standardised consulting-room and utilising only means that can be employed at the client's home.
- An economic difficulty: the previous point results in low productivity due to significant time being lost; this is compounded by the problem of travel, which is very expensive due to wasted time and to a lesser extent to the direct costs (car, petrol, etc.). See **Box below**.

Brief cost/price assessment of domiciliary services (all costs and prices do not include VAT)

1 - ASSUMPTIONS:

- A trained veterinarian spends 25% more time to perform the same consultation (this time is lost at the beginning of the procedure – arrival of the veterinarian, set-up in the client's home – the procedure itself – lack of convenience, lack of help – and at the final stage – prescription, billing, receiving payment, farewell and departure).
- Direct cost of a vehicle : €0.50 per kilometre.
- Complete cost of a "minute of veterinarian time" is at least €1.50 (considering that overhead allocation should be minimised for domiciliary service).
- A veterinarian driving in an urban zone may reach the average speed of 20 km/hr from door to door (taking into account the time needed to find a parking space), *i.e.* 3 minutes per kilometre.
- The standard practice consultation fee is €32.
- The average distance from the practice to the client's home and back is 8 kilometres.

2 - RESULTS:

- The same veterinarian practice should price the domiciliary consultation at €40 = €32 + 25%.
- The standard travel fee should be €40 = 8 x (€0,50 + (3 x €1.50)).

D) Scenario 4

The fourth possibility, the creation of a “feline unit” within an existing clinic, makes it possible to meet the specific needs of the feline clientele within the context of an existing site, by maximising the synergies with the rest of the clinic (surgery, imagery, laboratory, etc.). This involves the creation of at least a dedicated reception-room, consultation-room and hospitalisation area.

It is also important to have a team (veterinarian and support staff) that, if not completely dedicated, is at least trained in the requirements of the feline clientele. Many clinics have already partially implemented this strategy, notably with a specific reception area and/or a dedicated hospitalisation area, but few have taken the approach to its optimum level. The main difficulties explaining this shortfall are as follows:

- Physical constraints in terms of the premises;
- Organisational constraints in terms of the personnel;
- The running of the clinic becomes less flexible, which eventually leads to numerous deviations from the original plan (the dedicated consultation-room for cats is sometimes used for dogs, the same for the reception area, or more rarely the hospitalisation area).

Overall, we believe that this approach needs to be systematically studied by the largest clinics in terms of floor space and in terms of the number of staff, particularly in the zones or countries where the canine clientele is dominant, but also where cats are becoming more numerous and where their owners have increasing expectations (dog dominant groups in **Figure 6** on page 9 and **Figure 7** on page 10). Keep in mind that a feline unit require less floor space than a dog one because the rooms can be smaller.

E) Scenario 5

Sometimes however, it is not possible to organise a true “feline section” within the clinic due to the restricted size of the clinic or constrictive layout and/or a team that is too small in number. In this case, all is not lost and it is still possible to “re-think” medical protocols by engineering a partial separation of the key areas, whenever feasible. This approach can be applied throughout. It may seem

simpler as there are far fewer constraints involved than in all other options. Far from it!

This approach requires full commitment from the management and the whole team at the clinic to effectively modify the service rendered, such that it is effectively felt by the clients. Therefore, this option is probably one of the most demanding in terms of organisation and management.

Table 1 summarises the main items to consider before choosing one of the five strategic options we described.

2/ How to solve the “cat paradox”

In this section, we propose a three-step approach to improve the feline side of your veterinary practice:

- The first step involves conducting an honest, realistic self-assessment of where your practice stands in relation to the feline side of the business.
- The second step will focus on learning from successful examples (benchmarking), the idea being that the feline side of your business can be improved by imitating or adapting ideas that are working well for other veterinary practices.
- The third step will look at how to set up a realistic action plan that will guide you in the direction of maximising the feline side of your business.

A) Step 1: Where is my practice positioned?

Reading and answering in writing the self-evaluation checklist on **page 21**, ideally as a group exercise with the practice team, can be an eye-opener for most owners. The questions have been grouped by management themes (Finance/Control, Marketing/Communication, Strategy/Operations, and Human Resources).

No practice (unless there really is such a thing as perfection!) can be expected to answer “yes” to all of the questions

Table 1. Some strategic options to answer the feline clientele's specific expectations.

Strategic option	Pros	Cons	Conclusion
Moving to a cat-only practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated site, team, range of services and products • Cat-friendly atmosphere • Specialised team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion of dog owners who are currently clients • Loss of a proportion of revenue • Requirement to train the team • Loss of some staff (especially most talented people in dog/medicine and surgery) • Premises adaptation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be considered in those practices with a client base already dominated by cat owners • Especially in large cities from "cat dominant countries" (see Figure 6 on page 9 and Figure 7 on page 10)
Creating from scratch a new cat-only practice or branch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated site, team, range of services and products • Cat-friendly atmosphere • Specialised team • Synergies with other sites (cat-only branch) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cat-only practice: disadvantage of practice creation • Cat-only branch: increased operating costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should be considered in large cities from "cat dominant countries" (see Figure 6 on page 9 and Figure 7 on page 10)
Offering domiciliary services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solves the issue of cat owners' and cats' aversion to travelling to the practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical difficulty in providing good quality services • Increased operating costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be considered, in very large cities, provided the practice is able to charge high enough fees
Creating a "feline unit" within a practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the specific needs of cat owners are met • Cost efficiency due to synergies with back-office facilities and equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constraints of premises • Constraints of staff and organisation • Loss of flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be considered by all "large enough" one-site practices especially in "dog dominant countries" (see Figure 6 on page 9 and Figure 7 on page 10)
Re-engineering the process to improve services to cat owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible in every practice, regardless of the size or disposition of premises; irrespective of the number of staff members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong commitment of management and team required • Precise and longstanding implementation required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be implemented in every practice wishing to increase its cat business without choosing one of the previous options

in the self-evaluation checklist on **page 21**. There is no correct number of affirmative answers, as some of these ideas may be more applicable than others depending on the particular situation of each practice. Their purpose is to raise awareness about the size and potential of the feline market if you are willing to make the effort. It is also important to remember that it can be useful to go through the checklist together with the practice team, and confirm whether you all share the same view of the current situation.

B) Step 2: What can I learn from cat veterinarians?

When preparing this publication, the authors identified and visited a selected group of veterinary practices in four different European countries (Germany, UK, France and Spain). These practices differed in size and structure, in their competitive environment, and in the range of services they offered, but they all had one thing in common: a loyal, well-established feline clientele. During the individual, in-depth interviews that we held with the owners of these veterinary practices, we identified some common trends:

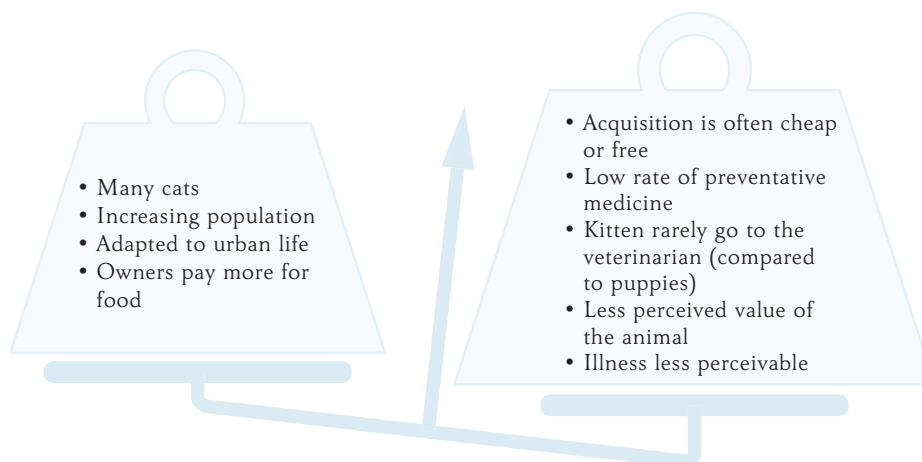
- Knowledge, respect, but above all, a passion for cats. Most of these successful practice principles have owned

cats for a long time, and recognise and understand the special needs of these demanding companion animals. These veterinarians regularly attend lectures on feline medicine, they enrol in specialist associations, and enjoy talking to and educating cat owners.

- Special attention to sensorial marketing. These practices have invested a great deal of effort to ensure a positive experience for both the patient and the owner: soft colours, absence of loud or sudden noises, an obsession for cleanliness and absence of odours, warm surfaces and special hospitalisation cages; all of these combined with exquisite physical handling of the patient: quoting one of the interviewed veterinarians, “handling cats well is not a science, it is an art that you must learn and master”.
- Absolute belief in the power of “word of mouth” recommendation amongst cat owners. For this reason it becomes critical to ensure that every single feline visit is a positive experience. In this sense, less is more: it is preferable to see fewer cats every day but with a higher level of patient care and client service.
- Investing time and effort in client education. These veterinarians have realised that the “veterinary experience” of their clients starts when the cat leaves home on its

The cat paradox

Many factors suggest the importance of cats but are overcome by negative aspects.





Self-evaluation checklist

Tick the relevant box

Finance/Control

1) In our practice, we regularly check what % of our active patients are feline and we analyse the trend - at least once a year - to see if this % has changed significantly.

YES NO

2) In our practice, we regularly check what % of our revenue is generated from feline patients and we analyse the trend - at least once a year - to see if this % has changed significantly.

YES NO

3) In our practice we regularly check what % of our active clients own both dogs and cats and we analyse the trend - at least once a year - to see if this % has changed significantly.

YES NO

4) In our practice, we have tried to establish - at least once - how our figures for 1) 2) and 3) compare with those of other clinics.

YES NO

5) In our practice, we have defined - at least once - specific goals related to cat patients and cat clients (*i.e.* % of feline patients, average number of transactions per feline patient per year, or average transaction value per feline patient). YES NO

Marketing/Communication

6) In our practice we regularly send - at least once a year - written/electronic communications targeted specifically at cat owning clients, with contents specifically designed for them.

YES NO

7) In our practice we regularly send - at least once a year - written/electronic communications specifically targeted at clients who own both dogs and cats, with contents specifically designed for them.

YES NO

8) In our practice, we have a specific practice brochure for cat owners. YES NO

9) In our practice's website, we have a specific section for cat owners.

YES NO

10) In our practice, we make sure that we explain to cat owners how to improve their "veterinary experience" which starts when the cat is being transported to the clinic. YES NO

11) In our practice's reception area there are visual communication elements (posters, pictures, messages) demonstrating that we welcome cats and that we like them.

YES NO

12) In our practice, we conduct client satisfaction surveys - at least once a year - and we analyse differences in responses between dog owning clients and cat owning clients.

YES NO

13) In our practice, we have some programmes/ incentives specifically targeting cat owning clients so that they bring us additional feline clients. YES NO

Strategy/Operations

14) In our practice, we have a separate reception area exclusively for cat owners and cat patients or at least we have some scheduling procedures in place in order to improve co-existence of cat and dog patients in this area. YES NO

15) In our practice, we have a separate consultation-room exclusive for cat owners and cat patients. YES NO

16) In our practice, we have a separate hospitalisation area exclusive for our cat patients. YES NO

17) In our practice, we have a separate pet supplies area exclusive for cat owners and cat patients. YES NO

18) In our practice, we systematically use calming synthetic pheromones to improve the experience of feline patients during their visits. YES NO

19) In our practice, we do something significantly different (and better) in relation to cats in comparison with 5-10 years ago. YES NO

20) In our practice, we have specific written plans to do something significantly different in relation to cats in the coming 1-2 years.

YES NO

Human resources

21) In our practice, when we are selecting/ recruiting a new veterinarian or nurse we find out if they have or have ever had a cat at home. YES NO

22) In our practice, when we are selecting/ recruiting a new veterinarian or nurse, we try to assess their level of comfort with handling/ dealing with feline patients.

YES NO

23) In our practice, we have specifically discussed - at least once in the last 12 months - with our team the need to improve our performance with feline patients and clients, and we have agreed on specific action plans with that end in mind.

YES NO

24) In our practice, we have designed a specific training session to improve the level of confidence of our staff when handling/dealing with feline patients. YES NO

25) In our practice, we have revised most common medical procedures (*e.g.* physical exams, anaesthesia, blood sampling...) to ensure they fit the needs of feline patients.

YES NO

How to use this tool

You could share this questionnaire with other veterinary practice owners who are successful with feline patients, and compare your answers with them in order to identify the key differences. Another application of this tool is to use it as an internal benchmark to monitor your progress, comparing your answers across three consecutive years, and using them to set specific improvement goals for every period.

way to the practice. They therefore make sure that the clients learn how to transport their cats in a safe and stress-free manner.

- Central role of support staff in the “patient-client-veterinarian triangle”. Feline clients and patients highly appreciate well-trained and friendly staff, and continuity in the team. The visited clinics tend to have low staff rotation, high empowerment of team members, and a relatively high support staff to veterinarian ratio.
- Strong client to veterinarian bond. Cat clients like (even more than their canine counterparts) feeling special and important to the practice. They love the feeling of being recognised, understood, and even pampered. This may explain why in many practices feline patients are always assigned to the same veterinarian in order to minimise the cat owner’s stress and to enhance the feeling of personal contact.
- Willingness to adapt operational protocols to the needs of feline patients. For instance, allocating specific times of the day for feline consultations, allocating longer time slots for feline consultations (with an appropriate increase in fees), and showing the feline patients directly into a quiet consultation-room when the reception area is busy.

In summary, these successful practices with cat patient owners appeared to be quieter than traditional veterinary practices. Staff, from receptionists to nurses and veterinarians, allowed more time and paid more attention to patients and owners; they were able to prescribe, adapt and perform services responding to their feline patients’ and owners’ needs; and they offered high quality products selected for cats. All of these usually resulted in loyal feline clients, with lower numbers of transactions but higher average transaction values than canine clients.

C) Step 3: Action plan

1) Measuring where your clinic stands on “feline business”

As the famous management aphorism says, “what gets measured gets done”. Therefore, and not surprisingly, before you start designing an action plan to improve the performance of your practice in relation to feline clients, you need to establish some initial figures.

We suggest, to be consistent with the checklist that was previously detailed, to start by doing some homework and measuring the following:

- What % of the active patients in your practice are feline?
- What % of the yearly turnover of your practice is generated by feline patients?
- What is the average number of transactions per feline patient per year in your practice?
- What was the average transaction value for feline patients last year?

Most practice management software programmes will generate this data without too much trouble. If your software system performs the calculation on the basis of clients (as opposed to patients) you will need to keep in mind that there is a relevant percentage of multi-cat owners, and also a certain percentage of cat and dog owners, and you will need to make the necessary adjustments in your calculations.

2) Raising your team’s awareness; obtaining their input and gaining their commitment

At this point, it is necessary to sit down with the practice team and get them involved. A useful approach can be to start asking them to provide their best guesses as to the answers to the questions raised in point n°1, and to continue by sharing with them the actual practice statistics. Hopefully this will generate some reaction and an open exchange of ideas on why the numbers are what they are. You can then move the discussion to the next level by introducing the following formula:

Revenue from feline patients

$$= \text{number of active feline patients} \times \text{average number of transactions per patient} \times \text{average transaction value}$$

Next, you can divide your team into small groups of 2-3 (ideally with at least one veterinarian and one member of support staff in each group) and ask them to work separa-

? QUESTION TO A CAT-ONLY PRACTICE OWNER

What are the main reasons why your clients choose your cat-only practice?

“The most important thing our clients are happy to find in our practice is a specific atmosphere: less noise, less bad odours, no barking dogs. This cosier and cat-friendly ambiance, combined with the professional handling of cats by nurses and veterinarians is probably more important in our clients’ mind than pure technical skills.

We paid special attention to the design of our wards. First of all we have three of them: a standard hospitalisation ward, a restricted access one, dedicated to pets with contagious diseases and a bigger room with much larger cages where we can board cats requiring special medical attention because of chronic conditions (e.g. diabetes) when their owners are away from home. Moreover, our cages have glass doors; their size is a trade-off between the requirements of cats’ behaviour on the one hand and of the efficiency of care on the other hand. Finally, the wards are designed in such a way that no cage faces one another: no hospitalised cat has to see any wardmate.”



*“La Clinique réservée aux chats” (Paris).
Marie Erhel, Partner.*

tely on generating initiatives that will help the practice improve on each of the three “fronts” (number of feline patients, number of transactions, and transaction value). Some staff members will clearly become more engaged in the discussion and appear more sensitive to the whole “feline issue”. They will be the best future candidates for leading some of the projects that will evolve from this process.

Let us imagine that after running this exercise in a practice you obtain the following feedback from your team:

- Enhance our vaccination reminder protocol by calling all our feline clients personally (instead of sending an e-mail or a text message).
- Call all the feline owners we lost during the previous year to find out why they left.
- Redesign our website to make it more attractive and friendly to feline owners.
- Rearrange our reception area to allow for a “feline corner” where cats enjoy more privacy and a more relaxed envi-

onment. Make sure that we communicate this properly to all our existing and prospective feline clients!

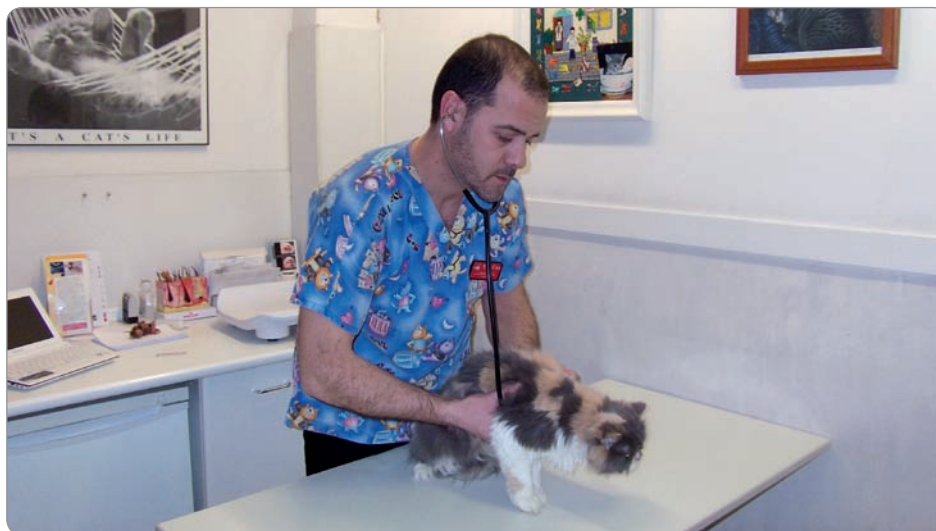
- Produce a “feline only” brochure that we can selectively distribute in our client catchment area, as well as mail to any cat owner who calls the practice and asks for information.
- Organise a cat information evening every quarter, open to clients and non-clients, where we can discuss useful tips with cat owners to help them to deal with transportation, behavioural problems at home, etc.
- Organise internal training for the support staff, by bringing in an external expert, on how to improve our cat handling skills.

(Note: this is not supposed to be a comprehensive and detailed list; it is just an example!)

You can then list all the ideas on a blank sheet of paper, and ask your team to rate them on the following three criteria: how easy is it to implement? costs incurred by

? QUESTION TO A CAT-ONLY PRACTICE OWNER

What advice would you give to a young veterinarian who wants to succeed with feline clients?



"Tot Cat veterinary clinic" (Barcelona, Spain). Martín Martí, Partner.

"In Tot Cat we are aware that we don't have a major budget to spend on marketing activities... therefore it becomes critical that every single client's experience with us is positive, so that they explain good things about us to their cat owning friends. This is why we put so much passion in the details: how we handle the cats, how to explain things to clients, how we care about the look, smell and general ambience of our premises. If I had to give some advice to younger veterinarians who want to make a career in feline medicine, I would encourage them to study, study and study, and also to always remember that handling a cat is not a science but an art that needs to be learnt and mastered".

the clinic (in terms of money or time), and potential to generate additional feline revenue. A four-point scale (very low, low, high, very high) will work best to avoid "score centralisation" (*i.e.* everyone rating "average").

Another tip is to give a limited number of points to each team member so that they are forced to choose/prioritise the different ideas.

3) Writing an action plan and sharing it with the team

With all of this information, the practice manager (and/or the senior partner) is now in a much better position to write the "CBIP" (Cat Business Improvement Plan). Some ideas to keep in mind when designing this plan:

- Focus first on the priorities that can make a difference ("the basics"). It does not make much sense to rebuild the practice's website or to start a "member get member" promotion to attract new cat patients if you have not fixed the central elements of the client and patient's experience when they visit you. If we review our learning from successful feline practices, it is evident that sensorial marketing combined with impeccable patient handling should be at the top of your list. In other words, first you need to fix it, and then you explain it.
- Assign clear responsibilities, resources, and timings. If one of your key projects is to "create a cat friendly zone in your reception area", it should be clear from the start who is responsible for making that happen, what are the

resources they can count on, and when do you expect it to happen. For instance, you could designate the nurse/reception team to be in charge of the project; you could also assign them a budget of €3,500 to invest in re-arranging the layout and decoration of this zone, and you could offer to help them by facilitating a couple of visits to other veterinary practices where they can borrow some ideas.

- Having a “cat champion” in every team. Ideally, you should have at least one veterinarian and one nurse/technician in your team to whom you give the role of feline advocate in your clinic. These people should be real cat fans, passionate about feline medicine, and have the will and intrinsic motivation to share their

knowledge and skills with colleagues in the team. As a well-known management principle says, “responsibility should go hand by hand with authority and compensation”... meaning that if you really want to strengthen the role of “cat champion” in your clinic, you need to assert it with a formal title (*i.e.* “feline veterinary coordinator”), provide it with some real authority (*i.e.* they must review and agree to any new protocol or equipment that may affect feline patients) and recognise it via performance review and compensation (*i.e.* having an economic incentive linked to results). The practice could also consider the possibility of communicating this role to clients as a kind of feline advocate or even “feline ombudsman”.

3. How to make your practice cat-friendly

> SUMMARY

On the operational side of things, the two main elements that need to be taken into account in recognising and exceeding cat owners' expectations are the practice team and facilities. To build a "cat friendly team", the feline elements must be integrated and emphasised at all levels, from the job description through to continuing education, not forgetting the criteria for recruiting new staff. The facilities themselves should say to the cat owner that he or she is welcome. Special attention should be paid to the ambiance, smell, noise, intensity of the lighting, etc. This chapter also includes a section about the various social media that can be utilised to convey the message.



1/ The team makes the difference!

Everyone who works in small animal practice should always keep this in mind and act accordingly. In small animal practice, we don't just have to take care of one animal species, but different ones, each with different owners.

A) Fundamental considerations

In every business sector, at the end of the day it is the clients who decide which models, services and products are of interest to them and what they buy. This measure is particularly valid in the service sector where the differentiating factor of personal service, expressed in the form of a special and emotional component is so important. This is in addition to the obvious market offerings, which are provided by most businesses and accessible to all. This emotional component in what is offered and the provision of services plays a significant role in small animal practice, because we're talking about family members and in many cases pets that play the role of a child in that family.

Data collected from around the world demonstrate that the cat population is growing almost everywhere, so it makes sense to acknowledge this and focus on strategies to increase the number of cats visiting the practice by creating special offers for them and their owners. Cat owners have, in some respects, different personalities to dog owners; they and their pets have (partially fundamental) different needs when it comes to medical requirements and communication.

This becomes apparent if you compare the differences between dogs and cats – both act completely differently in terms of behaviour and each requires very different approaches from us as a practice team – particularly in the stressful situation of a veterinary practice.

B) The differences

If we accept that owners who only have cats or dogs demonstrate different personality traits, then the next consideration is how to respect and recognise these differences with what we offer these disparate client groups.

An important, perhaps the most important difference in what we need to offer cat owners is the composition of the practice team; those who work with both people and animals. Our approach to cat owners must first and foremost be reflected in the personality and expert knowledge of the people who work with these clients in order to generate a trusted and successful relationship with them. This means that the “cat team” within the practice must be able to show through its medical and expert skills, as well as with the type of communication used, that the cat is a special animal and that the team is prepared to address this type of pet specifically and with empathy.

C) Starting with a vision

If you want to create a cat-friendly team in your practice, to include veterinarians, veterinary nurses and receptionists, you should first of all envisage what this team should look like, *i.e.* develop a vision of the new situation and sketch

this out in key words. Let yourself be guided, for example, by the following questions:

- How should the service for cats and their owners differ currently and in the future (*e.g.* in terms of communication, services and products)?
- What should the difference be between the service offered to cat and dog clients?
- How should the cat client perceive the practice, *i.e.* what should he or she feel?
- What reasons should the client have to bring his or her cat into your practice?
- How should the team approach cat clients?

When doing this, take into consideration that at the end of the development of a special service for cat clients, it is they who will judge whether the concept has been a success or not, *i.e.* it needs to exhibit significant features in order to give your cat owners sufficient reasons to choose your practice!

When this vision is completed, the next task is to develop specific goals – goals which turn the vision into a reality.

? QUESTION TO A CAT-ONLY PRACTICE OWNER

What is the role of a good team in seeking to develop a successful feline practice?

“The process of transforming our existing clinic into a feline-only practice was not trouble free, and required an important communication effort both within our team and to our clientele, but the results have paid off. We held an internal informational meeting with our team, where we explained the project to them and asked for their feedback and their commitment; their response was phenomenal, they all decided to be part of the new project. It was a big effort, but we would do it again”.



“Gattos, Feline Clinic” (Madrid, Spain). Marisa Palmero and Vanessa Carballés, Partners.

There are two ways of developing goals from your cat-friendly team's vision depending on the practice's structure and options:

- 1) Can the level of caring for cats and their owners be raised through the efforts of the existing team? If the answer is yes, then it has to be planned as to how this is going to be achieved. In a small practice desired changes have to be carried out by the existing staff.
- 2) Is it an option to create a "cat team" by hiring new people to look after cat clients? This is only possible if there is enough space and financial "muscle" to make this happen.

In terms of how the cat team's duties are designed it does not make a difference whether the cat team is formed from new or existing human resources. For the organisation and management of the individuals involved it does however definitely make a difference whether they are recruited from the existing team or are new members of staff. When setting up a new team, additional objectives generally arise in finding, recruiting and training staff, as opposed to merely redesigning the team from existing personnel.

Both options have advantages and disadvantages, such as:

- When assigning new tasks to existing team members, individuals' strengths and weaknesses are already well known and they are integrated into the team, whereas the personalities of new employees are, as yet, unknown and you cannot always predict whether and how (quickly) they will integrate into the team.
- New employees have the opportunity to start completely afresh, and given a clear workplace description and if selected with care and trained appropriately they stand a good chance of fulfilling their duties to the utmost. In contrast, it can become difficult to shift those who have been working in the practice for longer, out of their "daily grind" and motivate and train them for new tasks, even if these employees want it themselves. Everyone knows how difficult it is to change long-standing behavioural patterns even if you want to and are convinced it makes sense.
- From a financial viewpoint, it is certainly more expensive to search for, recruit, and train new staff than it is to train existing staff.

In addition to the considerations described above, you should also carefully consider whether the capacities for new tasks exist in the current set up, as the introduction of new tasks mean that work and time have to be reallocated, whilst the tasks the staff previously carried out will still need to be done. In the ideal scenario, a differentiated offering for cat clients will result in more work – and of course greater turnover – and not less. It is nonetheless important to pay equal attention to the following steps irrespective of whether the "cat team" is to comprise of new or existing staff members. This means that an in-house recruitment process should be carried out following the same exact criteria and the same steps as a search on the open market.

D) Goal 1: Employee description

When fundamental issues have been clarified, you can move to the active creation of a cat-friendly team and the objective is: to define as precisely as possible the positions to be filled and the people suitable for each one. The previously developed vision is very helpful here as it can act as a guideline for putting together the so-called "hard" and "soft" qualities or attributes which the employees should have. The employee's qualities which relate to the expert knowledge which he or she will bring to the job are referred to as "hard" attributes, while "soft" attributes describe personal characteristics.

To enable the management team or the head of the practice to get a precise idea of the staff required to make up a cat-friendly team, it is a good idea to make two lists with all the hard and soft qualities which are necessary in the roles and to use these either when seeking new staff or when considering existing team members. When designing the team in terms of cat-friendliness, it is of course particularly important that each individual attribute in the respective list is scrutinised in order to check to what extent they are specific to the cat. We need to consider whether the different focus in comparison, for example, to the topic of looking after dog clients has been clearly stated.

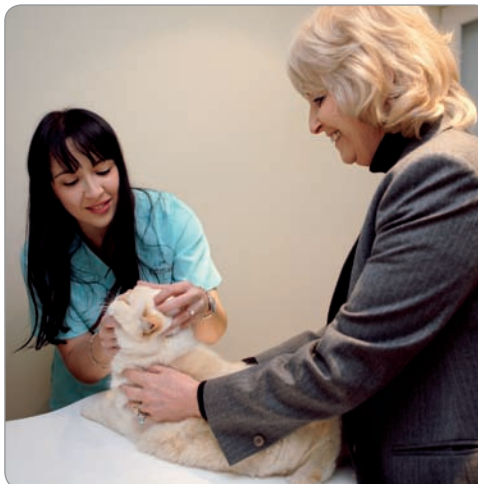
The list of hard qualities includes:

- Knowledge of current cat medicine: diseases, diagnoses and treatments,

? QUESTION TO A CAT-ONLY PRACTICE OWNER

What do you regard as your most valuable assets?

Zeta Frasca owner of the Kitten to Cat clinic in London regards her team as her most valuable practice asset. And when asked how she selected her team members, she had no hesitation, or delay, in replying, "They must be great communicators and good team members. But above all else, they must be cat lovers, with excellent cat-handling skills." Asked if she would like to have more members in her team, she replied, "I would, tomorrow, if I could find the right person!" What a great lesson for all of us. How often do we employ the best of a bad lot as opposed to waiting for the right person, only to repent at leisure?



Kitten to Cat Veterinary Clinic (London, United Kingdom). Zeta Frasca, owner.

- Knowledge of cat behaviour and cat handling,
- Knowledge of cat breeds and the world of pedigree cat owners and cat breeders,
- Expert knowledge of keeping cats (outdoor and indoor),
- Expert knowledge of cat nutrition in the different life stages and for particular cat diseases,
- Practical skills in treating cats; for example, as little constraint as possible during clinical examination, a gentle injection technique, efficient blood sampling, carrying out x-rays and all other, day-to-day, standard procedures within the practice.
- A love of cats and respect for their particular characteristics and needs,
- Understanding and ability to empathise with cat owners,
- Aptitude in advising and selling,
- Ability to work within a team and get on with colleagues.

Once you have listed the skills and desired characteristics, you need to draw up a specific and comprehensive job and workplace description.

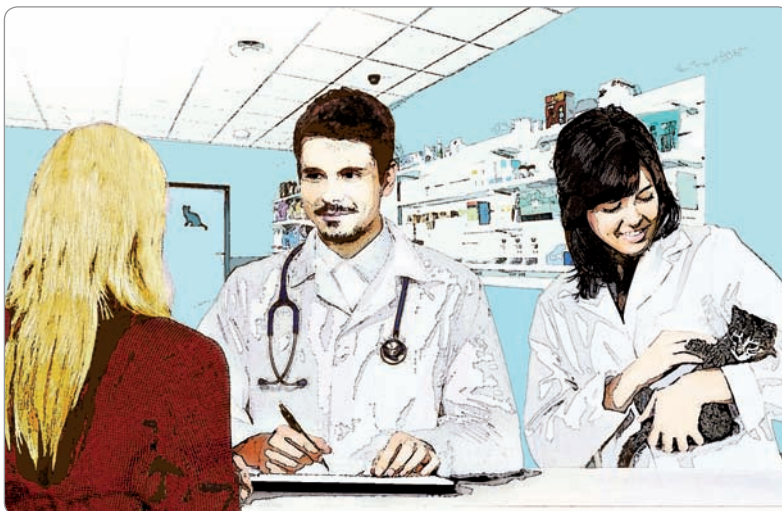
E) Goal 2: The job and workplace description

The aim of the job description is to paint as precise a picture as possible of the role to be filled. This description acts, amongst other things, as a basis for the job advertisement which will be used to recruit new staff. To establish a special cat team, the job descriptions for veteri-

These points must of course be further modified and their focus changed, depending on whether you are looking for a veterinarian, veterinary nurse or receptionist.

The list of soft qualities includes:

- Ability to communicate well with people,



A love of cats and an understanding of their needs are important qualities to work in a cat-only practice.

narians, and/or other team members are distinct and should be drawn up with a different focus.

For example:

- In the job description for vets, the focus is very clearly on the clinical aspect of cat medicine and surgery as well as on consulting and prescribing, along with recommending veterinary services and associated products for cats.
- For veterinary nurses/other team members, the focus of duties is different, in accordance with the job, focusing more on the topics of handling and care of cats, selected clinical tasks as well as giving advice on selling services and products.
- How should both areas of activity of the veterinarian and the veterinary nurse/assistant be connected, *i.e.* in what specific areas and duties should both jobs complement one another in a synergistic manner?

In addition to the specifics of the most important work areas, details about working hours, information on the position in the team (management and reporting structure) as well as social benefits, all of which are part of the job, should go in the job description.

The workplace description contains precise details of all the responsibilities and duties of that member of staff, *i.e.* spe-

cific task lists including the frequency with which the tasks are to be carried out and the way they should be conducted.

In addition to the recruitment of new staff, drawing up this list serves to establish the need for staff in particular areas of duty and to check whether one's own planning is complete and realistic.

For setting up a cat-friendly team, both job and workplace descriptions must highlight the precise details for this special feline duty, in addition to the usual requirements. The information detailed in the staff, job and workplace descriptions can be used to draw up an appropriate job advert to recruit new or existing staff.

F) Goal 3: Selecting and testing new staff

In this part of the process of creating the cat-friendly team, potential new staff members, who seem suitable on the basis of their written application should be invited to an interview.

The following points are important in the interview process:

- If possible, the interview should be carried out by 2-3 people who already work in the practice and know

what kind of employee the practice is looking for. If several people take part in the interview, more information will be gathered about the candidate and it makes the decision easier. It is important that all interviewers have sufficient job experience, good listening skills and are aware of the particular details of the person who is being recruited for the cat team.

- First of all, the applicant should - stimulated by a few introductory questions - be invited to tell the interviewers about him or herself as openly as possible so that he/she can relax and those present can gain a first impression of his/her personality, for example:
 - Data on his/her professional career history (check

whether the information agrees with the written application).

- What he/she does and doesn't enjoy about the job.
- What strengths and weakness he/she has.
- What the biggest challenge of the job is for him/her.
- Why he/she applied and/or why he/she believes he/she is really suitable for this particular job.

- The interviewers should then ask targeted questions from a standardised, prepared questionnaire so that all applicants answer the same questions. It will make comparisons possible. The answers should be noted written down. In this part of the interview, questions on the job specificity should only be asked. This means that on top of the general questions on job behaviour

Example of a job description for a veterinary clinician in a cat-team/ a cat-only practice

- **Job Title:** Small Animal Veterinary Clinician – Cat Clinician
- **Reporting to:** Clinical Director (Owner of Clinic) and Practice Manager.
- **Position supervises:** Two full-time veterinary nurses.
- **Scope of job:** To provide high quality veterinary professional services for cat-owners and their pets. To work closely with the Clinical Director, Practice Manager, Veterinary Nurses and all support staff to reach the practice's goals and to secure the highest level of service in accordance with the practice's Rules of Conduct and Mission Statement.

Key responsibilities:

- Provision of clinical veterinary services in feline medicine as defined by the practice's Policy Manual and instructed by the Clinical Director and the Practice Manager.
- Assistance in training, development and supervision of veterinary nurses and other support staff.
- To take part in and contribute to regular staff meetings.
- To submit to the practice's staff rota including appropriate out-of-hours and emergency services.

Key tasks:

- To provide high quality veterinary services to cats and their owners during employee working hours.
- To provide emergency services to the practice's clients in accordance with the practice requirements.
- To take part in in-house and external post graduate training courses on feline medicine in agreement with the Clinical Director.
- To display professional behaviour at all times and in accordance with the practice's Rules of Professional Conduct.



During the recruitment interview, you should put a clear emphasis on the special aspects of working with cat owners and ask yourself the question: “how will she be seen by my clients?”.

(dealing with managers, stress and criticism, ability to work within a team etc.), you should put a clear emphasis on the special aspects of working within a “cat team” so, for example:

- What is the appeal for him/her about working in a team with people dedicated to feline medicine?
 - What are the differences for him/her between dog and cat owners?
 - How would he/she respond to the particular needs of cat owners in his/her job?
- At the end of the interview, the applicants are given all the job details such as salary, holiday, additional statutory aspects as well as practice-specific information on daily life in the workplace (workplace description) and other additional benefits (further training offers, bonus system, etc.), so that the candidate can have a comprehensive picture of the job.

When you have selected one or several people after discussion with the interview team, it is sensible to invite two or three of the best candidates to a “second interview”, *i.e.* 1-2 days of work experience so that you can see whether he/she lives up to what he/she promised. The candidates can be put into different situations which are part of the practice daily life and be observed. This will finally help you choose the most suitable person for the job. The training can then begin! It will also help the candidates realise whether the job suits them and if they will fit into the team.

The latter should also be asked for their opinion on their potential new colleague.

G) Goal 4: Continuous and further training for the cat team

Work on creating a cat team does not end with the selection and initial training of suitable people. So that the selected new members of staff can do a good job for as long as possible and continue to develop further, it is absolutely essential that:

- They regularly take part in internal training and team discussions in which personal and medically relevant topics are discussed.
- They keep on being trained on the job internally, so that no mistakes or negligent behaviour creep into their daily working life.
- They regularly take part in external further training on cat related matters so they can keep on introducing the latest developments into the practice.

Putting together a successful team of professionals with expert knowledge in cat medicine and handling, training and continually developing them is a major challenge and a totally new goal for most practices. However, in view

of the developments in the small animal market with advancing specialisation and a growing cat population, it is essential for the long-term planning of a practice to appreciate these trends and establish a special offering for cat owners.

One of the most important issues in delivering this concept is finding exceptional team members who will “live up to” the services they offer and make all the difference in the cat owners’ eyes.

2/ The practice’s design makes all the difference!

A) How do you successfully create a cat-friendly practice environment?

In a cat-friendly practice, the atmosphere, along with the furniture and communication media, must show the cat owners from the very moment they enter the premises that they are welcome and that they will be offered a very special service.

Practices, which feel confident that they are already cat-friendly should ask for their cat clients’ feedback to check whether the results are in line with their own evaluation or whether there are perhaps a few things which could be improved in the services they offer. This also could help identify interesting services provided by other practices. After all, at the end of the day, it is the clients alone who judge whether a service goes down well with them or not. This means that when creating a cat-friendly practice, the focus must be on how the practice and its services will be perceived through the clients’ eyes – having a service is not enough, it must be clearly recognisable!

In order to check whether the atmosphere and design of the practice are cat-friendly, it makes sense to take a “trip” through the building, checking all areas which play an important role in daily client contact. The objective here is to check the following points, and if need be, improve them:

- How does the practice demonstrate overall that it understands and respects cat clients and the nature of cats?
- How does the practice show with its set-up that it is cat-friendly?
- How are the services and products for cats presented?

Of course this does not mean that the importance of other animal species, which are cared for in your practice, should no longer be recognised. Nonetheless it can often be noted that in daily practice, services and products for cats are much less frequently and clearly presented than the offers for dogs and this needs to be checked and changed. Pet owners, who have other pets in addition to cats, also clearly benefit from it if they get the opportunity to experience the special offers, optimally presented, for their cats.

1) Area 1 – Outside the practice

Interested cat clients should recognise before they enter the building that this practice offers something special for them and places a particular emphasis on it. The practice’s love of cats and their owners can be demonstrated, for example, with the following details:

- Images of cats on the practice sign.
- A clearly recognisable and highly visible welcoming message for cat clients.
- The highlighting of 1-2 special services for cat clients in the display window or outside at the practice entrance.

The goal is that the cat client recognises that his/her pet is appreciated here and that it is always worth stopping by to see what current or new offers are on display.

2) Area 2 – The front desk area

The reception area of a practice should generally be designed in such a way that the client immediately feels at ease. But for a cat practice and/or a practice with a particular focus on the needs of cat clients, something more should be done in order to make this clear as soon as they enter the clinic. The most important “ingredient” for a warm welcome at reception is of course the practice team member who addresses the clients in an attentive

and open way. To score with cat-owners in particular, the team must be specially trained. Ideally, the team needs to be aware of the clients' needs at all times and organise a welcome that is both obvious and helpful to the client. It is important here that the cat as a pet and patient is acknowledged with a different form of communication to that used for dogs. This is achieved successfully if the receptionist not only greets the client but also addresses the cat personally and ensures that the cat client receives precisely the information which is important to him/her on arrival:

- Where is the cat reception room/reception area?
- How long will the waiting time be?
- Which members of the cat team will look after the cat?
- What special services are there for cats?

Of course, not all the information can always be disclosed to a client, but these are the most important details to clarify at reception. It will show the cat owner that you

march to the beat of a different drum, *i.e.* to the purr of cats!

To convey this information not just orally via the reception team and to make it accessible to the clients at all times, it is useful to present the information using posters, signs, display boards and everything which can provide information in an interesting and attractive way, *e.g.*:

- Pictures of the team with names and special training, *e.g.* "Dr. Maier – veterinarian with special knowledge of cat medicine" and "Ms Schmitt – veterinary nurse/assistant for cats with additional training in cat behaviour".
- Details of particular services for cats, *e.g.* cat health check, cat health plan, nutritional advice for cats, special products for cats.
- Signposting of the cat-dedicated areas with cat pictogrammes.

In addition to this information, it is of course important to arrange the entrance area, where registration takes place,

Clients must recognise before they enter the premises that your practice offers something special for cat owners.



Your reception area should be designed to accommodate both your feline and canine clients and make them feel welcome.



Notice the space where the cat owner can put his/her box so that he/she avoids putting it on the floor.

in terms of its design and fittings, in such a way that the cat client will feel at ease and welcome with his/her cat carrier. It is therefore absolutely essential that there are easily visible and elevated areas where cat carriers can be placed in the entrance area, preferably directly at the front desk. Small animal owners, in particular cat owners and those who own indoor pets and birds, do not like putting their pets on the floor. They want to maintain eye contact with their pet throughout the duration of their practice visit. You can see this from the frequently, somewhat "agonising appearance" of their posture, if they have been balancing a cage or a basket on their lap for a while in the reception area.

In addition, it is a good idea to place 1-2 cat products in the entrance area and/or on the counter, if this fits with the ethos of the practice. Particularly suitable here are things which act as "eye-catchers" because of their appearance and are suitable for taking away, e.g. fishing toys or a new type of food in small, manageable packaging. This positioning fulfils two purposes: on the one hand, it gives an overt sign to the cat client, emphasising to him/her the practice's interest in cats and on the other hand, encourages additional purchases.

3) Area 3 – The reception area

Whenever possible, it is a good idea to set up an individual cat reception-room in which cats and other specific indoor pets can be accommodated without being disturbed by the more noisy and boisterous dogs. When thinking about a cat reception-room keep in mind that the floor area requirements are much less than for a dog or mixed reception-room. If this cannot be provided, then you should see if at least an area of the reception-room can be divided off and reserved for cats as frequently as possible.

This cat area should be easily distinguishable through optical design. In addition to comfortable seating you should arrange designed areas in between the seats, e.g. small tables, where the client can place their cat carrier so that he/she doesn't have to put his/her pet on the floor. If there is space on the walls of the cat area you can present the team members who look after the cats (possible repetition from the entrance area). In addition, you could display current topics and offers related to cat health. The display of team members and offers are always particularly interesting to clients if they contain pictures of day-to-day life in the practice, showing people and pets in real situations.

Setting up a reception-room dedicated to cats only is always a good idea. You should arrange designed areas between seats (small tables) where your clients can put their cat carrier.



If the practice has enough space, you could also display food and products for cats in the reception-area in an attractive manner.

4) Area 4 – The remaining practice area

In order to create a consistent picture as a cat-friendly practice, other areas to which clients with cats have access also have to be equipped accordingly. Let us take the two most important rooms as an example:

- The consultation-room. In a cat-only practice, all rooms are cat-specifically designed, but in a “mixed practice”, you should either – depending on the available space – set up a cat-only treatment room or ensure that the treatment area is equipped in such a way that cats immediately feel at ease there. A cat consultation-room and its equipment actually doesn’t take up a lot of space and sometimes you can really find (unused or “storage”) room in your practice when you were convinced at first there was no space! In way of equipment and interior design, you should ensure that the needs of the cat and its owner are acknowledged, e.g. with:

- A soft, warm cover for the treatment table,
- Soft lighting, which can then be appropriately intensified for clinical examination,
- Set of appropriately sized instruments,
- Small, portable (baby) scales for checking weights directly on the treatment table without having to carry the cat elsewhere,
- Suitable educational material (leaflets, posters, models) to be used for counselling and explaining procedures and services.

When designing a cat consultation-room please also keep in mind that you should do everything you can to reduce stress for both the cat and its owner during their wait. This includes setting and keeping to appointment times and giving them some extra time alone in the consultation-room to settle and get used to the environment.

- The ward. Of course, in the ideal situation you would accommodate dogs and cats separately. If this is not feasible, the cat suites should at least be equipped as appropriately as possible to meet the requirements of their species, to reduce the stress that the cat already has because of its illness and hospitalisation:

- Cage units made of plastic or fibreglass to reduce noise and enhance warmth,
- A raised bed with a soft disposable covering,
- A secluded area with a covered view,
- Separate water and food bowls.

This of course has to be reduced and adjusted for cats that are under more intensive medical care. In this case you have to limit the space you assign for cats to a minimum so that you can handle them more easily and in order to ensure that any attached lines (i.v. or feeding tubes) don't get flexed or disconnected too often.

In many cases, it is not desirable and/or sensible for the owner to visit during in-patient treatment. However, it makes a big impression on the cat owner and reduces

his/her stress if he/she is at least allowed a peak behind the curtains to see with his/her very own eyes that the practice is doing everything to make his/her cat's stay as pleasant as possible. This transparency increases the credibility of the practice in the eyes of the client and this in turn increases the trust which the client puts in his/her practice.

All other rooms in which cat owners may stay should also show, with the presentation of specialised services, offers and decoration, that cats are respected and appreciated in your practice.



Use of social media in the veterinary practice

So-called “social media” are currently very popular and one gets the impression that (almost) everybody is permanently connected to their mobile devices in order to exchange information and opinions. It is no longer possible to imagine day-to-day life without Facebook, Twitter and many other platforms and the fact that they facilitate a very particular, dynamic way of generating and exchanging thoughts and data across great distances.

Users of social networks are no longer “just” information-consumers, they are increasingly becoming information-designers and opinion-makers, building up a high level of influence by constantly exchanging and evaluating information about certain events, services and products. Participants’ posts on certain services – especially as genuine users, compare notes there – and are for many people, more believable and trustworthy than statements made by the companies themselves about their own services or products. It is the difference between marketing and P.R.

If one observes this dynamism and expansion of social media, then of course the question arises as to whether these platforms can also be used for veterinary practices and if so, how?

Fundamental considerations about social media

First of all it is essential, even if a practice decides against actively using social media, to nonetheless check regularly what opinions are circulating about them on the Internet; how the practice is portrayed there; what is said about competing veterinary practices and how other practices in the neighbourhood utilise social media. This kind of monitoring enables the practice to extract some useful information, such as:

- Which clients are engaged in the different social media platforms?
- Which veterinarians and practices are engaged in social media?
- What is being praised?

- What is being criticised?

Using this mix of opinions, the practice can extract the information which is relevant and use it to improve its service and client communication. For example, this means approaching clients, who have expressed a positive opinion and reinforcing this in a targeted manner. It also involves actively dealing with negative opinions and clients by engaging in conflict management. It should be the practice’s goal to eliminate any negative image, which has built up on the Internet as quickly and as effectively as possible.

The second consideration is to find out whether your target group, *i.e.* your clients, use social media and if they do, on which platforms? This plays an important part as it is imperative to restrict active usage to the media where you will encounter your clients. You don’t always have to use the largest networks, such as Facebook and Twitter for the practice. In every country there are numerous smaller networks within which very specific groups of people move, and these could potentially be of interest to a veterinary practice.

As an example of an interesting and new platform for a specific group you can go to: www.unitedcats.com. This is a platform especially designed for the needs of cat owners and lovers and shows how social media can be used in a very enticing way.

Thirdly, it is essential to consider what the practice’s goal is by taking part in social media. The question as to what you aim to achieve is key in shaping the practice’s presence in the new media. Social media can, for example, increase



the level of awareness of the practice or clinic; specific offers can be displayed and advertised there, and clients can be canvassed to give their opinion on specific topics in small surveys.

Organisation and usage of social media

If you have taken the fundamental decision to participate in social media and the goals are clear, then resources need to be planned. That raises the question as to who is going to be responsible for planning, installation and maintenance.

Participating in social media should not be an experiment; it should be carefully planned and implemented. If the practice does not have its own know-how and manpower in order to design interesting, current and interactive platforms, there are agencies that can take on this role. The advantage of this is that the professionals can approach the implementation in a fast and professional way and can work with the subject matter on an ongoing basis, whereas a practice team would first have to undergo laborious training and the result may well turn out less than optimal. Professional media agencies can act in an advisory capacity and by selecting suitable networks and their different tools, in the complex world arena, can elicit the best results for a business.

Monitoring success, *i.e.* measuring the results of a social media campaign can be difficult because of the fact that software tools are not yet optimally developed in every area. However, this will definitely change with appropriate developments and then monitoring, feedback and analysis of the extracted data on the social media activities of a business will become a matter of course. But until then a practice has to very carefully consider if the time invested in this media is really worthwhile – not knowing if and how this investment will be rewarded (financially, positive image etc.).

Paradigm change in the social web

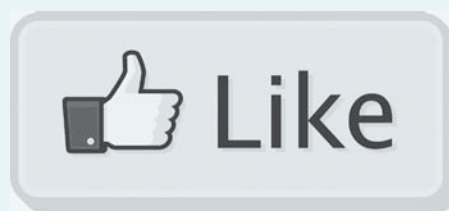
In the age of the Web 2.0 with its mobile devices, a paradigm change has taken place: Target groups have evolved to conversational partners, communication channels have become meeting platforms and messages have become topics of conversation. A business needs to actively follow

this development and adapt its communication goals appropriately. This is because the interactive nature of the new and faster media requires a completely different type of communication than businesses have previously adopted. Platforms in social media must, if they are to be done professionally, be up to date and designed with a very personal and authentic style of communication. “Content is king” applies here, *i.e.* those sites that carry attractive content from the clients’ point of view win the fight for users. Attraction to a site is solely generated by the users’ perceived benefits from using it.

Summary

If a practice wants to position itself in social media, then the following steps are sensible:

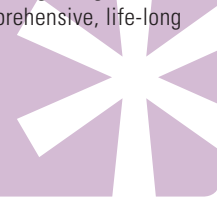
- Analysis of social media: where are your target groups active?
- Setting goals:
 - What do you want to achieve with a practice presence?
 - What benefits can you generate for your participants?
 - What tools can you use for this?
- Resource analysis:
 - Can the practice install and operate its own social media platform, *i.e.* does it have sufficient knowhow and manpower?
 - Is the involvement of an external media agency sensible and necessary?
- Implementing, maintaining and controlling activities in social media.



4. How to implement a cat marketing plan

> SUMMARY

The psychological and sociological profile of the typical cat owner suggests that a different marketing approach will be more successful than the one routinely offered to dog owners. Authors emphasise the importance of a cat owner's first contact with the practice and wonder if feline neutering is regarded as banal by many veterinary surgeons, and as a result all too often devaluated. A comprehensive, life-long offer, adapted for the cat and its owner is detailed in this chapter.



Once a marketing plan has been devised by management it has to be handed on to others in the team to be implemented. And the successful implementation of any plan involves a number of phases, irrespective of the subject and the target audience. All of these phases must be thought through and implemented as effectively and efficiently as possible to attain maximum success.

1/ Specificity of the cat owner

A) How should it influence our marketing strategy?

Research suggests that cat owners are more likely to:

- Be female.
- Be professionals or/and executives.
- Prefer passive leisure activities, *e.g.* reading, theatre and concert going, etc.
- Demonstrate concern over environment and economy.

Their anxiety over the environment and the economy may well influence their choice of product and these concerns need to be addressed in the way we detail our offers.

Dog and cat owners demonstrate more self-directed and hedonistic characteristics than the general population. Self-directed individuals are not afraid of being themselves; they are financially savvy and 65% plan their finances on a monthly basis. hedonistic people like to indulge themselves and see shopping more as a pleasure than a chore. On the negative side almost 50% of hedonists admit to often feeling stressed. However, owning a cat can reduce your risk of heart attack by up to a third, so maybe cat owners recognise their cats as living stress relievers!

A significant percentage of dog and cat owners are also achievers, interpreted as being avid shoppers who like to buy products with prestigious brands. This should help when it comes to marketing premium brands.

Just under half of dog and cat owner's visit or participate in community/networking sites, and this is an ever increasing percentage. Not surprisingly, they are interested in other

peoples' opinions and go out of their way to inform others of products and services they really like. So how should we promote our services and products in such a way as to be appealing to individuals described above?

We need to be sincere in what we are promoting whether it be a service or a product. The whole team must have confidence in what they are selling. This should be manifest in their keenness to engage the client and the enthusiasm with which they discuss the health and wellbeing of those clients' cats. For example on seeing an owner studying the pet food stand in the reception area, rather than opening with, "Can I help you?", they should say something along the lines of, "What age is your cat?"... an open rather than a closed question. To impart a high level of confidence in each and every team member who interacts with clients we first of all need to recruit well and this is covered in the previous chapter. We then need to ensure our internal marketing has been effective in achieving the following:

- All aspects of the promotional campaign need to have been thought through and planned by the management team.
- The whole team needs to be involved in the internal training which should include:
 - The features and functions of the service or product.
 - More importantly, the benefits need to be stressed.
 - The pricing structure.
 - Answers to the team members questions and those anticipated from clients.
- Ideally team members will be using the service or product with their own cats, enabling them to speak with first-hand knowledge to clients
- An understanding of any incentive, individual or team, associated with the campaign.

The objective of the Internal marketing is to ensure that, not only are each and every team member who consult with the clients, fully conversant with the campaign, but that they actively seek opportunities to promote the product or service. They will only do this if they are fully au fait with the promotion, understand and more importantly, believe in the benefits for the patients and are comfortable with any questions they may be asked by clients.

B) External marketing

Once you have confidence in your internal marketing you can tell the rest of the world about it. It is said that 50% of the marketing/promotion effort is wasted; the problem is that nobody is certain which 50%! The answer is that we have to make best use of all the media available to us in the most cost effective and efficient manner.

In the last issue of the Focus Special Edition (New Business Opportunities for your practice - same authors) there was a chapter devoted to this subject entitled, "Bringing your clients onboard". The chapter went into some detail on the various types of media that can be used to get the practice message across to clients. These included both materials used within the practice itself and externally.

In our publication there is mention of the key "buying questions" we all ask ourselves before purchasing anything:

- What is it?
- Do I need it? And do I need it now?
- How much is it?
- Is it value for money?

When it comes to answering the first question, "What is it?", it is paramount to remember one important thing.

Your staff members must be comfortable with any of the questions your clients may ask.





Cat carriers, food, litter boxes, litter etc. can be offered for sale as individual items or alternatively bundled together as a “Kitten starter pack”.

Whatever medium is being employed to get the important messages across, remember you are not trying to communicate with other veterinarians or scientists and that your messages need to be in “client speak”.

When it comes to answering the second question “Do I need it? And do I need it now?”, read your promotional material critically. Does the story you are telling answer those specific questions? Better still, ask some of your clients to read the material before it goes to a wider audience. What do they understand by the message you are trying to relay? Would they avail themselves of the service or product? Have you enthused them to the point where they would be keen to tell others about you and your offers?

Use of clients as advocates. To stand up and tell everybody how good you are is promotion. To have other people stand up and tell everybody how good you are is PR or public relations. The latter is a much more powerful tool.

Clients’ word of mouth is the best and by far the most cost effective way of spreading your message. These days things have moved on and if your clients like what you have to offer enough, you may well find it being tweeted about or appearing on somebody’s Facebook page. That way your offerings may well go viral!

2/ How to structure a cat specific offer

If you want to be seen, and more importantly spoken about as a practice that has a special interest in cats, it is insufficient to have that as a team aspiration, although that is an excellent starting point; you must demonstrate it through what you portray in words, pictures and above all in what you have to offer.

In this section we will look at services and products that will be of interest to your cat owning clients; products and services that you should be providing but which some owners may not be aware they need and others that we know they may well be sourcing from elsewhere.

As veterinarians, you and the members of your team will naturally feel more comfortable if you adhere to the core value of having the good of your clients and the welfare of their pets as central to everything you do. You should also approach this from the attitude of solving the problem as opposed to merely selling the product or service, and seek to address needs as opposed to wants. By educating your clients and thereby highlighting the needs, you differ-

entiate yourselves from your non-veterinary competitors and create clients who will buy from you, as opposed to the team having to resort to the hard sell, which nobody likes.

When deciding on what services and/or products you should promote as something special for cat owners, a good starting point is to consider the healthy cat and preventative medicine. And although recommendations may differ from region to region in terms of what should be done to keep cats healthy during their various life-stages that information is readily available, and can act as a template for devising healthcare packages.

Why is it that when it comes to offering services and products for dogs and cats most practices have more in place for canine owners? Could it be that you regard the cat as less important; that you perceive the cat owner as being less interested in their pet than the dog owner; that cats are inherently healthier than dogs; that good husbandry skills is something cat owners have whereas dog owners do not? The answer to all is probably no.

A good starting point in improving what you provide cat owners would be to mirror what you probably already do for dog owners! This is something which should be fairly

easy to introduce. Take neutering for example. You may see this as a routine, straightforward procedure, but what about the owner? It may be the only time they have had a pet undergo an anaesthetic and a surgical procedure. We mustn't allow familiarity to breed complacency!

But let's go back a step! Often, the first point of contact is over the phone from that new kitten owner, requesting details of vaccination prices. It could be a client phoning around, comparing prices. You need to engage that client in a dialogue, providing them with more information than merely the price of the vaccination course. In that conversation your receptionist should be asking about the kitten; in particular its name, and how he/she is settling into their new home. Obtaining the client's and the kitten's details allows you to send a personalised letter or email to that client (or even the kitten!) providing them with details of your practice and what you can offer them and their new family member. That action, plus the receptionist's genuine interest in the kitten provides that client with more than a price upon which to decide what practice to use.

One of the real or perceived stresses owners and their cats have is that journey to the vet! The new kitten owner may well have experienced this when they first brought



Health check questionnaire

Before the consultation, answering these few questions can help your vet assess your cat's ageing status:

Circle the appropriate answer

- Have you noticed any change in your cat's appetite?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she drink and urinate more than usual?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she have difficulty chewing?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she seem less agile, stiffer?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Is he/she reluctant to jump or to climb the stairs?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Is he/she reluctant to be handled or stroked?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she have difficulties grooming her back?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she sleep more?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she wake up during the night?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she seem less active?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she meow loudly for no apparent reason?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she sometimes seem confused, disoriented?..... **YES NO N-A**
- Does he/she seem more irritable or more aggressive?..... **YES NO N-A**

Providing the client with a health check list adds value, documents what the patient needs and allows the owner to discuss your findings with the family.



their kitten home. So what better question to ask that enquiring client on the phone than, “How will you be bringing your kitten to us?” This opens up the whole conversation about the best carrier to use, the use of pheromones to help with not only transportation, but with settling the kitten into his/her new surroundings.

A suggestion could be made that the client may like to call into the practice, ahead of their appointment to purchase a carrier and other useful, “cat practice/ approved” products and information. Other questions regarding the kitten’s feeding and toileting arrangements open up the conversation about the best food, litter box and litter to use. Why force a client to go to a pet store or the internet to be confronted with a wide, confusing selection of products when you can be their only port of call for expert, interested advice and help.

Cat carriers, food, litter boxes, litter etc. can be offered for sale as individual items or alternatively bundled together as a kitten starter pack at a reduced, special offer price. On pages 50 and 51, there is an example of a five-step action plan to help your clients. At the time of writing this edition of Focus there is an excellent online video on the CATalyst Council website (www.catalystcouncil.org) providing advice on transporting cats along with the best

type of carriers. This is a good source of information for the practice team and the client.

Returning to the neutering, as an example of how you can improve and add value to your offering. Is it conceivable that in your practice a kitten could come in for neutering and that throughout the whole process, its owner would never see a vet? As already has been mentioned it may be the only time that owner has left a pet for an anaesthetic and an operation. What kind of message does that portray to an owner? How much does that devalue the procedure? Surely it is much better to arrange a pre-puberty check for that kitten before the operation, an appointment with the vet when the kitten’s development can be checked. It also provides an ideal opportunity to recap on other important areas such as diet, microchipping, insurance, behaviour etc. When it comes to pet insurance, practices need to be aware that legal restrictions are in place in some countries restricting the level of advice that can be provided.

Should that pet require additional medication, accompanying advice should be provided on its administration. We can all find it difficult to administer oral medications to cats, so some useful advice and demonstrations from nurses will be well received by clients. In addition, where possible, palatable medications should be offered. Written advice with diagrams or videos on your website demonstrate you have not only thought about the challenge, but are providing solutions.

A) Healthcare programmes

The fact that almost all adult cats (except such breeds as Ragdolls and Maine Coons) are the same size, in terms of average weight (3.6kg-4.8kg) makes the pricing of healthcare programmes at a fixed price a great deal easier. One of the problems in attempting to design similar schemes for canine patients is the enormous difference between breed sizes and the knock on effect that has in providing a simplistic fee structure that clients and team members can understand.

Where cats are concerned you could for example offer a healthcare programme to include the following, for a fixed annual fee:

- Annual vaccinations;

- 6 monthly health check (with written report*);
- Annual external parasite control;
- Regular worming treatment for roundworms and tapeworms (incl. preventative medication for heartworms if appropriate).

*A written report, which needs not be a lengthy document, but a simple list detailing all the health aspects that have been checked along with any recommendations, serves a number of purposes. Most importantly it adds value to the procedure, as it is not always obvious to the client just how much is involved in a thorough health check. The recommended remedial actions and associated costs can be documented for the client to consider and if necessary, discussed with other family members before making a decision to proceed. It is best kept as simple as possible, with additional information being added, as and where necessary, in the form of relevant commercially and/or in-house produced literature.

The list above could be considered a basic healthcare programme for a 1-7 year old cat. It could be added to or adapted according to the marketplace and/or the target audience. For example it could be modified for cats of differing age groups as suggested in **Table 1**.

One of the advantages of a Healthcare Package to the client is that it provides them with a roadmap for their cat's care. It lays out when they need to come to the clinic

and for what. The practice can help the process by sending out text or email messages to remind the client of their next appointment. The other advantages, to both the client and the practice can be in the pricing.

Take a new kitten for example; that initial visit can be an expensive one for the client if they purchase all that the practice advises, vaccinations, food, microchipping, cat carrier, litter box, litter tray, etc. As such many may not make those purchases and could easily go on to buy them elsewhere. In order to help clients to budget, the overall cost of the package could be spread equally over a given period, *e.g.* 12 months. It could even be offered at a discounted price for a given period as a Special Offer.

There are advantages for all when it comes to offering schemes along the lines of those described above; offers that bring the client and the patient back into the practice on a regular basis. From the patient's point of view it should mean a healthier life in that problems will be picked up much earlier than would otherwise happen. From the client's perspective, they can be assured that their feline family member is in the best hands when it comes to healthcare, not just for when there is a problem. And from the practice's perspective, it ensures regular contact with patients and their caring owners, allowing you to practise good medicine. And from a business perspective, the regular payments help with cash flow. In addition, the fact that clients will perceive they are paying

Table 1. Suggested healthcare components for cats of various ages.

Procedure	2-3 months old	6 months old	1 year old	2-6 years old	7-10 years old	11 years old plus
Vaccination	●		●	●	●	●
Weight check	●	●	●	●	●	●
General Health Check	●	●	●	●	●	●
Parasite treatment*	●	●	●	●	●	●
Urinalysis					●	●
Blood pressure test					●	●
Haem./biochem./T4						●

* Testing and preventative treatment for the various parasitic feline diseases will vary from country to country and needs to be tailor-made appropriately.

The annual healthcare programme should go far beyond vaccination.



for the services and products “up-front”, makes them more likely to utilise them. If the practice does decide to discount the overall price, the profits will come from larger sales and the spin-off work which results from the increased contact with patients.

Other services and products that can be added to make up a bundle include:

- Microchipping
- Neutering
- Insurance
- Pet food

B) Pet food

Irrespective of what an individual owner may decide to do in terms of caring for their cat, they will hopefully remember to feed it on a daily basis! Bringing clients into the practice is going to be an ever increasing challenge and the one thing that will bring clients, with healthy cats, back into your clinic more frequently than any other service or product is if they purchase their cat food from you.

Assuming the practice selects a premium brand as its preferred option, how can you add value to what may be perceived as an expensive product and one that may be obtained from elsewhere? Firstly, to add intrinsic value we need to break the price down into something the owner

can understand. And whereas the face price of a premium bag of dry cat food may appear expensive, if the cost per day is clearly displayed beside the product, this allows the client to relate to other alternatives on the market. Any differences will then appear less significant and easier for a practice team member to explain. Another plus may be to indicate how long the bag will last, potentially an important issue for some if home storage is at a premium. Another plus could be to offer regular weight checks; something you may well have been doing for your canine patients for some time, but where you may have been neglecting your feline friends.

These weight checks can be carried out by nursing staff at times when the practice is quiet and offered at a reduced price or even free as long as the client purchases their food from you.

It could be regarded as a precursor to creating dissatisfied clients to include in an annual healthcare bundle, “Enough food to feed your cat for a year”; better to calculate the average amount a cat will consume and to include that amount in the bundle and to make that clear in the offer. Any obvious discrepancies regarding the amount of food being consumed, along with the associated difference in cost, can be discussed with the owner at the time of the regular health and weighings.

A practice may consider offering other products for sale; items that could be classified as waiting-room merchandise. There is obviously a wide spectrum of such items out there, of variable quality and a service we can offer our clients is to focus on a narrow range of quality and useful products. Adhering to core principles, it is vitally important that all such items fit with the practice’s ethos of being of high quality and addressing a genuine need. As such our team should be comfortable in recommending these products to solve issues and/or to improve the quality of cats’ lives. They should not be asked to sell products that have doubtful efficacy!

When it comes to clients making their decisions as to whether to purchase a service, a product, money is going to be a factor they will consider. When it comes to financial decisions, many cat owners will be financially savvy and will be more concerned about value for money than they will be about the pure cost. But unless we demonstrate that value for money by illustrating the savings that can

Clients who purchase their petfood from your veterinary clinic will come back on a regular basis.



be made by taking up the offer, how is the client to judge? For example, with a bundle offer we need to show the normal aggregate price along with the discounted price. We also need to highlight any additional value such as free regular weight checks or unlimited telephone advice.

C) Coping with competition in the marketplace

In an era when the consumer is king, customers are encouraged to shop around and we are all bombarded by adverts and special offers, you may find yourself faced with clients querying your prices. How can you respond to such challenges?

Taking the approach of competing on price can prove to be a very slippery, and sometimes steep slope and one that cannot be recommended as a first resort. You should always seek to compete on quality and the whole team should be prepared to defend that stance if faced by a client who says they can buy "similar" products elsewhere for less. You need to have the ammunition to be able to explain that, although it may look similar, your products are superior because...

You do however need to be conscious of the marketplace and if you do stock exactly the same products that are available elsewhere you must be aware of your competitors' pricing. You may be able to justify a higher price for the same product by adding value, *e.g.* "free weight checks and nutritional advice when you buy your pet food from us". Nonetheless you cannot expect to enjoy high volume sales if your prices are seen to be much higher than others.

When it comes to competing on the open market you may well be up against competitors whose buying power is much greater than yours. Having said that, if you do find yourself in a position to have to reduce your price to compete, you may have more margin to play with than you think. Your true margin is not the difference between your selling and invoicing price; it is the difference between what you sell the product for and your nett price; in other words you need to take into account any manufacturer's and wholesaler's discounts you receive.

But a word of caution! If you do decide to take this route of discounting, you need to be conscious of the effect of a price reduction on your net profit. Take for example an item on which you have a 20% margin; you decide to decrease the sale price by 10%; you have to increase your

sales by 100% to make the same amount of profit! And remember, the lower the gross margin, the more dramatic the effect a price reduction will have on the net profit.

3/ Specific medical procedures

A cat that has access to the outdoors may well fulfil the exciting and active lifestyle of a small game hunter, but once indoors tends to lead a very different life. One of the challenges when dealing with cats is that their relatively secretive and sedentary lifestyle means their behaviour when well may differ little from when they fall ill. As a result many illnesses go undetected at their early stages.

As has been discussed elsewhere, this message of early disease detection needs to be stressed to cat owners along with the promotion of programmes to monitor the state of apparently healthy patients.

When it comes to considering what specific medical procedures to offer and what equipment is required, a good starting point is to look at the list of commonly occurring diseases and conditions that can affect our feline patients, especially those that may well be difficult for their owners to detect.

Although a thorough clinical examination may well provide direct evidence of, or be suggestive of a clinical or sub-clinical disease, cats can be very good at “hiding” problems and so specific procedures can be very helpful in detecting

Table 2. A list of commonly occurring feline diseases.

- Dental disease
- Hyperthyroidism
- Chronic renal failure
- Hypertension
- Osteoarthritis
- Diabetes mellitus
- FLUTD

and addressing issues at the earliest stage possible (Table 2).

Urinalysis can be very helpful in detecting diabetes, kidney failure or FLUTD. Using non-absorbent cat litter is an unobtrusive method of collecting the sample and can be used by clients at home or with in-patients. An alternative way of collecting a sterile sample is by cystocentesis. Urinalysis is relatively inexpensive for the client in that it requires minimum equipment, *e.g.* a refractometer, dipsticks and a microscope. If urinary tract infection is suspected a bacterial culture and sensitivity may be called for. This can be done in-house or can be sent to an external laboratory.

Haematology and biochemistry carried out in-house or at an external laboratory may provide direct evidence of diabetes or renal failure, or may suggest the presence of hyperthyroidism, which can be further investigated with an additional blood test. The decision whether to purchase or lease in-house laboratory equipment should be based on a number of factors. This will include:

- The availability of a reliable and efficient external laboratory service;
- The cost of processing the samples in-house *versus* the external option;
- The ability to interpret results in-house;
- The size of the practice’s feline population;
- The perceived number of clients who you think will avail of the service.

Hyperthyroidism is a reasonably common condition found in older cats and should be suspected if presented with a thin but active (often hyperactive) patient with a good appetite and a rapid heartbeat.

Although a routine blood test may be indicative of hyperthyroidism, the condition needs to be confirmed by the presence of raised Thyroxine (T4) levels. Again, this can be carried out in-house, or sent to an external laboratory. Hyperthyroid cats often exhibit signs of hypertension and as has already been mentioned, tachycardia. If the hyperthyroidism has been present for some time there may be secondary, permanent changes in the heart (left ventricular hypertrophy) that could require additional medication. This should be investigated by carrying out an ECG on the patient.

Blood Pressure monitoring on an annual basis for cats over the age of 7 is good practice. Cats are very prone to increased blood pressure due to stress, making it difficult to establish and interpret readings. Because of that, patients should be given time to acclimatise to their surroundings and if possible the procedure should be carried out with their owners present. Readings are taken using a Doppler Blood Pressure Kit and because of the variation in readings due to outside influences a number of readings should be taken and averaged to arrive at a result.

Dental treatment is necessary in many of our feline patients as a high percentage of them will have dental and/or gum disease. If neglected this can lead to chronic pain and possibly systemic disease. Whereas it may be possible for some dog owners to clean their pet's teeth, brushing a cat's teeth is an almost impossible task.

As a result, owners are often unaware of the state of their cat's oral health until shown by a member of the practice team. You may not be given the luxury of a lengthy look and the use of dental models and/or photographs can prove very useful when explaining the problems and the proposed remedial actions that are required. Dental charts are useful to document the state of the oral cavity before and after treatment. These can be paper based or can be held on computer. Providing a copy to the client adds value to the treatment.

In order to carry out a comprehensive oral examination of some feline patients it may be necessary to radiograph the jaws. It is virtually impossible to take good radiographs using standard veterinary x-ray machines because of the restricted movement, and the size of the head of the machine. A dental x-ray unit, which can be either wall or castor mounted, is ideal. They can often be sourced second hand.

The following equipment is also required:

- Small dental film which can be processed manually or automatically.
- A chair-side developer allows the film to be developed in the operating theatre.
- Dental gags to keep the mouth open.
- Film holders to position the film in the mouth.

Cat's teeth, especially diseased ones can be very fragile and can fracture easily, leaving whole or partial roots

Blood pressure monitoring on an annual basis for cats over the age of 7 is a good practice.



behind, with undesirable consequences. In order to successfully and safely extract feline teeth you need appropriately sized dental elevators and chisels. In addition, a dental engine that allows you to scale, polish and where necessary cut crowns in an effective and efficient manner, to facilitate root extractions, is a worthwhile investment for most practices that intend carrying out feline dental work.

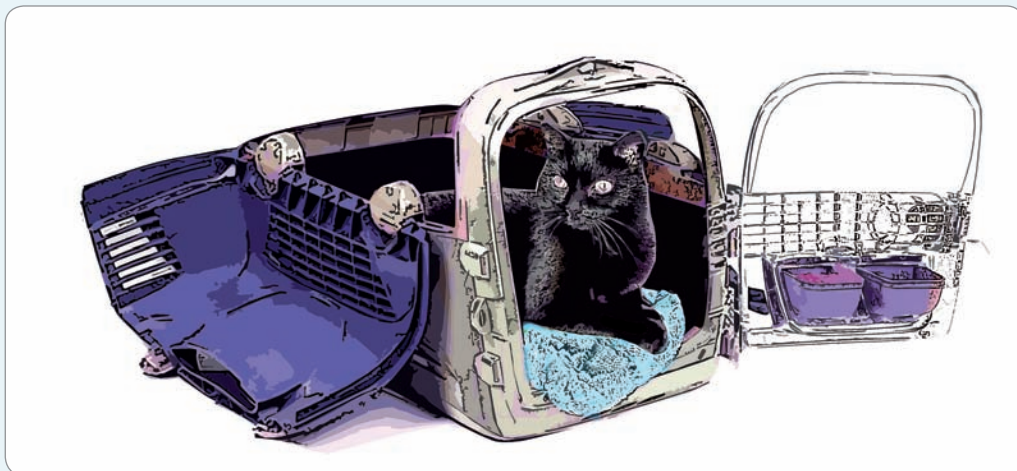
Helping your clients to get their

One of the most important factors preventing cat owners from bringing their pet to the veterinary practice lies in the practical difficulties in transporting their cat from home to the clinic. Plus there is the associated stress, for the cat and the owner alike. Therefore a practice wishing to increase its cat business must implement a five step action plan:

A/ Design a short leaflet "Top ten travel tips when bringing your cat to our practice" to include the following advice:

1. Never travel with your cat loose in the car.
2. Choose a robust carrier that opens from the top and the front, and can also be taken apart in the middle (an easily removable top allows an anxious cat to be examined, whilst remaining in the bottom half). Focus on the practical and functional features and avoid fancy and often expensive carriers. Feel free to ask our receptionist to show you one of our recommended carriers and to demonstrate how to use it.
3. Leave the carrier at home in a place where it may be regarded by your cat as "part of furniture", allowing it to become a familiar place.
4. Make the carrier as comfortable and familiar as possible by putting in some clothing with your scent and/or your cat's scent (you can gently wipe a soft cloth on your cat's face to pick up his/her scent). Spray some synthetic feline facial pheromone (Feliway™) – available at the clinic – on the clothing at least 30 minutes prior to departure. Don't forget your cat may be sick or may soil the carrier during the journey, so it is a good idea to take some spare bedding for the drive back home.
5. To get your cat into the carrier, if he/she doesn't enter spontaneously, you should calmly take your cat and lower him/her into the carrier through the top opening. Alternatively you could remove the top half of your carrier and replace it after your cat gets into the bottom half. If your cat is really unwilling to get in the carrier, you can wrap her in a thick towel (containing his/her scent and/or sprayed pheromone), then lower the cat and the towel into the carrier.
6. Once in the car, prevent the carrier from being shaken during the ride either by securing it in the foot well behind the front seat or with the seat-belt. Drive carefully; avoid loud and aggressive music; talk quietly to your cat to reassure him/her. The quieter the owner, the better the

It is important to choose a carrier with an upper half that can be removed.



cat to your practice

cat. Some cats like to see out, but most of them will appreciate it if you keep the carrier covered with a towel during the journey.

7. When you walk from your car to the practice's reception area, try to avoid shaking the carrier or bumping it against your legs.
8. Once in the reception area, ask our receptionist to show you where to sit and how to rest the carrier (we have a dedicated reception area for cat owners with specific places where you can put the carrier next to you). We strongly recommend having the front end of the carrier toward you (rather than towards other cats!) and to keep the carrier covered with a towel when in the reception area.
9. Of course, you should respect the same protocol for the journey back home!
10. Last but not least, if you own several cats, you should take some precautions when bringing one of them back home, especially after a long stay at the clinic. Leave your returning cat in the carrier for a few minutes and see how the other cats react. If all cats remain calm, you can open the carrier and let your cat join his/her roommates. If you sense tension between your cats, it is probably because the returning cat bears odours from the practice. Should this happen, keep your returning cat in a separate room (of course, with a litter box, food and fresh water!) for a minimum of 24 hours to regain a more familiar smell.

B/ Include within your product range a limited number of carriers including all the features described in the leaflet. Of course the leaflet should contain pictures of carriers that are very similar to if not identical to the carriers you sell! Include also in your product range, synthetic feline facial pheromone sprays.

C/ Ensure all team members are knowledgeable when it comes to issues regarding cat behaviour, and train them to comment on and go through the contents of the leaflet, to demonstrate the use of the carrier, etc.

During transportation, it is important to safely place the cat carrier in your car so that it does not move around and your cat does not get stressed.



D/ Include the leaflet in the welcome pack for every cat owner visiting the practice for the first time. The receptionist must offer to comment on and go through the contents of the leaflet and to demonstrate the use of the carrier, etc.

E/ Design a dedicated page within the feline section of your practice's Website with explanations, pictures or even videos and offer the possibility of downloading the leaflet.

This book has been prepared with the greatest care, taking into account the latest research and scientific discoveries. It is recommended that you refer to the specificities of your country. The publisher and authors can in no way be held responsible for any failure of the suggested solutions.

Editorial coordination: Laurent Cathalan and Olivia Amos
Layout: Pierre Ménard
Technical Management: Buena Media Plus

Illustrations: Youri Xerri

Photos: Fotolia, Shutterstock

© 2012 Royal Canin
BP 4
650 avenue de la Petite Camargue
30470 Aimargues France
Tel: + 33 (0) 4 66 73 03 00 - Fax: + 33 (0) 4 66 73 07 00
www.royalcanin.com

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