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VOLUME 8
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VETERINARY MEDICINE

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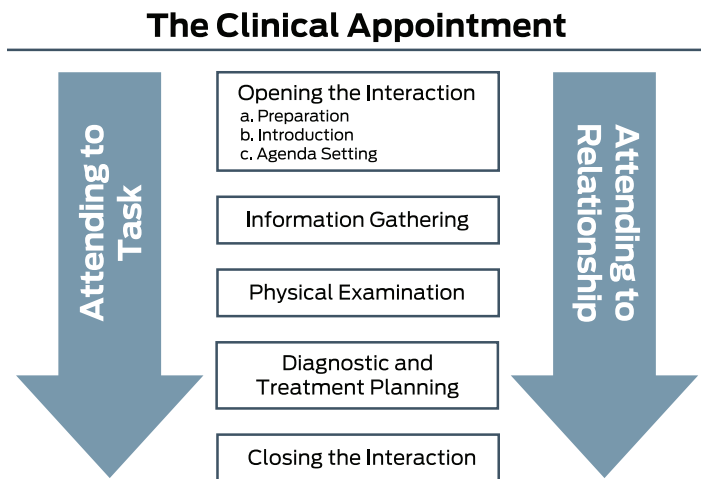
Communication skills for owner adherence

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Begin with the end in mind

As the saying goes, “begin (agenda setting) with the end in mind (adherence).” The opening of the appointment consists of three communication steps: preparation, introduction, and agenda setting (**Figure 1**).¹ The next step in the visit is information gathering. So, before jumping into getting a history, elicit the client’s agenda in every appointment, every time.

Figure 1. Structure of the clinical interaction



Agenda setting is a transformative communication process that potentiates client satisfaction, adherence to recommendations, and appointment efficiency.¹ The agenda allows the pet caregiver, and the veterinary health care team to set mutual expectations for the remainder of the appointment [satisfaction]. It lays the groundwork for the diagnostic, treatment, and care plan by identifying the client’s goals and expectations [adherence]. Employing agenda setting early demonstrates the veterinary team’s interest and investment in meeting the client’s needs [satisfaction and adherence]. Cocreating a mutual agenda with the client provides a framework for the visit and lays out the topics for exploration and discussion [efficiency].

Agenda setting involves more than what brought the client and patient into the hospital. Agenda setting is a six-step, systematic, and structured question-asking process utilizing two communication skills:

Of Note

To enhance the caregiver’s adherence to veterinary recommendations:

- Obtain the client’s agenda upfront, every appointment, every time.
- Follow a structured and methodical agenda-setting process.
- Align with and tailor recommendations to the client’s agenda to overcome barriers to care

open-ended inquiry, to elicit the agenda items, and summary to ensure thoroughness:

1. **Reasons for the visit** - *What brings you and Francis in today?*
2. **Client’s concerns** - *What concerns do you have for Francis?*
3. **Goals and expectations** - *How can we work with you and Francis to meet your needs?*
4. **Summary** - *Let me recap. You noticed increased itching, licking, and redness under his tail and multiple bouts of soft stool after a recent dietary change [reasons]. We need to be gentle as Francis is sensitive to touch in that area [concerns]. You hope that we can figure out what’s going on and make Francis more comfortable. [goals and expectations] [summary].*
5. **Check-in** - *What else can we address for you today?*
6. **Priorities** - *Of all that you shared with me, what is most important to you?*

Use open-ended inquiry (examples are shown in **Box 1**) to draw out why the client scheduled the appointment, their worries, and what they would like to accomplish. Summarize the list to ensure accuracy and check in again for any remaining agenda items to develop a complete inventory.¹ The final step in agenda setting is to identify the client’s priorities to ascertain where to start and how to best spend the appointment time.

Box 1. Build a repertoire of agenda-setting inquiries¹

- What else would you like to discuss with Dr. Hernandez? [reasons]
- What else would you like to focus on during our conversation? [reasons]
- Share with me what worries you about Francis? [concerns]
- What is going on with Francis that concerns you? [concerns]
- How can we address your objectives? [goals]
- Describe what you would like to accomplish today. [goals]
- Tell me what you expect from us today. [expectations]
- How can we best help you and Francis? [expectations]
- Elaborate on what is most important to you. [priorities]
- What is your number one priority for today's visit? [priorities]

Agenda setting is the first step to offer contextualized care, where veterinary professionals tailor the diagnostic and/or treatment plans to the patient and client needs.² An individualized approach overcomes barriers to care, including financial, lifestyle, and schedule concerns, enhancing caregiver adherence.³ When the diagnostic, treatment, and care plan align with the client's reasons for the visit, concerns for their pet and their goals, expectations, and priorities, clients are more likely to adhere to the recommendations. When clients are invited to share what is important to them, feel heard by the veterinary health care team, and their needs are met, they leave the visit satisfied and empowered to enact the plan of care.

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Communicating with pet owners about canine and feline obesity

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Effective client communication about pet obesity presents a unique set of challenges. This sensitive topic can be emotionally charged and is often met with resistance; one study revealed that 53% of veterinarians avoid the topic entirely with their clients.¹ However, addressing the importance of the human-animal bond and tailoring discussions on improving quality of life can keep these conversations positive and more productive.² Utilizing communication strategies that shift the focus to health-related outcomes and quality of life can lessen the emotional burden and support better outcomes.

Strategy #1

Assessing Client Readiness:

When to Address Pet Obesity

Before engaging clients about weight loss, or any major lifestyle change, it can be helpful to consider where an owner might fall on the scale from readiness to resistance to change (e.g., are they interested in making changes at all? Have they made changes and stopped after having challenges?).³ Some owners who are not interested in initiating a weight loss plan may benefit from a discussion that focuses on other health parameters instead such as movement, enrichment, or overall quality of life and well-being. Conversely, other families who are seeking help for their pet's obesity or have already made changes may benefit from a tailored plan and troubleshooting support. This concept of 'meeting families where they are at' can guide realistic goals but also allow pet owners to engage at a level they are comfortable with and can commit to.

Strategy #2

Full Nutritional Assessment:

Knowing Your Audience

Every relationship between a pet and their family is unique. A full nutritional assessment not only includes the diet of a pet, but also the role that food and activity play in the human-animal bond. Especially for families that are apprehensive or resistant to change, starting with questions that focus on quality of life can be helpful such as "What are your favorite activities

Of Note

- Shifting pet obesity conversations from weight loss to health-related outcomes and quality of life allows families to focus on how they can make their pet happier and enjoy their time together more without fear of judgment.
- Tailored plans engage families where they are at and empower them with tools and knowledge needed to set them up for success.
- There are many available resources to help the veterinary team as well as pet owners create plans that best meet their needs efficiently.

with your pet?" and "What makes your pet happy?" Additional tools for performing nutritional assessments can be found in the 2021 AAHA Nutritional and Weight Management Guidelines, which detail assessment of the diet, pet, family, and environment to best guide conversations for each unique pet and family.⁴

Strategy #3

Tailored Plans: Enhancing vs Threatening the Human-Animal Bond

A full nutritional assessment allows for a collaboration with clients to set realistic and achievable goals that focus on improving the pet's health and happiness. For those families ready to engage in change, asking specifically about the relationship between the pet and all members of the household may also uncover "non-negotiable" aspects of the human-animal bond. Example questions such as "What's important to you that we include in the nutritional plan?" or "What's important for me to know that I might not have asked about?" can help develop goals that focus on improved overall health and wellness, not just body weight (which families may or may not want to prioritize). For

Table 1. Examples of how to change the conversation*

Instead of:	Try:
Your cat's obesity is why her hair coat is so matted. She'll groom again when she's thin.	Let's make a plan to help her meet her needs like grooming. Our goal can be how often she grooms and how easy it is for her.
Stop the junk food! You can't lose weight if you eat candy all day...	Let's brainstorm fun but healthy amounts and types of treats to add variety without unbalancing their diet.
Even if it's cold, you can still walk him more. It would be good for both of you!	What activities does your dog like? Here are resources with great ideas to engage your dog's brain and encourage activity.
It's called 'tough love.' I get it isn't easy, but you have to be the alpha and tell your cat no when they beg.	If your cat begs, she might be hungry, but she also might want interaction with you. Let's brainstorm how your cat can get attention in ways that don't include food.

*Modified and expanded from *Purina Institute Handbook of Canine and Feline Clinical Nutrition*, page 87.

example, these goals may include improved mobility, increased mental enrichment or playtime, or changes in feeding behavior such as puzzle toys to make mealtime more fun and engaging. Even for families that are invested in weight loss, shifting the target outcome from “X% body weight loss” to “jumping onto the couch without pain or hesitation,” for example, provides additional motivation to improve quality of life for their pet vs abstract numbers that may be harder for families to connect to tangible outcomes (**Table 1**).

Strategy #4

Supporting Long-Term Success: Empower Families with Essential Resources

Set families up for success by proactively brainstorming potential challenges and empowering them with troubleshooting tools. Eliciting concerns from the family with questions such as “What are you most afraid will change?” or “What issues have you encountered in the past?” can guide which tailored resources or troubleshooting tips to provide to families for when they need them. Many families, for example, struggle with “begging behaviors,” which are often misinterpreted as hunger when it is actually attention or interaction that their pet is seeking. Getting creative with mental and physical enrichment activities⁵ can help shift the focus to improving quality of life while also redirecting undesired behaviors to positively support the human-animal bond.

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Addressing communication challenges with clients

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Pets depend on their guardians for proper nutrition, and providing the right food and amounts is essential for supporting long and healthy lives. Given the implication nutrition has on pet health and well-being, client communication about nutritional management is a professional responsibility for the veterinary health care team (VHCT). Educating pet owners about nutrition, however, often presents challenges. VHCT members frequently report a lack of confidence in addressing nutrition topics, concerns about time constraints, or apprehension about potential controversy.

Building trusting relationships with clients enhances patient care, client satisfaction, and veterinary team success. The bond between the veterinary team and pet owner significantly influences client compliance. Key communication skills to strengthen veterinarian-client-patient relationships include 1) open-ended questions, 2) reflective listening, 3) non-verbal communication, and 4) empathy.¹

Open-ended questions, like “Walk me through the day including everything your pet eats,” gather crucial details efficiently while fostering trust. Nonjudgmental phrases such as “Tell me about,” “Describe for me,” or “What type of treats do they enjoy?” elicit the owner’s perspective and inform nutritional plans. Reflective listening, which involves clarifying responses, reassures clients they are heard and helps redirect focus if needed.

Non-verbal communication, including body language, facial expressions, and tone, is critical, especially during discussions on sensitive topics like nutrition. For example, positive words paired with closed-off gestures (e.g., crossed arms or frowning) may send mixed signals. Regularly checking for client understanding ensures clarity and alignment.

Lastly, showing empathy while focusing on education, rather than judgment of past decisions, builds trust. Using these communication strategies strengthens client relationships, fosters trust, and improves outcomes.

Just as the use of treatment protocols can help deliver the best practice of care, developing a nutrition framework will provide high quality nutrition recommendations that are consistent between team members and become expected at every visit (**Box 1**).

Of Note

- Establishing a nutritional framework for conversations creates a nutrition-focused culture and standardizes patient care.
- Using a collaborative 3-talk model for shared decision making empowers clients to make informed decisions about their pets’ nutrition leading to better outcomes and stronger partnerships.
- Successful communication techniques are transferrable skills to all conversations with clients.

When every member of the team uses a framework to approach conversations about nutritional care of patients at each visit, this helps the process of creating a nutrition-focused culture in the practice as well as proactively creating the expectation that a pet’s nutritional needs will change throughout life stages and health conditions. It establishes the VHCT as the expert in their pet. How the VHCT engages with clients impacts the outcome. Compassionate curiosity during the history provides a key understanding about more than the diet or food intake but also the environment, the client’s goals, motives, and abilities to carry out recommendations.

Benefits of shared decision-making, the approach where clinicians and clients (or patients) partner to discuss goals and options and make care plan decisions together, have been well established in human healthcare. Recent studies have confirmed veterinary clients prefer collaborative decision-making regardless of type of appointment.^{2,3} Elwyn describes an easy 3-talk model to incorporate shared decision-making with clients.⁴ Implementing this communication model while using the core skills can optimize care and reduce communication challenges.

1. Team Talk - Start by using partnership-focused language, such as “we” or “let’s,” to engage the client

Box 1. Toolkit for enhancing nutrition conversations

- Develop your framework for each nutritional conversation
 - Nutritional assessment – are there risks for malnutrition?
 - Recommendation – what to feed (including treats), amounts per day, and frequency
 - Follow up to evaluate and record outcomes – stay connected
- Key communication skills to address difficult nutrition conversations
 - Use the 3-talk model to develop a shared plan with clients
 - Determine “readiness to change” to set the client and pet up for success
- Use your communication skills to address nutrition-related questions
 - Remember, these are transferable skills

in a collaborative conversation about their goals. Use team talk to provide support, present options, and foster a sense of shared decision-making. Always ask for the client’s permission before discussing options to ensure everyone feels comfortable and included.

2. Option Talk - Checking a client’s understanding of their pet’s condition provides valuable opportunities to clarify information, discuss diagnostic and treatment options, and outline the pros and cons. Research in veterinary medicine shows that clients appreciate benefit-focused communication, especially regarding preventive care.⁵ The impact on their pet’s health and life expectancy was deemed the most important feature in deciding to act on treatment recommendations.^{6,7} When discussing topics like a nutritional plan, emphasize the benefits it provides. Include a discussion of costs, present available options, and offer support for decisions made collaboratively. Always offer follow-up if results are unexpected and the client wants to revisit choices.

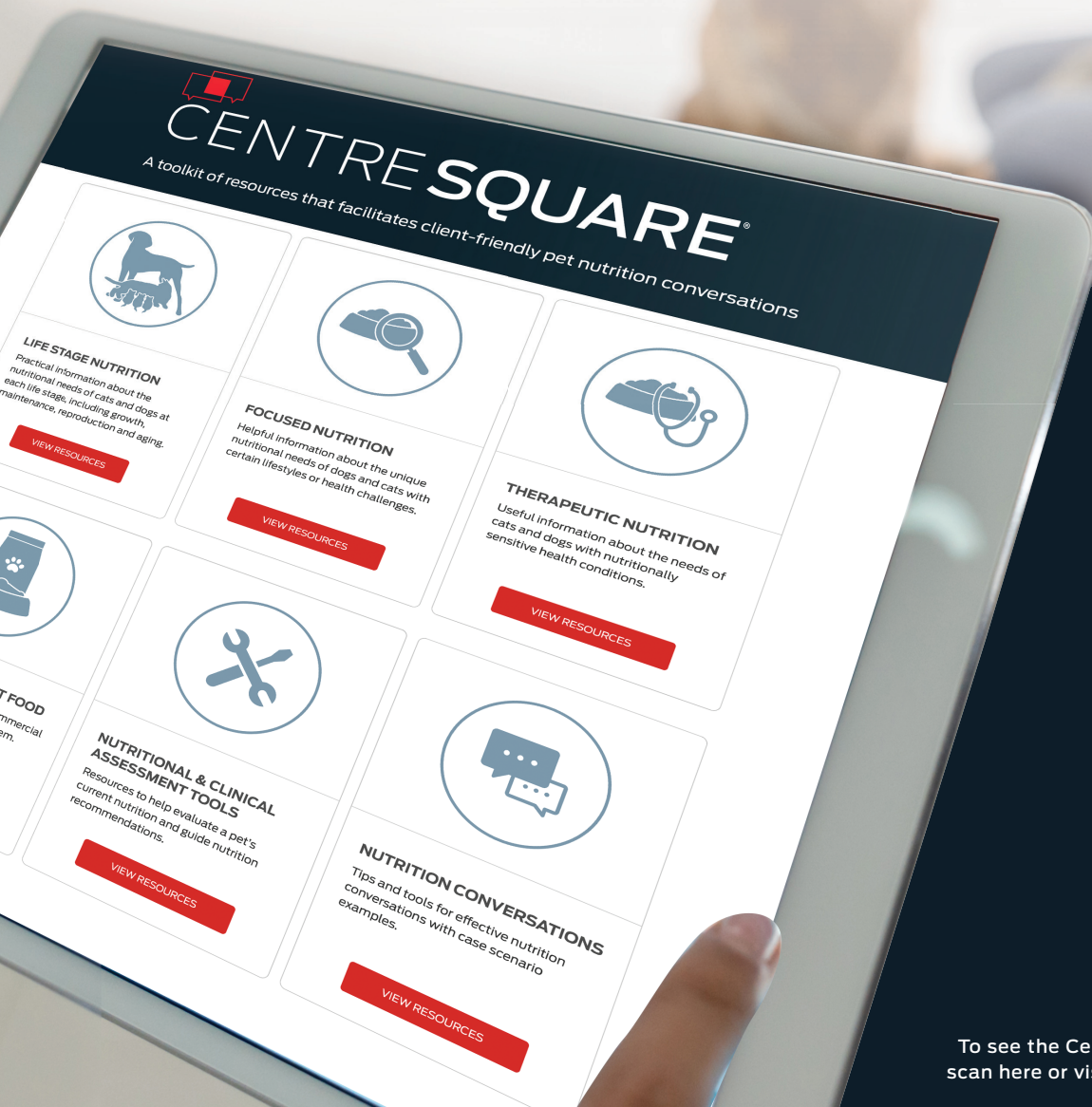
3. Decision Talk - After discussing the options, elicit the client’s preferences and ask what matters most to them in the decision-making process. This approach helps them make informed, preference-based decisions. Support their choices and encourage them to revisit the options as needed, based on their pet’s response.

Effective communication about pet nutrition is essential for improving patient outcomes, building client trust, and fostering collaboration between pet owners and veterinary healthcare teams. By integrating core communication skills, adopting a structured framework for nutrition discussions, and employing shared decision-making models, veterinary professionals can address communication challenges, provide tailored nutritional care, and support pets’ lifelong health. This approach enhances client satisfaction reinforces the veterinary team’s role as trusted experts in pet care.

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