

How to Answer, “How Much Is...”?

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Meet Your Consultant



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What you’ll learn:

- How to present treatment plans
- Turn phone shoppers into new clients
- Explain the cost of drugs
- Create perception of value when accepting payments

BONUS: Facilitator’s guide to implement the training

From veterinarians to client service representatives (CSRs), every member of your team talks with clients about money. You need to provide clear, confident answers about your hospital’s fees.

Emotions and experiences prompt clients to buy services and products from your hospital. When clients’ expectations are met, they are satisfied. This is especially important in healthcare. When clients are satisfied with your services and products, they tend to obey instructions from medical personnel, spread positive reviews, and are more loyal.¹

In healthcare, perceived service quality has two factors:

- 1) **Technical quality:** Accuracy of diagnostic and therapeutic processes
- 2) **Functional quality:** Behavior of healthcare providers during the service delivery process

Each employee influences functional quality, from the CSR who greets the client and patient by name upon arrival to the doctor’s bedside manner and ability to explain diagnoses.

To develop perceived service value among clients, teams must go beyond demonstrating excellent technical skills and professionalism. They must have soft skills of empathy, kindness, and hospital reputation in the community.¹

Service excellence means connecting with clients on an emotional level that creates meaningful experiences. Talk “with” rather than “at” clients. Let me share an example. Dr. John’s hospital previously had five-star reviews and passionately loyal clients. During the pandemic with curbside-only service, his team got reviews such as “rude receptionists,” “can’t get an appointment for weeks,” and “is all about the money.” Like many hospitals, half of his client service team is new and were onboarded during curbside-only care.

“They forgot how to talk to clients,” Dr. John told me during our discovery call to identify his team’s training needs. “We are so busy that clients feel they are being processed. My team needs to learn how to reconnect with people.”

Price is a factor. Veterinary care is an out-of-pocket expense for most clients. Some clients have pet insurance to supplement the cost of care. Your team needs to combine service excellence with perceived price. Answer the question, “Is the care worth the cost?” Discuss the consequences of not treating, too (how the pet’s health will be affected, how the dental disease will progress, and the cost of treatment will increase).

Let’s look at scenarios to confidently communicate your fees.

How to present treatment plans

When Amy talks with clients about dental treatments, she starts with the price. Some clients are shocked at the cost of care. Are you making this mistake when discussing fees?

When discussing dental and surgical fees, follow four steps to create perceived value and get more clients to accept medical care:

1) Share the benefits of treatment

Leading the conversation with money kills compliance. The term “estimate” can create feelings that veterinarians are “all about the money.” Instead, say “treatment plan.” Benefits are what sells treatments to clients, explains Roger P. Levin, DDS, a third-generation dentist and CEO of Levin Group in Owings Mills, Maryland.² When consumers buy a product or service, they perceive it will benefit them. Dr. Levin advocates discussing benefits early. When discussing dental treatments, use benefit statements such as:

- Relief from dental pain
- Reduce risk of serious health problems as the dental disease progresses
- Oral health impacts overall health

Dr. Jason Coe, PhD, a professor in the Department of Population Medicine at University of Guelph’s Ontario Veterinary College and a leading expert in veterinary clinical communications, advises to consider clients’ perspectives.² Pet owners want to know:

- What treatment options are available along with the cost?
- What will my pet experience based on the treatment we choose?
- What is the prognosis or outlook?
- If I accept treatment, what will be the outcome for my pet’s health?

2) Explain the treatment plan

Teach clients with visual aids. Psychologists’ research shows most people (65%) are visual learners.³ They understand best when shown an image, model, or graphic that demonstrates the problem or treatment. Use models, websites, dry-erase boards, x-rays, handouts, exam report cards, digital photo frames, and videos as teaching tools.

Show clients the problem. If you diagnose ear mites, have the client look at them through your microscope. When they see the monsters, they will comply with treatment. Take photos of dental problems with a hospital smartphone. Consider repurposing an old phone as the “clinic phone.” Connect the smartphone to your hospital’s WIFI so you may email images and save them in pets’ electronic medical records.



In his YouTube video, Dr. Jan Bellows, Dipl. AVDC, ABVP, of All Pets Dental Services in Weston, Florida, explains how to take dental photos with your smartphone (www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BO51ZMuJaA). Few clients look in the back of pets' mouths, so show them what you see. Smartphones let you adjust exposure, crop, and mark up images. Zoom and crop to enlarge images of painful conditions such as resorptive lesions. Save images in pets' electronic medical records to document the diagnosis and share photos with clients by text or email.



Use jaw models with clear gums. Pet owners don't realize 60% of the tooth surface is below the gumline and can't be seen on physical exam. Use dental models when explaining why you take x-rays to see below the gumline. Order clear canine and feline dental models through veterinary distributors or <https://www.im3vet.com/accessories-and-consumables/dental-models>.

Help clients understand the steps of the procedure. Create digital slideshows to play on exam room computers or digital photo frames. When computers hibernate, slideshows play as your screen saver. Take a photo of each service listed on your treatment plan, including images to illustrate preanesthetic testing, IV catheter, fluids, surgical monitors, taking dental x-rays, nursing recovery care, and more. Your slideshow or photo book will have more than a dozen images, demonstrating every step of the procedure in the order that care will be delivered.

Use collaborative body language. Body language accounts for 55% of communication.⁴ The veterinarian should sit to explain the diagnosis. Sitting tells the client, "You have my full attention. I want you to understand your pet's diagnosis. I'm not rushing off to my next appointment." Sitting has multiple benefits. Besides the physical relief of sitting for a few minutes, you'll enjoy a more engaging conversation because you're on the same eye level and have removed physical barriers between you and the client. Avoid standing if the client is seated because you will physically dominate the client. If the client is seated and a chair or stool isn't available for you to sit, kneel to get on the same level or invite the client to stand next to you to see your visual aids.



Avoid physical barriers between you and the client. Don't stand behind the exam table and talk across it. This posture is confrontational. When explaining treatment plans, medication instructions, and handouts, position yourself shoulder-to-shoulder or L-shaped next to the client. This allows you to read information right-side up and point to key information. This collaborative body language shows you're partners in healthcare decisions. Use a highlighter to mark details that clients will need to remember. Clients also may need to share information with family members who were not present for veterinary appointments.

SAY THIS: *"Let's discuss the treatment plan/solution for your pet's dental disease. I will review the services and fees with you so you may decide."*

3) Share fees

Provide treatment plans on the day of diagnosis. Give clients enough information to decide and schedule the procedure today.

A treatment plan serves four purposes:

1. Gives you legal permission to treat
2. Lists services and products in the treatment
3. Shares expected cost of care (range)
4. States payment policies

Explain services before sharing fees. After explaining your diagnosis and the steps of treatment, share the cost of care. Your treatment plan should list services in the order they will be delivered. For example, preanesthetic testing is listed before anesthesia. Most treatment plans will have a high and low range.

SAY THIS: *“The expected amount for your pet’s dental procedure is a range of \$__ to \$__.
Because 60% of the tooth structure is below the gumline, we will take dental x-rays while your pet is anesthetized. We will text/email/call you if x-rays identify additional oral surgery or care that is not included in this treatment plan. Our hospital accepts cash, checks, and credit cards. We offer payment plans through <third-party vendor>.”*

Don’t wait until the end to mention patient financing. Once you’ve described services and shared photos, state the price and option to finance care. When you’re presenting treatment that will cost more than \$300, mention the availability of financing early in conversations, advises Dr. Levin. If clients assume they can’t afford treatment from the get-go, they will stop listening.

Present monthly payments. When pet owners hear the monthly amount and know they don’t have to come up with all the money upfront, they will listen to your diagnosis and treatment presentation. Consumers finance everything from mattresses to dishwashers. They also can finance veterinary care. If financing isn’t available, 43% of pet owners would decline procedures due to cost.⁵

When a client says, “I can’t afford it,” the first no is not the final no. Acknowledge pet owners’ concerns, and then share financial solutions. Say, *“I understand you’re concerned about the cost of your pet’s dental procedure, which is \$600. We offer ____, a payment plan for approved clients that has six months of deferred interest. Your monthly payment will be \$100. You can apply in less than 5 minutes on your smartphone. Let me show you how.”*

4) Ask for a commitment to treat

Ask clients to move forward with treatment. Dr. Levin advises to be direct. Ask, *“Your pet needs this dental procedure. Do you want to receive the benefits of treatment?”*

To lead the pet owner to book now, offer the veterinarian’s next two procedure days. Book the dental treatment with the same doctor who diagnosed the condition because he or she will be familiar with the case and enjoy production pay. Scheduling with the same doctor also increases clients’ confidence.

If you have computers in exam rooms, doctors or technicians should book procedures now, which elevates the importance of treatment. If you don’t have computers in exam rooms and CSRs will need to schedule procedures, put alerts in electronic medical records, paper charts, or travel sheets so CSRs know to book procedures.

Lead clients with the yes-or-yes technique: *“Dr. <Name> diagnosed <pet name> with Grade 3 dental disease. Let’s schedule your pet’s procedure first, and then I will get you checked out for today’s services. We can perform the dental treatment on Monday or Wednesday. Which fits your schedule?”*

In her decades of experience, Mary L. Berg, BS, RVT, RLATG, VTS (Dentistry), of Beyond the Crown Veterinary Education in Lawrence, Kansas, has found 25% of clients will accept treatment immediately, 60% will take a little time to decide, and 15% will decline care.⁶

Turn phone shoppers into new clients

While your hospital may have an abundance of new clients thanks to “pandemic pets,” don’t turn away new business. The lifetime value of one client with one pet can be \$8,900 or more!

Lifetime client value = Annual average revenue per client x Average client lifespan

Example: \$8,960 = \$1,120 annual average revenue per client x 8 years average client lifespan

Don’t treat price shoppers as a nuisance. They ask for prices because veterinary care is not a frequently purchased service. You know that your favorite tall Café Latte at Starbucks costs \$2.95 because you buy it frequently. When was the last time you bought puppy or kitten shots? People ask prices because they simply don’t know what veterinary care costs. Your job is to educate and engage them.

Potential clients have made 60% of the purchasing decision to do business with you before they contact you, according to *Harvard Business Review*.⁷ Your goal is to provide concise information and lead the potential client to book now.

Follow four steps to welcome new clients:

1) Engage and connect with callers

Share your smile over the phone. Callers form an impression of your hospital within 7 seconds.⁸ When you smile, a warm, friendly tone just *happens*, advises Anna Taylor of Ruby, a virtual receptionist service.⁹ Smiling will make you and your caller feel good. Place a small mirror next to the phone receiver as a reminder to wear your smile before answering calls. Even though callers can’t see you, smiling will positively impact your mood and tone.

You get what you give. A curt greeting of “ABC Veterinary Hospital. Please hold.” will be off-putting. When you deliver a friendly greeting, you’ll get cheerful callers in return.

SAY THIS: *“Welcome to <Your Veterinary Hospital>. This is <name>. How may I help your pet today?”*

Sounding happy can be challenging in today’s overstressed workplace. Before COVID, a CSR answered 600 calls a week.¹⁰ Now call volume has more than doubled, with practices getting 800 calls a day.¹¹ You may feel rushed to get the caller off the line so you can grab the next incoming call. Callers will sense you’re in a hurry. Give callers your full, focused attention. When you concentrate on the current conversation, you will have a concise call and make the caller feel she is the most important person in that moment.

Ask callers’ and pets’ names immediately after the caller’s question. The first step in starting a relationship is to get to know the caller and identify the patient’s medical needs. This technique personalizes the call experience. Callers want a friendly, interactive conversation, not a spiel. When a caller asks, “How much are shots for a new puppy?” Reply, *“I’m happy to share information. May I ask your name and your pet’s / baby’s name? Then I will ask questions about your puppy to determine what it will need.”*

Identify whether the caller is a new or existing client. When you ask caller and pet names upfront, you can quickly search your practice-management software to see if this is an existing client with a new pet or a new client. You will need to provide more information to new clients, including driving directions and setting up the electronic record during the scheduling call. HINT: To look up client records faster, use caller ID or software such as FetchIt, which integrates with your phone system and practice-management software (<https://www.fetchitdata.com>). Fetchit works seamlessly with your practice management software and phone system to pull up a patient’s electronic medical record as soon as the phone rings.

Repeat names three times during the conversation. People love to hear their names, and they love to hear their pets' names even more. Once the caller shares names, immediately use them. This personalized experience starts the relationship, and people choose to do business with those they know, like, and trust.¹² Say, *“Congratulations on your new baby, Susan. Let me ask you questions about Duke so I may share which vaccines and veterinary care your puppy will need.”*

2) Ask questions to determine which medical services the pet will need

Don't slip into a spiel. You risk overquoting or underquoting services. If you just quote vaccine prices, you will miss discussing the exam, intestinal parasite screen, deworming, preventatives, and other services.

Identify needed services through questions. Know your hospital's standards of care for pediatric, adult, and senior pets. Create quick-reference sheets or treatment plans you can quickly access on computers. For example, build treatment plans for 8-, 12-, and 16-week puppy exams. These tools will shorten call times and ensure your team communicates consistent, accurate fees.

Questions to ask callers with puppies:

How old is your puppy?

What breed is your puppy? (This lets you tailor vaccine protocols for dogs that will go to groomers or hunting.)

Where did you adopt <puppy name>? (Animal shelter, breeder, stray, etc.)

Which vaccines has your puppy had, and when were they given? (Helps you identify timing of when next vaccines will be due, so you know when to book the appointment.)

Have you seen any fleas, or has <puppy name> been scratching?

Which flea/tick and heartworm preventatives are you using?

Has your puppy had an intestinal parasite test to check for worms? If yes, what was the result?

Has <puppy name> been spayed/neutered?

Do you have other pets at home?

Do you plan to board <puppy name>, take him/her to dog parks, or go to areas where he/she may interact with other dogs?

Questions to ask callers with kittens:

How old is <kitten name>?

Where did you adopt <kitten name>?

Which vaccines has your kitten had, and when were they given? (Helps you identify timing of when next vaccines will be due, so you know when to book the appointment.)

Has <kitten name> had an intestinal parasite test to check for worms? If yes, what was the result?

Has <kitten name> been tested for feline leukemia and FIV? If yes, what was the result?

Have you seen any fleas, or has <kitten name> been scratching?

Which flea/tick and heartworm preventatives are you using?

Do you have other pets at home?

Has <kitten name> been spayed/neutered?

Will <kitten name> live indoors, or will he/she be allowed to go outside?

Questions to ask callers with adult or senior pets:

How old is <pet name>? (If the dog or cat is a senior, share information on an early detection screen.)

When was your pet's last checkup?

Which vaccines has your pet had, and when were they given? (Helps you identify timing of when next vaccines will be due, so you know when to book the appointment.)

When was your dog's last heartworm-tick screen?

When was your cat's last feline leukemia and FIV test?

Which flea/tick and heartworm preventatives are you using?

Has <pet name> been spayed/neutered?

Does your cat live indoors, or does he/she go outside?

Do you have other pets at home?

3) Explain services before prices

Never lead with the price, which centers the conversation on money. Prospective clients will decide within seconds whether they want to book an appointment.

Present service first, price last. This creates perceived value for your professional fees and tells pet owners which services and products their will pets need so they can make informed decisions. Sharing details of the first visit also lets callers compare apples to apples. They may have called another hospital and need to understand the difference between your price and another practice's fees.

Here is a script for a 12-week-old puppy call:

"Bella will have a nose-to-tail exam to check her growth and development. She will receive puppy exams at 12 and 16 weeks of age. Because Bella is a Yorkie and will go to a groomer, she needs to be vaccinated for distemper/Parvo and Bordetella, which protects her from a respiratory disease called kennel cough. (Explain other vaccines such as Lyme, Leptospirosis and Canine Influenza that are in your protocols). When Bella is 16 weeks old, she will be vaccinated for rabies, which is required by law. Bella will receive an intestinal parasite test to check for worms, including parasites that may be passed from pets to people. We will give Bella medication to deworm her. We will start Bella on monthly flea/tick and heartworm preventatives for ongoing protection. Bella will get a puppy baby gift on her first visit, which includes a free dose of flea/tick and heartworm prevention, a leash, a 3-pound bag of puppy food, handouts on training and raising a healthy puppy, a vaccine record-keeper, a pet food measuring cup, treats for training, and 30 days of free pet insurance. This baby gift is valued at \$100."

Talk up free gifts for new clients such as a complimentary pedicure, free exams for new patients, or a puppy/kitten kit. Assign a retail dollar value to create perceived value.

| Puppy baby gift items | Retail value |
|---|--------------|
| Dose of heartworm prevention | \$ |
| Dose of flea/tick prevention | \$ |
| Slip leash with your clinic name and phone number | \$ |
| Pet food sample or coupons | \$ |
| Hospital magnet | \$ |
| Emergency clinic information | \$ |
| Literature, handouts, booklets | \$ |
| Vaccine record-keeper | \$ |
| Pet food measuring cup and/or can lid cover | \$ |
| Pen with your logo, phone number and website | \$ |
| Toy or treats | \$ |
| Pet insurance, 30-day free trial | \$ |
| TOTAL | \$ |

| Kitten baby gift items | Retail value |
|---|--------------|
| Dose of heartworm prevention | \$ |
| Dose of flea/tick prevention | \$ |
| Slip leash with your clinic name and phone number | \$ |
| Pet food sample | \$ |
| Hospital magnet | \$ |
| Emergency clinic information | \$ |
| Literature, handouts, booklets | \$ |
| Vaccine record-keeper | \$ |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Pet food measuring cup and/or can lid cover | \$ |
| Pen with your logo, phone number and website | \$ |
| Toy or treats | \$ |
| Pet insurance, 30-day free trial | \$ |
| TOTAL | \$ |

4) Ask for the appointment

You will invest 5 to 7 minutes talking to a price shopper who is worth thousands to your hospital. Don't just provide information and hang up. During a mystery shopper call, a CSR asked, "Do you want to make an appointment, or are you still calling around checking prices?" Ask with confidence using the word "when." Use the yes-or-yes technique, offering your next two available new client appointments. This approach is more effective than the yes-or-no choice of "Do you want to make an appointment?" or the negative impression of "We don't have any new client appointments available for three weeks."

SAY THIS: *"When can we meet <pet name>? Our next available new client appointment is <date, time #1> or <date, time #2>. Which fits your schedule?"*

Explain the cost of drugs

With current inflation rates and competition from online pharmacies, more clients are questioning the cost of pet medications. To stay competitive, your hospital needs to:

- 1) Strategically price drugs
- 2) Send refill reminders
- 3) Set price-match guidelines

Matching prices can be tricky. Pet owners may ask you to match Chewy's price of 35% off the first order. A word of caution: This promotion requires pet owners to sign up for autoship subscriptions and has a maximum discount of \$20. A \$98 12 pack of heartworm preventatives with 35% off is savings of \$34.30 but Chewy's discount taps out at \$20. All future shipments will be 5% off (not 35%). Chewy designates which products are eligible for the discount.

Chewy's sales were \$10.1 billion in 2022, which grew 14% (2023 fiscal results will be announced 03/20/24).¹³ The internet pharmacy buys semitruck loads of medications while your hospital buys cartons. If a competitor buys drugs below your wholesale cost, you simply can't price match.

Here are two alternatives:

1) Leverage rebates and rewards

A client shoved her phone with Chewy's website at the client service representative and barked, "Will you price match?" The CSR panicked and wasn't sure how to respond. I was standing behind her doing onsite coaching and training at the hospital. I smiled and told the client, "Let's see how our price compares." I asked the CSR to pull up prices for the dog's heartworm and flea/tick preventatives and apply the \$60 instant rebate. The hospital beat Chewy by \$30. The client smiled and replied, "Wow, I will always buy my pets' medications from your hospital."

If your hospital uses Greenline instant rebates available through several pharmaceutical companies, clients can apply the rebate at checkout at your front desk or in your online store instead of waiting 4 to 6 weeks for redemption. Hospitals that offered Greenline instant rebates increased compliance by 50% among pet owners who previously bought parasiticides.¹⁴

2) Match the offer...exactly

If your price is close, consider whether to match the promotion. In the Chewy scenario, the client will:

- Sign up for auto shipments with your hospital's online store

- The discount maximum is \$20
- Future orders of the same drug are 5% off
- Designate which products are eligible for price-match promotions

Decide on a case-by-case basis because marketers are constantly changing their promotions. Your veterinary distributor can create special promotions to keep your hospital's online pharmacy competitive.

Create perception of value when accepting payments

A client service representative made a mistake at checkout, again and again. That'll be \$329. Your bill is \$502. The total is \$947. She blurted out total after total. Let me show you how to create perceived value when accepting payments. Follow three steps:

1) Stand up to greet clients

If you're seated and the client is standing, he is in the dominate position. Stand when clients approach the counter to communicate that you're ready to help. This body language gets you on the same eye level and shows respect.

2) Summarize services before sharing the total

A client can spend upwards of \$700 for a checkup, including an exam, vaccines, diagnostic tests, and 12 months of preventatives. Do not blurt out, "That'll be \$700." Create perception of value, which defines clients' opinions of your hospital's services and products. If you lead with the total, you will create poor perception of value. Instead, explain services and products delivered first and then finish with the price.

SAY THIS: *"Max received a nose-to-tail exam, vaccines to protect him from Rabies, Parvo, distemper, kennel cough, and Leptospirosis; heartworm/tick and intestinal parasite tests; and 12 months of preventatives. You will receive a rebate of \$XX for this medication. Your total is \$700. Which payment method do you prefer to use?"*

Hear the difference? This client received more than 19 services and products for \$700.

3) Close with appreciation

SAY THIS: *"Thanks for visiting us today, Sherri. We appreciate the opportunity to care for Max. We look forward to seeing you again."* This closing is simple and genuine.

App payments: If you send payment requests through your hospital's app, create perceived value just as you do for in-person checkout.

TEXT/APP THIS: We have refilled <brand> for <pet name>'s heartworm prevention. You will receive a \$XX rebate for purchasing 12 doses. Pay through the app and get a receipt. Park in our curbside pickup spot and message us when you arrive.

You've heard, "People buy from people they like." You'll find that "People pay the people they like." That's why you must show value at checkout. Let's turn "Whoa! It's how much?" into "Wow, is that all?"

Which goals will you implement from this training?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Facilitator's Guide: How to Answer, "How Much Is...?"

Choose a facilitator to lead your team's discussion. Create plans to implement goals you learned in this training program.

1. Which teaching tools will you use when presenting treatment plans? If you will create a new visual aid such as surgical and dental slideshows, assign a team and deadline.

2. How will you respond to price-match challenges from clients?

3. How will you show value for fees during checkout?

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