




# Crucial Client Communication Strategies: A Guide for Vet Students





Client communication is a fundamental part of being a veterinarian, as you have probably realized. Your medical knowledge is valuable, but you cannot apply that knowledge until you effectively communicate with clients and get them to understand the need for the tests, procedures, and/or treatments that you are recommending.

Therefore, it's important to take the client communication aspect of vet med just as seriously as you take the medicine side of this profession!



## Strategies for Effective Client Communication

### 1. Focus on Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is everything! Okay, maybe not *everything*...but it plays a huge role in client communication. One commonly-referenced guideline states that 55% of communication is body language, 38% is tone of voice, and 7% is the actual words that are spoken.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, it means that 93% of our communication with others is nonverbal! While it's impossible to accurately quantify nonverbal communication in a particular context, it is true that your body language and tone of voice often play a larger role than the words you are speaking.

When interacting with clients, pay close attention to your nonverbal communication. If you are trying to de-escalate a situation, are you using body language and a tone of voice that are consistent with your intent? If you are trying to convey urgency, do your tone of voice and body language reflect that message? Give conscious thought to your nonverbal communication in order to communicate more effectively.

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<sup>1</sup>Thompson J. 2011. Is Nonverbal Communication Really a Numbers Game? Psychology Today. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-words/201109/is-nonverbal-communication-numbers-game>

## 2. Ask Open-Ended Questions

The rush of a busy vet clinic pushes all of us towards efficiency. We are often hesitant to ask open-ended questions, because we are afraid that the client will talk for “too long.” While some clients may need to be stopped or redirected after providing an extra-long answer, the truth is that open-ended questions are often a more efficient way to gather information than closed-ended questions.

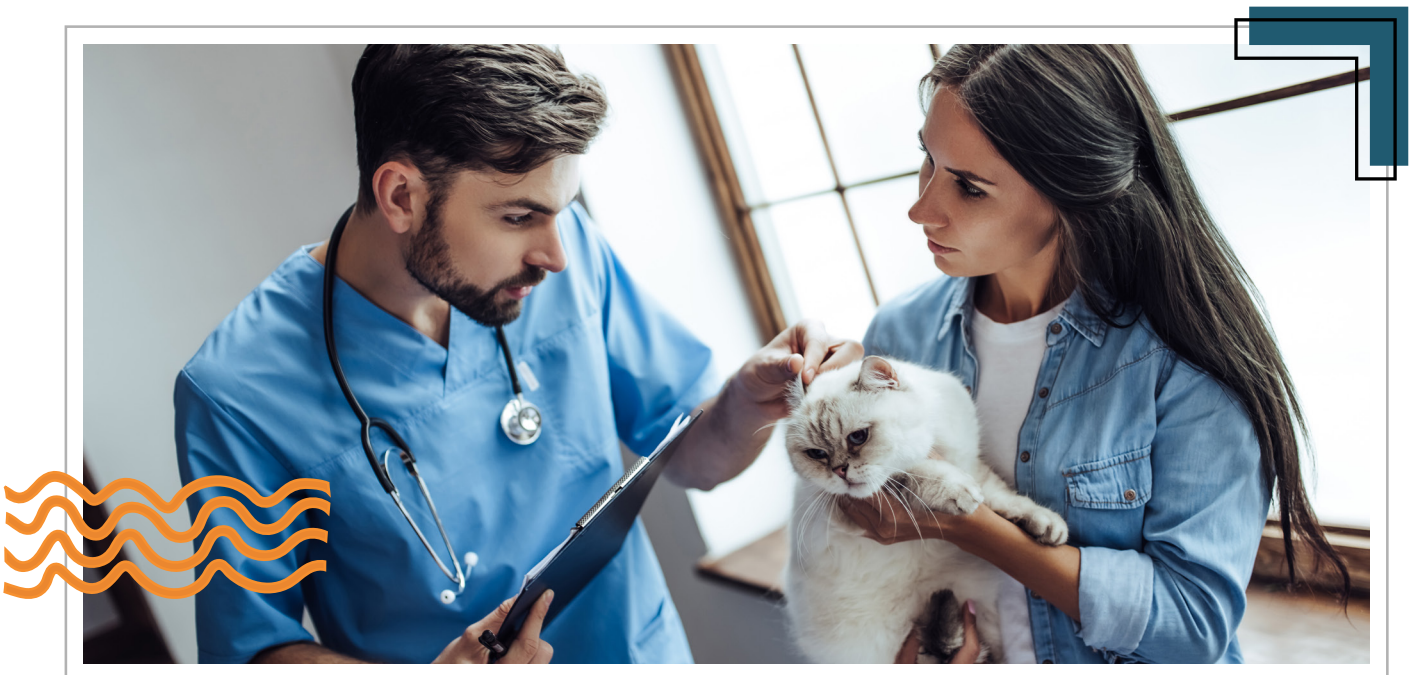
Imagine trying to get the details of a client’s vomiting dog using solely yes or no questions. That would be a very time-consuming process! Even other closed-ended questions may not always elicit the most relevant information. If you ask “when did the vomiting begin?” the client may tell you what day it began but leave out other details (like the fact that it was the day after the dog got into the trash.) With an open-ended question, like “tell me about your dog’s vomiting,” you are far more likely to get relevant background and explanation. Closed-ended questions can be asked for clarification, if needed.

## 3. Be an Active Listener

When clients are speaking, whether it’s to provide a medical history or to express concerns about a proposed treatment, demonstrate active listening. Active listening strategies include:

- Making eye contact
- Nodding as a client makes a point
- Reflecting client statements back to them when they finish speaking

With more veterinary clinics using in-room computers for medical recordkeeping, this can take practice. If you are taking notes as the client speaks, be sure to look up at the client periodically to confirm what the client is saying and ask if you have understood them correctly. You can even tell them that you are recording the history in your notes and read it back to them to ensure that it is accurate. If possible, consider having your vet tech or vet assistant take notes as you talk to the client, so that you can really focus on your client interaction.



*“If you haven’t personally been in that position, tell them that you have had other clients in a similar situation, or acknowledge that it is a difficult situation. A little empathy goes a long way.”*

#### **4. Avoid Jargon**

While you may be eager to show off the lingo you learned during your veterinary education, it’s important to keep in mind that doing so might prevent clients from understanding you. Words like “radiograph” and “CBC” may be meaningful to you, but they won’t mean a thing to clients! Many clients will not stop you to request clarification when you use words they don’t understand; instead, they will just tune out and miss the message that you are delivering.

You can make an exception to this rule if you are interacting with a client who works in human or veterinary medicine. In those cases, feel free to talk to them like a professional! For most clients, however, understand that they do not have the medical training that you do. Explain concepts like you would explain them to your grandmother or a younger sibling.

#### **5. Show Empathy**

In many situations, clients have limitations in the care that they can provide for their pets. They may be limited in money, time, mental energy, or any of a number of other resources.

When these limitations affect the care of their pets, try to show empathy. Put yourself in the client’s shoes. If you’ve ever been in a similar situation, tell them so. If you haven’t personally been in that position, tell them that you have had other clients in a similar situation, or acknowledge that it is a difficult situation. A little empathy goes a long way.





## Case Scenario: The Newly-Diagnosed Diabetic

A 9 YO FS DSH presents to your clinic for increased thirst, increased appetite, and weight loss. You perform a complete blood cell count, serum biochemistry, and urinalysis. Based on these results, you diagnose the cat with diabetes.

You return to the exam room to discuss the diagnosis and treatment options with the client. As you enter the room, you pay careful attention to your nonverbal communication and do the following things to facilitate the conversation:

- Place yourself at the client's eye level, by pulling a stool into the exam room.
- Avoid placing any barriers between you and the client, by sliding the stool to the same side of the exam table that the client is sitting on.

Next, you begin to explain the diagnosis and recommended treatment to the client. In doing so, you make a conscious effort to minimize your use of medical jargon. As you explain diabetes and the premise behind insulin therapy, you frequently check in with the client's understanding. You ask open-ended questions, such as "what questions do you have about this treatment?"

Once the client understands diabetes and insulin administration, she tells you that she is going to have to think about whether or not to pursue treatment. She travels frequently for business and her mother watches the cat while she is gone; she is unsure whether her mother will be able to administer insulin injections. You employ active listening strategies, maintaining eye contact and nodding as she makes her points, to ensure that she feels heard and free to express these concerns.

After the client has finished expressing her hesitations, you ask "Just to make sure I understand correctly, it sounds like the biggest barrier for you is finding a way to ensure that your cat gets injections while you are out of town. Is that right?" The client confirms that you are correct. Next, you express empathy, saying "I can understand that insulin injections might feel like a lot to ask of your mom. I'm not sure if I could ask my mom to do that for my cat! Do you think there might be some other options?" This leads to a discussion of alternatives: perhaps the cat could board while the owner is out of town, or a pet sitter could come to the house to administer injections?



The owner becomes anxious and seems to feel a bit defensive, raising her voice and insisting that she cannot make a decision today. You focus on your nonverbal communication, ensuring that you do not reflect that defensiveness in your own tone and body language. In doing so, you are able to defuse the client's frustration and bring her back to your shared focus of helping your cat.

Ultimately, the client says that she needs to think about her options overnight and agrees to contact you the following day to discuss a plan for the cat.

As you can see in this case study, all these communication skills can be employed together to tactfully manage client relations.

If you were to poll a large room of veterinarians, many of them would tell you that client communication is one of the most challenging aspects of the job. Ultimately, however, it is also one of the most important aspects of the job.

Take your client communication skills just as seriously as you take your medical skills, in order to ensure that your knowledge and skills can benefit as many pets as possible!



### About the Author

Cathy Barnette is a freelance veterinary writer and contributor to Edcetera. She is a graduate of the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine and spent 15 years working in small animal general practice before transitioning to a career in writing. Cathy is passionate about veterinary medicine and education; she enjoys working to provide valuable information to veterinarians, veterinary teams, and pet owners.