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# 'I wish to register a complaint...'

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**ABSTRACT:** Receiving complaints in a veterinary practice is no fun, and front-line staff can feel uncomfortable bearing the brunt of an angry client's strong emotions. This article looks at the problem of not handling them professionally and makes the case for a positive attitude. It concludes with a practical three-phase approach to dealing with complaints. Dealing with the emotions of the complaining client through understanding, acknowledging and solving the problem, achieves better outcomes for the client and the practice.

While we might have some feelings for the hapless Michael Palin as a pet shop owner facing John Cleese in the immortal Monty Python 'dead parrot' sketch, not surprisingly, nobody likes to deal with complaints. It does not matter whether the criticism is about them or the practice – it's no fun.

In an ideal world, there would be no complaints about the service provided by the practice. This is not an ideal world though and people do complain, especially clients! As one head nurse I spoke to said: "People are not better educated but they are better informed."

They are certainly more litigious. Therefore, in order to limit the negative impact of a complaint, it makes sense to use the opportunity constructively.

Research has shown that:

- most dissatisfied clients do not complain. The average business does not hear from 96 per cent of its unhappy clients.
- for every complaint received, there will be another 26 clients with problems – at least six of which will be serious.
- complaints are not made because people think it's not worth the time and effort, they don't know how or where to complain, or they believe the organisation would be indifferent to them. Mostly, they simply can't be bothered and just take their custom elsewhere.

- non-complainers are the least likely group to buy from the organisation again. A complainer who receives a response is more likely to come back. Between 65 and 90 per cent of non-complainers will never use your practice again and you will never know why.

Better to have complaints than silent dissatisfaction! You need to keep in close touch with your clients' feelings to ensure that they remain clients! So, learning how to receive, respond and turn complaints around is vital.

## Complaints are good!

The chances are that when you think of complaints you think of negative issues. However, think positively. *Looking* positively at complaints is the crucial first step to *dealing* positively with them – see a complaint as a second chance to get it right. When a complainer has received a satisfactory response, he or she will tell five other people and will talk about it positively.

Every point of contact, every 'Moment of Truth', with a client is a chance to impress that person, build the relationship and encourage them to return. A complaint is itself another 'Moment of Truth' and one that can be used very effectively.

## The three-phase approach

However, while these points are fundamental, the following are three

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practical stages that can make the difference between success and failure when handling complaints

## 1. Understanding the problem

Before you can begin to solve your client's problem, you must, of course, be absolutely clear about its nature. Some clients can explain very concisely what is wrong, while others may give a confusing or rambling description. Some people may be so angry or upset that it becomes very difficult to get a clear picture.

Your first task then is to identify exactly what is wrong and why the client is unhappy. Only then will you be in a position to help. Clearly, success comes from good listening and questioning skills coupled with sound experience. The novice may jump to conclusions all too readily.

The best way to show someone that you understand them is to summarise their key points. Summarising gives the client the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings.

## 2. Acknowledging the problem

When we have a problem, to whom do we turn? Our friends.

Now, the client with a complaint has a problem, yet their approach to you or your staff may be so unfriendly, the mere thought of befriending them seems outrageous! However, this is a very effective stage – so simple in theory yet potentially tricky in practice – and it

**“When a complainer has received a satisfactory response, he or she will tell five other people and will talk about it positively”**

can turn even the most inflammatory situation around.

Acknowledging the problem involves showing the client that you recognise there is a problem and that, as a result, they are upset, angry or inconvenienced. We can do this in two ways. We can:

- sympathise with them.

We are sensitive to their plight. We can feel sorry for them that they feel they have been overcharged, that they feel hard done by or that they feel ignored. None of these things may have happened in fact – but that does not mean that they do not have every right to their feelings, even if they are misinformed.

- empathise with them.

We've all been shoppers. We use professional services, such as banks, and sometimes don't get the service that we deserve. We have been through similar situations. It is important to validate a client's feelings.

Take the example of a client who thinks they have been overcharged; despite all

your protestations: “No you haven't.” “Don't shout – calm down.” “Don't get cross.” The client isn't listening – they're still angry. You are not their friend. If you are not a senior person, you probably represent a barrier to their solution, which is talking with a more senior manager or partner who will put it right.

However, if you say: “That must be really annoying. No wonder you feel cross”; or “I'd feel cross if I thought I had been overcharged”, it shows that you are on their (emotional) side. Many practices insist that staff do not ‘admit liability’ – so it is important to differentiate between admitting that a mistake has been made (if it has) and empathising with the clients' emotions.

Whatever complaint someone presents you with in the practice, they may have had to make a special trip to see you. Over the phone, they have had to take time out to call. You can always acknowledge the inconvenience too.

This is the ‘filling in the sandwich’ that makes the difference between someone who is defensive towards complaints and someone who can turn them into positive client care situations.

## 3. Solving the problem

Owning the problem involves accepting responsibility for putting it right and not attempting to pass the buck to someone else. It is the difference between: “Well, I'll have to talk to the person who dealt with you” and “Right, let me see what I can do to sort it out for you”. (An exception might be the death of a pet – such instances should be referred to a veterinary surgeon immediately.)

The key point here is that when clients have a problem they are not interested in anything other than getting their problem solved; and having their difficulties sorted out as quickly, easily and smoothly as possible.

## Summary

You should never make promises you cannot keep; and, of course, every practice should have its own systems and procedures for dealing with client complaints.


Nevertheless, it is important to show clients that you understand, acknowledge and ‘own’ the problem; and that you will, as far as you are able, sort it out for them. 



Photo courtesy of the Orchard Veterinary Group

## Expository Questions

### 1. What did research, reported in the article, say about client complaints?

- Clients like to complain.
- Clients complain most about money.
- 96 per cent of people don't complain.
- People don't like to talk about their problems.

### 2. What is the crucial first step proposed in the article when dealing with client problems?

- Hand the problem on to someone else.
- Take a positive approach.
- Accept responsibility for the problem.
- Refer them to the person that dealt with them originally.

### 3. What is the first stage in the three-phase approach outlined in the article?

- Observe.
- Quote the practice policy in the first instance.
- Question them thoroughly.
- Understand their problem.

### 4. What is the second stage in the three-phase approach outlined in the article?

- Acknowledge the problem.
- Seek advice from the practice manager.
- Solve the problem.
- Apologise profusely.

### 5. What is the final stage in the three-phase approach outlined in the article?

- Find the culprit.
- Make a refund.
- Write a report.
- Solve the problem.

## Answers & Explanations

### Question 1

- No, most people don't like to complain – perhaps 96 per cent.
- This was not mentioned specifically in the article, different practices will have different experiences on price issues.
- Yes. Most dissatisfied clients do not complain – perhaps because the practice doesn't make it easy – so clients take their business elsewhere and you may never find out why.
- No. Experience among practices varies but people do like to talk about poor service more than good service – you just need to get them to talk to you!

### Question 2

- No. Everyone in the practice should have the skills and confidence to handle complaints positively.
- Yes. This is the crucial first step where complaints are viewed as a second chance to get it right.
- No. While it is important from any litigation standpoint not to accept responsibility for the problem immediately, the first step is to think positively about complaints. (Note: By all means apologise appropriately for any inconvenience – then get full details.)
- No. Everyone in the practice should have the skills and confidence to handle complaints positively.

### Question 3

- No. This would be only part of the first phase: question, listen and seek clarification so that you fully understand the nature of the problem and how it has affected them.
- No. Clients will not be interested in your policy – they want to find someone that really understands the problem and how it affects them.
- No. This would be only part of the first phase: question, listen and seek clarification so that you understand fully the nature of the problem and how it has affected them – but this is not an interrogation!

- Yes. Use sympathy and empathy appropriately to understand fully the nature of the problem and how it has affected them.

### Question 4

- Yes. Demonstrate that you are 'on their side' by recognising the effect that the problem has had on them – particularly any emotion. They'll then be ready to hear your solution.
- No. Everyone in the practice should have the skills and confidence to handle complaints positively, albeit that the practice manager may need to sanction particular solutions.
- No. The second phase is to demonstrate that you are 'on their side' by acknowledging the effect that the problem has had on them. They'll then be ready to hear your solution.
- No. While it is important to apologise appropriately – particularly for any inconvenience – the second step is to acknowledge the effect that the problem has had on them – particularly any emotion. They'll then be ready to hear your solution.

### Question 5

- No. Everyone in the practice should have the skills and confidence to handle complaints positively – without blaming others!
- No. While some might want this solution, it will depend on the circumstances and a different outcome might be more appropriate.
- No. While it might be important to record the issues so the practice can improve its service, it is the outcome for the client that should be the priority.
- Yes. Taking ownership to seek a solution is far more positive even if you are not in a position of authority to sanction any particular course of action.