

Five Stars: The Art of Encouraging Your Clients to Leave Positive Reviews (and How to Respond to Negative Comments)

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In this digital world of ours, online reviews play a significant role in generating new business. This fact holds particularly true in the medical field, where a decision to interact with a business (in this case, a veterinary practice) carries significantly more weight than the average transaction. Unlike walking out of a coffee shop with a watery mocha or a burned croissant, a negative experience at a veterinary office can cause more distress than a ruined breakfast. Because the health and welfare of a pet are involved, prospective clients rely more heavily on reviews (mainly platformed by Google, Yelp, and Facebook) when searching for a new veterinary practice than they might when searching for a restaurant, a nail salon, or a fitness center.

The end result is that a veterinary practice's Google rating—a simple average landing somewhere between one to five stars—has an astonishing impact on prospective clients' decision-making. The matter is complicated by the fact that reviews are typically only left by emotional outliers. In most cases, if a client isn't directly encouraged by the practice to leave a review, it takes either a phenomenally positive experience or a terrible one to prompt them to head to Google, Yelp, or Facebook and leave a review on their own. If a clinic relies on these outliers alone to fuel their reviews,

the result is typically a confusing combination of five-star, glowing compliments mixed with harshly worded, single-star complaints.

Take Control of Your Practice's Reviews

It might seem like your practice's ratings and reviews are completely out of your hands, but this couldn't be further from the truth. While you can't control what an individual client rates or writes, you can control two things:

- Going above and beyond to create a positive experience for clients and patients alike
- Encouraging and reminding clients (in a gentle, non-forceful manner) to leave ratings and reviews if they're satisfied with the service they and their animal have received

Before we dive into these two methods of generating positive reviews, it's important to set one thing straight: **No veterinary staff member or practice is perfect. Even the best-run veterinary clinics will receive negative reviews from time to time. It's impossible to make everyone happy, and a perfect five-star rating is not a realistic goal for any practice.** Instead, a healthy goal for reviews has two parts: The first is a commitment to earning positive reviews and encouraging or inspiring clients to leave kind words or ratings in virtual public places; and the second is a commitment to effectively handling and minimizing the impact of an occasional negative review.

Go above and beyond to create a positive clinic experience for clients and patients alike.

The best way to generate positive reviews is to deliver an experience both in and outside the practice that is overwhelmingly supportive and considerate. It is impossible to cure every ailing animal you encounter, but it is entirely possible to handle every patient and client encounter with empathy, expertise, and a professional level of friendliness. Outside of practicing excellent medicine, a few examples of actions that can make clients feel secure in their decision to entrust their animal's care to your practice include:

- **Adhering to basic customer-service principles.** Any staff members who interact with clients—be it at the front desk during check-in, within the exam room, or during follow-up communications via phone or email—should conduct

themselves in a friendly yet professional manner. This includes greeting clients with a smile, offering assistance where appropriate and necessary, and bidding the clients farewell in a manner that matches the reason behind the visit (i.e., “Thanks for coming. Spot seems like s/he is doing great!” for wellness visits or annual check-ups; and “We hope Spot feels better soon. Please contact us if s/he doesn’t improve.” for injury or illness visits).

- **Communicating often, and with empathy.** Outside of wellness visits and minor illnesses or injuries, trips to the veterinarian can be stressful for both clients and patients. Relaying information and follow-up steps in a clear, understandable way is always helpful, but particularly so when a client is nervous or upset. Offering comfort and reassurance (within reason) and making the client feel as though you truly empathize with them and their animal can leave a lasting impression.
- **Keeping in mind that little gestures go a long way.** Simple actions such as calling or emailing a client to check in on their animal a few days after an injury, illness, or surgical appointment will make the client feel as though they and their animal are important to you. A simple question or two--“We’re just calling to see how Spot is feeling. Is s/he doing any better? Did you have any follow-up questions?”—proves to the client that you have their pet’s best interests at heart. Another example of a small gesture that demonstrates care (that many practices already do) is sending a card or email on a pet’s birthday.

Every practice is unique, and if one or more of the recommendations above doesn’t make sense for your practice, don’t worry. At the heart of each of these tips is the same general principle: to treat every client you encounter with kindness and genuine concern. If you make it your practice’s “golden rule” and commit to finding new ways to demonstrate this value, it can only lead you in a positive direction.

Encourage clients to leave ratings and reviews if they’re satisfied with the service they and their animal received at your practice.

Reviewing your practice is not a priority for your clients. Unless you take the time to make a request, it likely won’t happen—unless the client is extremely happy or extremely angry/upset. There’s no shame in politely asking for positive reviews, but it does require tact. Ending a patient visit with, “Hey, if you don’t mind, can you leave us a positive review if you thought today’s appointment went well?” might sit fine with certain clients; but it also might irritate, annoy, or make other clients uncomfortable.

That's why **our recommendation is to provide clients with passive reminders that provide a gentle nudge**. A few examples of such "nudges" include:

- **Putting a sign near the front desk encouraging clients to review the clinic.** Place it in the lobby or on a door clients use to enter and exit the clinic so it's one of the last things they see before they leave, giving the message a better chance to stay top of mind.
- **When sending appointment notes, reminders, or newsletters, include a blurb either in the header or footer of the message asking clients if they've already reviewed the clinic.** You might say, "Are you happy with the care your pet received at ABC Animal Clinic? If you haven't already left us a review, we would really appreciate it."
- **Adding an automated message to your on-hold music so clients hear a short message asking them to leave a positive online review if they are pleased with the service they receive.** This message can be an exact replica of the blurb outlined above.

A bonus recommendation:

At the end of a first-time visit, always ask the client how they found your practice and what made them decide to choose you. The responses will likely be varied ("Our friend Adam brings his two cats here and recommended you" or "We live two minutes away. You're super conveniently located!"). But if they say something like, "We Googled vet clinics in our area and liked you the best," it's okay to inquire further and ask what specifically attracted them to your practice. Was it the DVM bios on the website? The "About Us" page? The Google reviews people left? Every first-time visit is an opportunity to gain valuable insights about how your practice's physical and virtual presence is influencing prospective clients. And while this question doesn't directly generate reviews, it can arm you with information you can use to improve your online presence.

A client left a bad review of the practice. Now what?

On the flip side of a wonderful review is something that all small businesses dread: a bad one. Whether it's an angry, disappointed, judgmental, or simply a one-star review with no explanation, a negative review or rating is a blow to practice morale and overall rating. While every scenario is different, a few general rules do reply to negative comments:

- **Decide whether responding is worth your while.** If the negative review is nothing more than a one- or two-star rating with no accompanying comments or explanations, consider whether posting a response is even necessary. A prospective client who sees one or two one-star reviews with no story to corroborate the rating will likely not be concerned if the majority of other reviews are positive.
- **A negative review that contains a lengthy explanation deserves a response.** If an upset client leaves a review complaining about something specific—like pricing, poor treatment, or long wait times—it is important to respond. If you don't, it can look like you don't care. However, your response does not need to be long or personal. Instead, say, "Thank you for leaving a review. We're sorry to hear that you had a negative experience at ABC Animal Clinic. If you wish to discuss the matter, please don't hesitate to contact us at *insert the practice's generic email address here*."
- **Do not get into a virtual war of words and remember that the internet is forever.** Receiving criticism is rarely easy, especially if you feel it isn't warranted. Bad reviews that mention a staff member by name or make false allegations can be particularly upsetting, and in these scenarios, it's crucial that you keep your cool. No matter how insensitive or rude a negative review is, never deviate from the short and professional response that you use for all such reviews.
- **If a client makes any sort of threat against the practice or an employee, report it immediately to the appropriate authorities.** While online threats are typically just empty words, it's important to take all threats seriously. Even a suggestion of harm that might befall the practice or its employees is cause for alarm and should be reported.

While no one wants to think about a negative review and the potential fallout from receiving one, they're the unfortunate cost of doing business. The tips above provide a good starting point, but reputation management is a vast topic. For additional resources on handling negative comments and general reputation management tools, we recommend consulting the [AVMA's Reputation Management Toolkit](#).