

## Avoiding a Cat-astrophy: How to Engage Cat Owners in Life-Long Care

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“Time spent with cats is never wasted.” - *Sigmund Freud*

The unique relationships we form with animals is something of a spiritual experience. The way they can sense our emotions, or how we can read their moods just by looking at their eyes, all hints at a connection that's extraordinary.

But despite our love of animals and pets, some are represented constantly across websites, social media channels, and presentations, while others are left behind. I've found that practices rarely post about cats, both within social media and across their marketing efforts as a whole.

When I'm consulting with veterinary practices across the world, I'm combing through everything I see to get a holistic impression. This includes everything from the learning about marketing materials in their waiting room, to their website, Facebook Page, brochures, etc. I've noticed that kittens are sometimes used in picturesque settings (yes, that picture of a basket of kittens in a sun-drenched field is oh so realistic), but cats as a whole are mostly neglected.

While this presents an issue, it also presents an opportunity.

To take a more comprehensive look at this, let's begin with some impactful data directly from the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP). The AAFP has found that 50% of cat owners report they didn't seek to own a cat, but instead their cats “found them.” 69% of those responding to the same survey state they paid nothing for their cats.

This means that the majority of cat owners received little to no instruction on proper veterinary care for their cats, so while we've bonded with our cats early and often, we may lack professional insights into how to best care for these lovely animals.

I believe that many who own a cat can relate. One day, you're leaving some extra cat food outside for an occasional visit, and soon enough, you've bonded and you're the proud parent of a cat!

With this being said, where do first time cat owners go to learn more about the best way to care for their new feline friend? Well, of course they turn right to the Internet. While this used to make me cringe a bit (considering the amount of unvetted blogs and forums circulating about), I'm happy to report that an increasing number of online searches tend to endorse quality information the majority of veterinarians would recommend.

This is thrilling for somebody like me, who loves when proud pet owners have access to the information they need! This being said, the Internet (I won't call out any specific social media network by name...except for YouTube) is still absolutely ripe with horrible advice on cat care.

As veterinary professionals, it's up to us to represent all sorts of pets and to provide equal representation. This is also effective for marketing to more people, and for showcasing our

commitment to all species of animals we care for. I challenge you to become more proactive about sharing the stories of cats in your practice to ensure they are properly represented.

You can start off small, by sharing just a few pictures or an anecdote. During my routine social media audits (a process that helps me quickly hone-in on the strengths and weaknesses of existing social media strategy), I actually look to see the last time your practice shared content about a cat. Content that I routinely audit looks a lot like this:

- Dog Post (Monday)
- Dog Post (Tuesday)
- Dog Post (Wednesday)
- Dog Post (Thursday)
- Dog Post (Friday)
- Cat Post (Saturday)
- Dog Post (Sunday)

You get the picture. Not only does this content become redundant, but it underrepresents two specific groups: cats and consequently, cat owners. I'd like to see certain themes that show more interest in cats, like "Featured Feline Friday," which gives practices the chance to share something about cats that will resonate with cat owners directly on an on-going basis.

Looking again at some crucial data from the AAFP, their statistics show that 51% of clients believe cats are "low-maintenance" while a whopping 70% do not believe that cats regularly hide symptoms. 81%, yes 81% of cat owners in this poll believe that their cats are in excellent health and are self-sufficient.

Now we're beginning to see that the underrepresentation also creates an environment where misinformation can too easily spread and become the "norm" of what's largely believed. I'm confident when I say it's rare to find a veterinarian who believes that cats don't hide symptoms! A lot of this misinformation comes from pet owners going to the wrong sources for info, like a pet store employee or their local Facebook group, instead of a tried-and-true veterinary professional.

The AAFP also notes that "veterinarians estimate that 50% of cat owners consider a trip to the veterinarian to be stressful, versus 20% of dogs." ***Now we've got a scenario where cat owners don't believe their cats hide illnesses and also believe their cat hates going to the vet.***

Do we see a troubling trend emerging here?

Yes! So how do we overcome it?

What's the best way to inform pet owners that cats do indeed hide illness and that yes, our veterinary practice can provide care that truly accommodates the needs of their feline friend?

We need to tell the stories of the cats we see in our practices! Not just telling but showing too. These narratives are crucial to connecting to the hearts and minds of pet owners!

Read on to learn how to tell these stories and how to adhere to industry-standard best practices along the way:

Remember first and foremost, permission is required from a cat's owner and/or caregiver before sharing any of their information. This consent must be written.

- (1) Find a cat you've seen recently at your practice.
- (2) Secure written permission to share a story about the cat.
- (3) Briefly, gather information including the following:
  - a.) What illness was the cat brought in for?
  - b.) How did you help to discover the cat was ill?
  - c.) How did you help to treat this cat from a veterinary perspective?
  - d.) How is this cat doing today?

When you combine these elements, you're ready to begin telling the story itself, which may look something like this:

Example:

*Gazpacho, a 4-year-old calico, came into All Animal Clinic, a Cat Friendly Practice®, after her caregiver, Emily, noticed that she had not been eating a lot lately, and had started hissing and avoiding being petted. Dr. Gray carefully examined Gazpacho using feline-friendly handling and discovered that she had severe dental issues. So, we worked with Emily to take care of Gazpacho's painful mouth. While we had to do a few tooth extractions, we were also able to clean and do preventive treatments. After a short recovery time, we are happy to report that Gazpacho is feeling much better. She is eating well again and since she is no longer in pain, she is no longer hissing or avoiding being petted. Keep your cat's mouth healthy and pain free with regular check-ups at All Animal Clinic. Our staff use gentle, feline-friendly handling to help keep your cat calm.*

Why is this story so impactful? Again, let's look at the data! According to the AAFP, 56% of clients report that they would bring their cat to the veterinarian more frequently if they knew this could prevent problems!

This data shows us that increased information, including storytelling and specific examples, would likely lead to increased engagement from cat owners.

To take things even a step further, I recommend that practices consider becoming a Cat Friendly Certified Practice, which really takes the commitment to delivering remarkable feline care to the next level. While I'm not a veterinarian, I know there's more we can be doing to create a better experience for cats.

I also think it's equally important (whether you decide to become certified or not) to proactively share the things your practice does to make visits for cats easier.

This could mean using pheromone diffusers or sprays to create comfort for a cat while explaining how this works and why it's important. Then and only then can you show me the cat cuddled up and content inside a blanket!

The same goes for sprinkling catnip on a blanket in the exam room. Explain to me that cats prefer a blanket over a cold, sterile table and that the catnip is just the icing on the cake to

enhance the experience further. Do you use feline-friendly handling techniques or have a cat-friendly waiting area? Great, tell me more and show me too with pictures or even video!

Without this type of content being shared regularly both via social media and on your veterinary practice's website, getting cats to come back to your practice is a lost cause.

But if you're willing to engage in thoughtful ways and go the extra mile to care for these beloved felines, well, they'll be beating a path to your door in no time at all.

Share your story, and the rest will follow.

## TELL YOUR STORY

People are often under the impression that social media is only for peer-to-peer interactions. This, however, couldn't be further from the truth. Facebook is a platform that's become as universal as the water cooler itself. Successful veterinary practices around the world *leverage Facebook as a place to tell their unique story*. Your veterinary practice has a story and details that make it entirely unique: the year it was founded; the founder (or two, or more); your **Cat Friendly Practice®** designation; and your practice style and perspective.

**Use social media to tell your story!** It's a perfect platform where you can capture and captivate your audience. Tell your followers about success stories at your practice such as:

- How and why you chose to become a **Cat Friendly Practice®**?
- How being a **Cat Friendly Practice®** has improved visits for cats and their caregivers?
- What differences your practice has made today in the lives of cats and other animals?

Sharing this kind of information with your followers in a story format fosters community, trust, interactions, and keeps your trusted cat clients coming back to you. Stories like these are also known as:

**Case studies** – a story particular to a specific cat client, place, and time.

Case studies are crucially important for a variety of reasons, but primarily to help your audience know about the stellar care your **Cat Friendly Practice®** provides!

When you're creating your case study, be sure to provide your audience with:

- The reason the cat came in to receive veterinary care.
- Details regarding the type of care you provided for the cat.
- How being a **Cat Friendly Practice®** improved the veterinary visit and overall care for the cat and the caregiver.
- An update on how the cat is doing today.
- A photo or quick video of the pet.

When you provide this level of in-depth information on a cat, you tell the story of your patient and demonstrate that you can deliver the same quality of care to any prospective client. You can forge an immediate bond with cat caregivers who appreciate your attention to detail and the accountability needed to provide optimal care for their cat.

Your followers and their friends want to hear of your successes, which will brighten their day and instill them with confidence about your **Cat Friendly Practice®**. In exceptional circumstances, news coverage has even come about after particularly sincere and uplifting stories. This results in tremendous positive publicity, and simultaneously helps you to market your services to a wider audience. This wider audience can soon grow and enhance your veterinary practice online, and in your local community.

Case studies are also a great opportunity to educate your clients. By highlighting a particular health concern (like lily toxicity in cats), you can spread important information in your success story that will resonate with cat caregivers. These posts can be timed for specific times of year (the “chocolate holidays,” the start of flea season, holiday dangers) to help your clients stay aware of how to best care for their cat, and to keep your practice at the top of their minds.

## **GET PERMISSION**

Yes, you should receive permission from the cat caregiver to share their story, pictures, or a video of their cat on social media or elsewhere. This is an important thing to note and emphasize, as some members of your staff may be appointed to collect signed photo/video release forms, to ensure you’re permitted explicitly to share various types of media.

Most cat caregivers don’t hesitate at the opportunity to share the joy of their cat with the world and online but receiving permission firsthand is definitely a must.

Sample topics for case studies can include:

- Dermatology: Before and after skin cases
- Dental: Before and after dental care with photos
- Surgical Case Examples
- Laser Therapy Cases

By using Facebook with photos and videos to create and communicate compelling stories, you can enhance your marketing efforts, stay on the cutting edge, and attract more clients to your **Cat Friendly Practice®**.

## **APPRECIATE CAT OWNERS**

In a world that’s moving so quickly, who really has the time to say “please” *and* “thank you”? We might think our world is so filled with stimuli, that nobody would hear it if we said, “Thank you”, just a little more often.

It may feel like these tiny, syllable-sized gestures are antiquated or meaningless in our modern-day environment. However, this couldn’t be further from the truth. In fact, those precious two little words might be more important now than ever before. Scarcity solicits demand, right? As **Cat Friendly Practices®**, we might be busier than ever before, but our need to express gratitude is also more prominent than ever.

*Our need to express a heartfelt, “Thank you”, has never been more relevant or imperative, than it is right now.*

Despite what you might have been told, this simple phrase is emblematic of a whole lot more. It can make or break a friendship or even a relationship with one of your clients. In feline

medicine, we are so intent on acquiring new business, that oftentimes we do not designate enough attention to telling our existing clients how much we appreciate them, or thank them for coming in. Now, why would we work so hard to build our **Cat Friendly Practice®**, market effectively, and provide stellar service, only to stop short of giving thanks to our clients?

With a few simple phrases you can help retain your clients, but even more importantly, create an ongoing, genuine bond of solidarity and trust. I recommend that you make saying the following few sentences a habit. You'll thank me later:

*"Thank you for bringing your cat in to see us. Thank you for being a wonderful cat caregiver, and most of all, thank you for choosing to trust our **Cat Friendly Practice®** with your cat's health care needs."*

This type of response to a new or established client may only take seconds to say but can make a world of difference. Of course, it's got to be genuine, even when you're busy and the phone is ringing again. You can't overlook the importance of sincere gratitude as a cornerstone of building any healthy relationship.

The central point here is this: *the effort really matters, because we really matter*. Simply taking time out of each day to thank your clients and letting them know explicitly of your appreciation and their importance can be surprisingly rare.

I used to work closely with a widely respected veterinarian, Dr. Eddie Garcia (no relation, I promise) who would call each and every one of his clients within 72 hours of their initial visit. He would do this with no ulterior motive or hidden reasoning. He would simply call to say, "Thank you for visiting our practice. If there is anything we can do for you, we are only a phone call away." He strongly encouraged both positive and negative feedback, in whatever form it came. He would use this feedback to learn about the wants, needs, and fears of his clients, and thank them for it - even if their visit was sub-par, as well. I can hear you asking, "Wouldn't this level of openness leave him vulnerable to hours of time-consuming critique?" While that's a fair question, the kicker is this:

- *A majority of phone calls were left on an answering machine (well, voicemail nowadays).*
- *People were so excited about the calls that they called him back simply to express their gratitude.*
- *Dr. Garcia boasted a 90% success rate of retaining upset or displeased clients.*

I watched Dr. Eddie Garcia make these types of phone calls every day for over 10 years ([watch him in action](#)). Yes, he really made these calls each and every day, and yes, they really did make a difference.

*Calling both new and existing clients is equally important and can't be emphasized enough.*

Whereas most of the time clients might simply express their grievance or general feedback to a spouse (if anyone at all), Dr. Garcia used their direct feedback to forge a bond, improve his practice, and retain his clients in a single call. You can do the same.

When I used to ask Dr. Garcia what motivated him to go above and beyond to make these phone calls, he had quite a simple explanation: to stay true to his mission. In his mission, he outlined that his veterinary practice "will meet and exceed expectation". These phone calls were

his little way of making sure that he exceeded his client's expectations of what an attentive and caring veterinarian looked like. And it did.

From phone calls to automated "Thank You" emails, there are plenty of ways to effectively implement gratitude into your **Cat Friendly Practice®**. Here is a 3-step-solution to implementing 'Thank You' into your practice today:

### ***3 Steps to Saying Thank You at your Cat Friendly Practice®***

**(1)** Implement a protocol to have your team members print two reports at some point, consistently, each day. These should consist of two parts:

- 1) New client report from the day before.
- 2) Appointment schedule report from the day before.

**(2)** Decide in your practice who the appropriate person is to make the call. I usually recommend that associates call their own clients in order to create a genuine bond. If associates do not have the time to do so, the practice owner or medical director may make the call. I've recently heard the idea of practices delegating this responsibility to a receptionist or technician. The reason they do this is because they've expressed that cat caregivers are more likely to share a negative experience with the receptionist vs. the owner or associate. Choose the person who you feel would be great at taking on this type of task.

**(3)** Begin by calling all new clients and only choosing 3-5 existing clients from the appointment schedule report from the previous day. You don't need to call back every existing client to say thanks but spot-check and call a few.

#### ***\*Optional Recommended Step***

You may also choose to include an automated 'Thank you' email to supplement the phone calls. This email can add a wonderful touch to a follow-up phone call and coincides with my line of thinking:

#### ***You can never be too thankful.***

I hope that these tips will help you implement new and improved techniques for your cat caregiver experience now and into the future.



**About the Author:** Eric Garcia is an IT expert. Digital marketer. Industry thought leader. When it comes to helping veterinary practices streamline their technology and attract and retain clients, Eric Garcia has a proven track record of educating the industry and producing results. Eric is an IT and Digital Marketing consultant working exclusively with veterinary practices. In addition to a long list of satisfied clients, Garcia's work has been recognized throughout the industry. He speaks regularly at conferences all throughout the world. **Facebook:** [facebook.com/EricGarciaFL](https://www.facebook.com/EricGarciaFL) **Instagram:** [@EricGarciaFL](https://www.instagram.com/EricGarciaFL)