



COMMUNICATION: HOW DOES IT HELP OR HARM US?

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When we decided to study veterinary medicine, a vocational career if ever there was one, we all imagined a professional life interacting with animals, ignoring the fact that behind each of them there is always a client, a client with whom a discipline takes on vital importance, one that we had never heard of at university: communication.

There are many definitions of communication, but the one that seems most appropriate to me, given what it implies, is that it is the "process of transmitting ideas, information, emotions, feelings and attitudes, with the aim of provoking a reaction in the recipient of the message". I would like to highlight the terms "transmitting" (and not just information) and "provoking a reaction" in this definition.

Taking this definition into account, we should bear certain premises in mind in the communication process:

- When we communicate, the message we want to convey is surrounded by an environment and interpretation by the person receiving it, so their perception of it is always subjective.
- The ultimate goal we should seek when we communicate is to ensure that our interlocutor understands what we want to express. It is of little use how we express ourselves if that information, attitude, feeling, emotion, or idea does not reach its final destination and is not understood by our interlocutor in the way we wanted to convey it.
- Forms are very important in communication, since both the content and the container that make up the message to be conveyed, how we express ourselves, and our non-verbal language will condition the message.
- Finally, we must be aware that prejudice is one of the greatest enemies of good communication: preconceived ideas about someone condition communication and we can fall into a self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, with our behaviour and our message, we will cause precisely what we thought might happen to happen. Let us approach communication processes with our customers without already deciding what they will or will not want to do, as we run the risk of making decisions for the customer that they have not yet considered.

Our daily lives are a whirlwind of exchanges of information, emotions, etc. (we communicate) on the one hand with colleagues and on the other with customers, with different profiles, different expectations and different abilities to deal with the situation their pet is experiencing, which means that, on occasions, this daily whirlwind is peppered with situations for which we do not have the solution the client is looking for. Therefore, in order to serve them well, it is very important to be fully aware of what they want and why they are requesting our services. Beyond identifying what they are looking for in each specific case, what condition concerns them and what they are willing/able to deal with, we must be aware that we are operating in an environment that is common to all of them, an environment that various surveys have attempted to analyse in order to provide us with a snapshot of it. The conclusion of these surveys is that their expectations demand more emotional than "clinical" care, as they take the latter for granted.

Pets are increasingly becoming another member of the family, with all that this entails in terms of care, attention to their needs and relationship with the human members of the family. Feelings and emotions are particularly important in this whole process, so we must take them into account when establishing a process of communication with the client who comes to request our services. They are not only looking for a medical solution to their problems, that is a given, they are looking for everything else that sets good service apart.

With these facts in mind, are we aware of why we lose clients?

All clinics lose clients every year, with the figure ranging from 20-35% depending on the centre, and most of them do not stop coming because of the quality of the medical services or the price, but because the level of care they receive does not meet their expectations. One of the most important factors in improving this level of care is establishing a good relationship through effective communication.



Have we ever stopped to think about why we have the customers we have and what are the reasons why we have those customers and not others? The reality is that we decide which customers we want to have, even if we do so unconsciously, and therefore we must bear in mind that it is important to define our target customer precisely and then design our policies and corporate culture in a manner consistent with the type of customer we want to have, in order to appeal to them and meet their expectations.

If we stop to think about what we need to be good professionals, is it enough to have clinical knowledge and the necessary skills to perform certain procedures?

In human medicine, seven basic competencies are described for being a "good doctor", which are perfectly applicable to our profession. Of the seven, only two, on the one hand, scientific and technical knowledge, and on the other, critical thinking and decision-making, are directly related to "clinical knowledge"; Two others focus on the relationship with the client, such as developing communication skills and showing empathy and sensitivity. Finally, the last three are related to our own personal management, such as the ability to work in a team, ethical and professional commitment, and stress management and resilience.

We must master the discipline of communication, because it is not enough to be good professionals, we have to demonstrate it, and to do so, we need the necessary medical knowledge, but also a team culture and mastery of communication skills.

Clients need to have the necessary information to be able to make decisions regarding the clinical process affecting their animal, so it is important that we understand how this client decision-making process works in a profession such as ours, where the emotional environment is particularly important. To this end, it will be very useful to take into account in every situation we have to deal with the 4Ps involved in the decision-making process when considering one treatment option or another for the condition. We must do this by working according to the new paradigm that currently governs the client-veterinarian relationship, which has changed from the veterinarian making the decisions and the client being a mere passive participant to the client now wanting to participate in decision-making alongside the veterinarian. In most cases, we have moved from a paternalistic relationship with our clients to a collaborative relationship, in which we are the ones who know most about veterinary medicine and the client is the one who knows most about the animal they bring to the clinic, and from the collaboration between the two, a work plan must be drawn up, including compliance with prescriptions.

The way to deal with this paradigm shift is through effective communication, for which there are tools that can help us develop our skills and that we can work on to improve it:

- As we mentioned earlier, choosing the right communication model in each case, because just as we do not treat a dog the same as a cat or a rabbit, not all clients are the same. The most common model today is the collaborator, but not all clients have the ability or need to use it, so we must be prepared to use the three different models: the paternalistic, the teacher and the collaborator.
- We must be able to master and put into practice the different channels of communication, since each of us uses the three forms of communication—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—to a different degree. Given that it is difficult to know which one is most useful to our interlocutor, the best strategy is to use a combination of them in order to reach all different profiles.
- It is also very useful to be able to classify our customers according to their degree of introversion/extroversion and sentimentality/rationality, because this will allow us to choose arguments that are more in line with their way of understanding life and achieve a better understanding.

Understanding our client, their needs and being able to adapt to them, applying different communication models, using all channels, giving preference to the one each client prefers and taking into account their more rational/emotional profile, depending on the client and the moment, will help us achieve effective communication that contributes to improving the health of the family member they bring to us for consultation and establishing a relationship of trust with the client.



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