

What to Say When Clients Challenge You

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Meet Your Consultant



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Learn how to respond:

- When clients turn into bullies and verbally abuse staff
- When clients arrive late for appointments and wreck your schedule
- When clients demand appointments, but your schedule is full
- When clients argue about drug-monitoring tests for medication refills

BONUS: Facilitator’s guide to implement the training

When clients turn into bullies and verbally abuse staff

A client drops the F-bomb. How should you respond? Don’t be bullied by clients who shout expletives. Explain the expected behavior and how it will result in a solution. Isolate the client by taking him to a private area such as an exam room, doctor or manager’s office, or employee break room. Reducing his contact with an audience of other clients may de-escalate the situation and will communicate your desire for immediate resolution. Stand up so you and the angry client are on the same eye level. If you are seated and the client is standing, he is in the dominate position. Walk and talk as you guide the client to a private area for further discussion.

SAY THIS: *“So you may have my complete attention and we can find a solution together, let’s step into an exam room.”*

To correct foul language, state benefits of respectful behavior.

SAY THIS: *“If I hear that language again, I won’t be able to help you and your pet. We need to find a better way to communicate so we may find a solution together.”*

The word “language” is neutral compared to “If you don’t quit cursing,” which may be perceived as confrontational and lead to more negative words. Use “we” to show collaboration rather than “you,” which blames the client. “Solution” communicates you want to resolve the issue. If bad language continues, ask the client to leave or explain you will hang up if it is a phone conversation.

Follow these steps to eject a bully from your hospital:^{1,2}

1. Assess the potential danger of the confrontation. Get support from a manager or veterinarian when a client becomes verbally abusive. The right words instruct the client to immediately correct the behavior.

SAY THIS: *“I understand that you are frustrated. We both need to be calm and work together to resolve this situation.”*

If a client appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs, offer to call a taxi. If the client is with others, ask a sober person to drive the offender home. If the impaired client insists on driving, get a description and/or photo of the car and license plate and call police with that information. You also may have security cameras that record the incident.

2. Explain why you’re asking the client to leave. Abusive behavior will not be tolerated.

SAY THIS:

- *“While you have a right to voice your concerns, you do not have the right to be abusive to our staff.”*
- *“As a manager/veterinarian, it’s my responsibility to protect my team, other clients, and patients so I must ask you to leave the hospital now.”*
- *“If you don’t leave our hospital voluntarily, I will call the police to protect my staff, other clients, and patients.”*

3. Escort the client out of the hospital. Use body language to reinforce your ejection of the client. Walk toward the exit and ask the client to follow you. Keep walking towards the door, even if the client doesn’t initially follow you. Remain at the door. Watch the client drive out of your parking lot. If he sees you immediately leave the door, he may return inside.

4. Don’t put your hands on the client. Touching an irritated person could get a violent reaction.

5. Call the police if necessary. Call the police if the client is threatening physical harm to you or others, breaking a law, or damaging hospital property.³ Don’t be timid. Look the client in the eye and explain, *“Please leave the hospital immediately, or I will call the police.”* You are telling—not requesting—that the client must leave now.

When should you fire a client? There is a difference between a difficult client and an abusive person.² Your staff should not have to fear for their safety or psychological well-being.

Hospital leaders should define reasons to fire clients such as:

- Threatening or aggressive behavior and/or language
- Physical violence
- Discriminatory behavior
- Failure to honor hospital policies
- Refusing to pay for services and/or having outstanding balances
- 3 or more no-shows for appointments and/or procedures

If you decide to end a client relationship, send a “You’re Fired” postal letter by a traceable method to confirm delivery and receipt. A client may easily delete or overlook an email or text.

Sample “You’re Fired” client letter

Dear <client name>:

<Your Veterinary Hospital> takes pride in its compassionate, professional staff. We expect mutually respectful relationships with our clients. You’ve indicated displeasure with either our services or our healthcare team <list specific instance sticking to facts>.



Because of your interactions with our team, <Your Veterinary Hospital> will no longer provide veterinary, boarding, or grooming services for your pets. OR Because we are unable to provide you with satisfactory service, we can no longer retain you as a client.

For your convenience, I have enclosed medical records for <pet name> so you may seek services elsewhere. We are confident you will find another veterinarian who can accommodate your requests.

This letter severs our business relationship. Any future communication to <Your Veterinary Hospital> should be directed to me.

Sincerely,
<signature>
Doctor or manager name

Enclosures: Medical records for <pet name>

When clients arrive late for appointments and wreck your schedule

With current out-of-control appointment demands, you must be the boss of your schedule. When one client runs late, you get multiple consequences:

- 1) Your team looks disorganized.
- 2) Late arrivals ruin your schedule.
- 3) Your medical team feels rushed.

Have a late policy. While clients may occasionally show up late, habitually tardy clients disrespect your time and team. Just as your hospital has a financial policy, have a late policy that holds clients accountable and sets expectations. Add the policy to your new client registration, online patient history forms, and online or app scheduling tools.

Sample late policy:

We ask you to arrive before your scheduled appointment time so your pet may benefit from the full exam time. Client and patient history forms must be completed in advance to help our medical team prepare for your pet's visit. A grace period of ___ minutes will be granted for unforeseen delays that you may encounter while traveling to our hospital. If you arrive more than ___ minutes late, we will consider options of a work-in appointment, day admission appointment, or rescheduling as our schedule permits. We strive to ensure clients and patients are seen in a timely manner and appreciate your on-time arrival. Clients who have three or more late arrivals for appointments cannot schedule future appointments and will only be seen as emergencies or day admission appointments. Additional fees will apply.

Give a gentle warning on the first offense. SAY THIS: *"I understand that you were 15 minutes late for your appointment today. We want you and your pet to benefit from the full exam time with our medical team. To best serve you, please be on time for future appointments. We send confirmations upon booking and reminders two weeks, four days, and two days before your exam. Let me confirm that we have your correct cell number for texts and your email. We appreciate your timeliness so we can give all patients the time they need."*

Put alerts in your practice-management software. Track the number of times that a client is tardy to identify when a one-time occurrence becomes a chronic behavior. I advise having a "three strikes and you're out" policy. Forgive a first offense. You've been unexpectedly delayed in traffic, too. When you see three late arrivals within one year, decide whether to keep or end the client relationship. Allowing the chronic behavior to continue is your fault.

Send a text when a client is 5 minutes late. Clients should follow laws about not texting while driving.
TEXT THIS: We expected to see you at <time> for <pet name>'s appointment. Reply YES and your expected arrival time if you're on the way, or RS to reschedule.

If the client replies, "I'll be there in 5 minutes," don't make promises in your response. Five minutes could end up being 20.

TEXT THIS: Thanks for letting us know. Drive carefully. See you soon.

Once the client walks in the door, look at options based on your schedule in that moment. Never punish on-time clients by letting a late client cut in front of them.

Option 1: See the patient. If most of the exam time remains such as 20 of 30 minutes, alert the technician and veterinarian so they may start the appointment and keep the schedule on track.

Option 2: See another doctor if one is available. SAY THIS: "*Dr. <Name 1> has started the next appointment. Dr. <Name 2> will see you now.*" This option may be a rare choice with current appointment demands.

Option 3: Ask if the client can wait and be seen as a work-in appointment. SAY THIS: "*Dr. <Name> has started the next appointment. We want <pet name> to get the care it needs. We will see <pet name> as soon as the first doctor becomes available, which may be XX or more minutes. Are you able to wait, or do you prefer to reschedule?*"

Option 4: Offer to reschedule. Use the yes-or-yes technique, focusing on what you can do. SAY THIS: "*My next available appointment is <Date, time 1> or <Date, time 2>. Which do you prefer?*"

Option 5: Offer a day admission appointment. You will admit the patient to the hospital for the day. A technician will get vital signs and ask history questions upon intake to prioritize the urgency of the case. The technician will share information about the patient with the doctor after intake. Based on medical urgency, the doctor may be able to see the patient between checkups or after surgery. Some hospitals designate an inpatient doctor who sees urgent care, emergencies, work-ins, workups, and walk-ins.

SAY THIS: "*Although you arrived too late and missed your appointment, we can admit your pet to the hospital. A technician will get your pet's vital signs and ask history questions. A veterinarian will examine your pet during the day, and then contact you about next steps. We will provide a treatment plan and get your approval before delivering care. You may pick up your pet between 4 and 6 p.m. Because we will care for your pet throughout the day, there is a day admission fee of \$___. Shall we admit your pet to the hospital, or do you prefer to reschedule?*"

When clients demand appointments, but your schedule is full

A client explains her pet is sick and must be seen TODAY. The client starts yelling. How can you calm the client and get the patient needed medical care?

6 strategies to de-escalate the caller:

Strategy 1: Use the client's name. People want to be talked "with" not "at." Using names shows respect and that you value the relationship.

As a shortcut to get names, look at caller ID to see if the person's name and/or phone number are listed. Search for the name or phone number in your practice-management software to access the electronic

medical record, which has information to help you during the conversation. If the caller is anonymous or the phone number isn't in your database, ask for caller and pet names.

SAY THIS: *“I’m concerned that your pet is sick. May I ask your name and your pet’s name so I may access the medical record and see how we can help you?”*

The word “concerned” expresses empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others.⁴ Repeating names makes clients feel important and helps them calm down.

Strategy 2: Let explosive clients “release their steam.” A pressure cooker has a steam release valve, which allows steam to escape before you may safely remove the lid. The same is true of upset clients.

Let them talk. Show empathy with statements such as, “<Client name>, I understand you are worried. Please tell me about <pet name>’s symptoms.”

Resist the urge to interrupt. Indicate you are listening with responses such as “OK” and “Thank you for sharing that information.”

Strategy 3: Keep your cool. Take notes about the pet’s symptoms so you may ask follow-up questions and put details in the medical record. Ways to stay calm:

- **Have a slight smile.** If you’re on the phone, smiling will relax you, and your tone of voice will be more friendly. If you’re face-to-face, have a neutral expression to show you want to learn more.
- **Take deep, calming breaths.** Breathe with a slow and steady rhythm. Wait a moment and collect your thoughts rather than responding immediately. When you demonstrate a calm and professional demeanor, the client may be unconsciously compelled to mirror your attitude.⁵
- **Don’t take it personally.**⁶ Criticism of yourself, your hospital, or the care your team provided can be hard to hear. Oftentimes, upset clients’ feelings aren’t about you or your competence. Detach your ego so you may focus on solutions.

Strategy 4: Actively listen and confirm concerns. Use active listening skills to make callers feel heard and understood. Active listening means stopping and digesting words your clients say.⁷ If you’re formulating your rebuttal while clients talk, you are not actively listening. Tips to achieve active listening over the phone:

- Don’t mentally formulate your response while clients are speaking.
- Never interrupt.
- Ask questions for clarification.
- Repeat core concerns to show understanding.

Paraphrase what callers tell you to confirm that you understand. When you hear an important point, repeat it. **SAY THIS:** *“Let me make sure I understand so I may add notes to the medical record. <Pet name> has had diarrhea for two days. He/she has diarrhea in the first bowel movement of the day, and it is the consistency of soft-serve ice cream. Is this correct?”*

Strategy 5: Control the discussion with facts. Facts let you maintain control of the conversation. Let’s say the pet owner is concerned about the cost of care. Use benefit statements and set expectations:

SAY THIS: *“Because your pet has had diarrhea for more than 24 hours, <pet name> needs to see a doctor. Let me explain what you can expect for an urgent care exam. The doctor will perform a comprehensive exam, ask questions about your pet’s symptoms, and explain next steps. We will provide a treatment plan with the medical services and fees so you may decide how you want us to proceed. Our urgent care exam fee is \$ __. We accept cash, checks, debit and*

credit cards, and <third-party financing>. I have an urgent care exam available today at <time 1> or <time 2>. Which do you prefer?"

When the cost of care is unknown, explain the exam fee, which is the starting point of care. Provide treatment plans before delivering care so clients understand services and feel in control of medical and financial decisions. Avoid the term "estimate," which centers the conversation on money.

Strategy 6: Present solutions. Because clients will call each morning with sick patients that need to be seen today, plan for it in your schedule.

3 options to see same-day sick patients:

Option 1) Schedule an urgent care appointment. Pre-block 3 to 4 urgent care slots per doctor per day. In a multi-doctor practice, stagger urgent care slots among veterinarians 30 to 60 minutes to avoid traffic jams in the treatment area for workups. For example, Doctor 1 will have an urgent care slot at 9 a.m. while Doctor 2 has hers at 10 a.m.

Each quarter, review the number of urgent care slots that you pre-block in the schedule. Are the number of urgent care slots perfect, too many, or too few? You may experience seasonal differences. Many hospitals see 10% to 20% increases in sick patient visits during spring and summer months due to injuries and illnesses from outdoor activities.

Vary the number of urgent care slots by weekday. Most hospitals see more sick patients on Mondays because they were closed on Sunday, Fridays because clients took a "wait and see" approach, and Saturdays because most clients are off work and it's a convenient time to seek veterinary care.

SAY THIS: *"I know you are worried about <pet name>. We want to help him/her feel better. I have an urgent care exam available today at <time 1> or <time 2>. Which do you prefer?"*

Option 2) Offer a day admission appointment. Avoid the term "drop-off appointment," which devalues professional services and sounds ridiculous. You would never "drop off" Grandma at a hospital. A technician should get the patient's vital signs and history upon intake. A cat that the client says, "Ain't doin' right," could be experiencing a medical emergency such as urinary obstruction.

Charge a 1- to 12-hour hospitalization fee to cover nursing care in addition to the urgent care exam fee and other services provided. *The Veterinary Fee Reference*, 11th ed., reports an average fee of \$48.94 for hospitalization without an IV and no overnight stay (day hospitalization) for a 25-pound dog, \$49.97 for a 60-pound dog, and \$47.28 for a cat.⁸ For consistency and simplicity, create a flat rate for a day admission appointment such as \$50. Explain the fee and admission process when clients call.

SAY THIS: *"I'm concerned that <pet name> is sick. Although our schedule is full, we can admit your pet to the hospital for the day. For 15 minutes, you will meet with a technician who will ask you questions about your pet's symptoms and get its vital signs. A doctor will examine your pet during the day, and then contact you about next steps. We will provide a treatment plan and get your approval in advance. You may pick up your pet between 4 and 6 p.m. Because we will care for your pet throughout the day, there is a day admission fee of \$__. We can admit your pet at 8:00 or 8:30 a.m. Which do you prefer?"*

Option 3) Offer a work-in appointment. The client will come to your hospital and wait for the pet to be seen. Have the client arrive during times when doctors are seeing checkups, which are shorter and more predictable appointments. The doctor may be able to examine the pet between two checkups, explain which diagnostics or treatments are needed to the client, and have the inpatient technician team begin workups. The client will wait in the lobby while the inpatient team performs diagnostics, and the doctor

continues seeing appointments. Once results are ready, the doctor will review them with the waiting client between other appointments. Charge an urgent care exam for this work-in appointment.

Consult with your veterinarians on the number of day-admission and work-in appointments that they can see each day. For example, veterinarians may decide they can see a maximum of three day-admission and/or work-in patients per doctor per day. Guidelines will help client service representatives understand when patient capacity has been reached. When you reach patient capacity or it's near closing time, confidently refer clients to the emergency clinic you recommend.

SAY THIS: *“I regret that our hospital will close in 30 minutes, which isn’t enough time to diagnose and treat your pet. We trust the doctors at <Emergency Clinic Name>. I will call the emergency clinic now and let them know you are on your way. I also will email them your pet’s medical records. Shall I text you the address of the emergency clinic?”*

When clients argue about drug-monitoring tests for medication refills

A client calls to request a refill on her dog’s arthritis medication. You check the medical record and see a blood test is overdue. He goes on and on about how his dog will be in pain without the drug and yells, “It’s all about the money!”

4 steps to eliminate confrontational conversations:

Step 1: Set drug-monitoring protocols. Have veterinarians identify which medications need monitoring, which tests to perform, and test frequency.

Step 2: Explain testing with the first prescription. To avoid complaints of “No one told me,” set expectations for future testing with written and verbal communication. When the technician explains medication instructions, share the “why” behind testing.

SAY THIS: *“Because this medication treats pain and inflammation, we need to perform a blood test in three weeks and then every six months. This test checks the level of medication in your pet’s body. Test results let us determine the right dose, which is different for every dog. Too little medication means your dog won’t get the full benefits of relief from pain and inflammation. Too much medication could have potential side effects. Routine testing lets us assess correct dosages over the course of treatment. I’m also giving you a client information sheet with more information. What questions may I answer about this medication?”*

The open-ended question of “What questions may I answer?” invites a discussion compared to the yes-or-no response to “Do you have questions?”

Provide a client information sheet about how the drug works, potential side effects, and symptoms to watch. The U.S. Food & Drug Administration offers client information sheets for common NSAIDs at <https://animaldrugsatfda.fda.gov/adafda/views/#/nsaidLabels>. Pharmaceutical and laboratory companies offer client brochures that provide drug info and advise routine testing.

Step 3: Set up diagnostic reminders. Just as you send diagnostic reminders for heartworm/tick and intestinal parasite tests, apply the same strategy to drug monitoring. Let’s say your protocol is to test patients taking NSAIDs every 6 months. Send the first reminder 30 days ahead so the client has ample time to schedule before the next refill is due.

Send texts because they have a 98% open rate and 45% response rate.⁹ Your text should include data fields with the pet’s name and next refill date. Having a deadline will prompt clients to schedule testing



before the last pill is gone. Best of all, you'll stop the frustrating habit of clients who need "emergency refills" the same day.

TEXT THIS: <Pet name> is due for a drug-monitoring test, which is required before the next <drug name> refill on <date>. We will collect a blood sample during a technician appointment. Click here to schedule online, download our app, or call 555-555-5555.

By comparison, emails average 20% open rates and 6% response rates.³ A strong subject line can radically raise open rates. Use a subject line such as "<Pet name> needs a lab test before next refill on <date> | Click to schedule." Include data fields with the pet's name and next refill date just as you did with text reminders. "Click to schedule" is a call to action in the subject line.

EMAIL THIS:

Subject line: <Pet name> needs a lab test before next refill on <date> | Click to schedule
Message: <Pet name> is due for a lab test. Drug monitoring is necessary for <pet name> to continue to safely take <drug name> for arthritis and pain management and is required before the next refill on <date>. During a technician appointment, we will collect a blood sample and run the test. Schedule 3 easy ways:

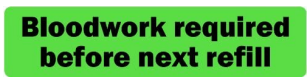
- 1) Click here to book online.
- 2) Download our app at <link> and request an appointment.
- 3) Call 555-555-5555.

We want to provide timely testing and refills to keep <pet name> comfortable.



Because people skim emails, add graphic buttons for "Book Online" or "Download App" for improved response rates. You need obvious instructions for what clients need to do next.

Step 4: Use "Blood work required before next refill" stickers. This bright-colored sticker will prompt clients to act before medication runs out. Place stickers on vials when testing will be due before the next refill. Use the sticker on chronic medications and heartworm preventatives that require routine testing.



The florescent sticker alerts your team as well as clients. When clients pick up medications, your client service team will see the sticker, too. This signals them to forward book technician appointments for drug-monitoring tests.

SAY THIS: *"This is your last refill before a drug-monitoring test will be due on <date>. Let's schedule a technician appointment for the blood sample collection. I have an appointment available <Date, time 1> or <Date, time 2>. Which do you prefer?"*

Lead the client to forward book with the yes-or-yes technique of presenting two choices rather than asking, "Do you want to schedule the test now?"

Diagnostic reminders will improve patient care and pharmacy and laboratory revenue. The largest share of practice revenue comes from wellness services, followed by drug sales and laboratory services, according to the AVMA.¹⁰

Which goals will you implement from this training?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Facilitator's Guide: What to Say When Clients Challenge You

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

1. Which scheduling options will you offer to see same-day sick patients?

2. How will you respond when a client uses foul language?

3. How will you keep your cool when dealing with upset clients?

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