



# A New Reminder Program

Available to Veterinary Practices that  
Re-engages Inactive Clients and  
Delivers the Benefits of Preventive Care



**We know how difficult it can be for cat owners and owners of senior pets to fully understand the importance of annual checkups, so it was rewarding to see that this program yielded outstanding results in bringing those very patients back to practices.**



*An American Animal Hospital Association-American Veterinary Medical Association White Paper*

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## Available to Veterinary Practices that Re-engages Inactive Clients and Delivers the Benefits of Preventive Care

**“PET OWNER CLIENTS** don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”<sup>1</sup> This powerful statement of patient advocacy for which our profession is well known is one of the cornerstones of a successful veterinary practice. It is also the basis of an inactive client re-engagement reminder program developed by Partners for Healthy Pets (PHP) and shown to be highly effective in bringing lapsed clients back to their veterinary practices.

Unfortunately, inactive clients are becoming increasingly common in companion animal practice. A recent review of practice databases indicated that the number of inactive clients (>18 months since their last visit) increased from 46% of canine patients and 51% of feline patients in 2012 to 53.4% of canines and 58.6% of felines in 2015.<sup>2</sup>

In 2011, the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study (VCUS) identified several reasons why this is the case.<sup>3</sup> First, the internet is increasingly becoming the default source of information on pet healthcare in place of a veterinarian’s examination. Second, there is a poor understanding by clients of the importance and value of regular exams, the foundation of preventive healthcare. Instead, many pet owners rely on veterinarians for routine vaccinations and transaction-based acute care but little else. Lastly, cat owners often avoid professional veterinary care because of the stress that occurs when their pets aggressively resist transportation and clinical exams.

The VCUS interviews with companion animal veterinarians indicated that most are unaware of the number of inactive clients they have.<sup>3</sup> Although many veterinarians send clients appointment reminders (many send more than one), there is often minimal follow-up to ensure compliance.

In-depth surveys and interviews conducted by AAHA have determined that an emphasis on client relationships, including client communication, is the single most important factor differentiating healthy, growing veterinary practices.<sup>4</sup> These data confirm that a caring veterinarian-client-patient relationship (“knowing that you care,” or what AAHA calls “client centrality”) is more critical to practice growth than technical expertise. Stated another way, technical competence without explicit empathy for the patient will always represent a suboptimal practice model.

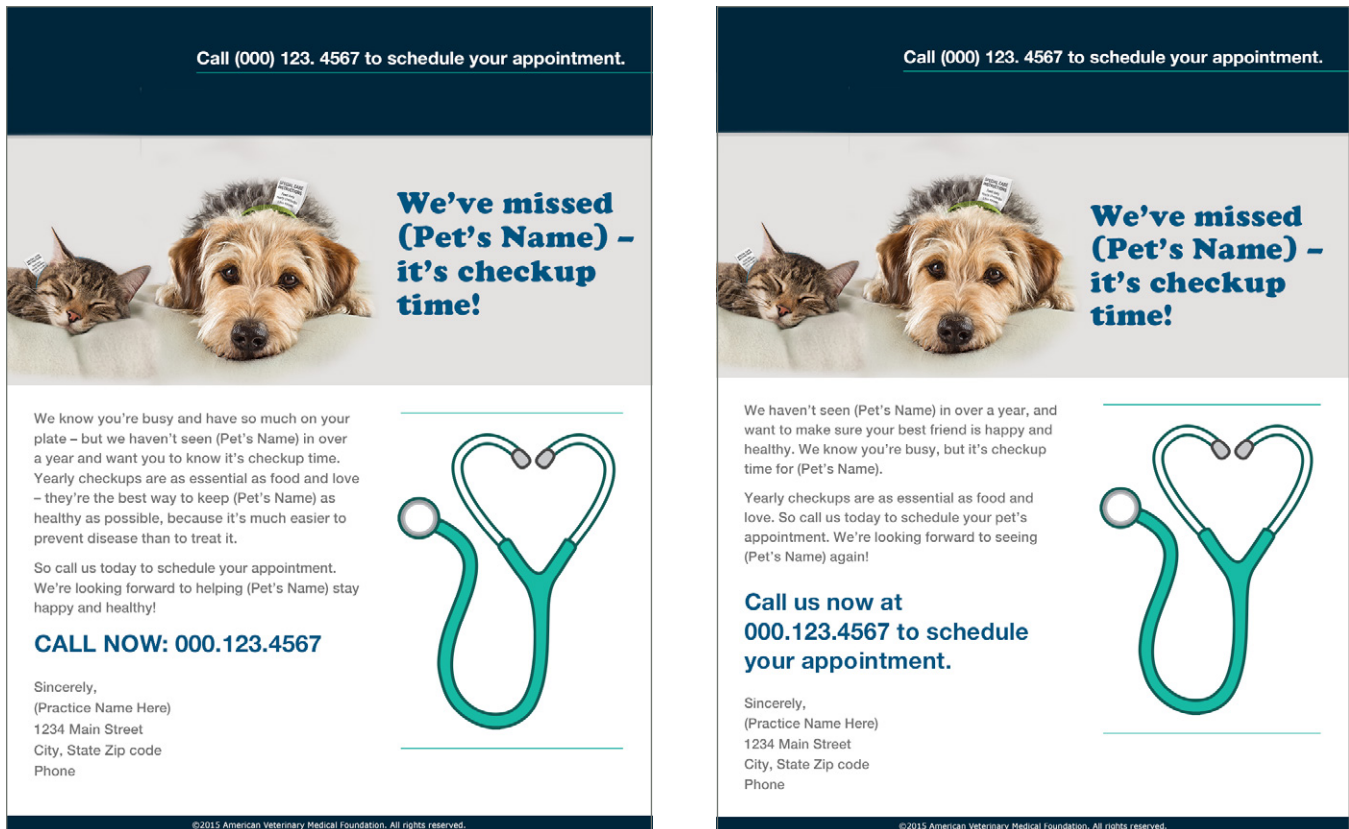
To help reverse these downward trends and reduce the number of lapsed clients, PHP partnered with Vetstreet, a leading provider of integrated veterinary marketing solutions. During 2015–2016, Vetstreet enrolled 1,612 practices in PHP’s inactive client re-engagement program. Utilizing the PHP program materials, those practices generated an average of 128 patient visits from formerly inactive clients within 180

days of implementation, an impressive response from a previously disengaged client population.

It should be noted the materials for this program are now available at no cost at [partnersforhealthypets.org](http://partnersforhealthypets.org) and have been designed so they can be utilized in a variety of practice management software systems or by general-use email servers.

### Where Most Reminder Programs Fall Short

Client reminder programs are a standard feature of veterinary practice, as are patient reminder programs in human medicine. Most traditional veterinary reminder programs focus on appointment reminders and overdue procedure alerts for specific services, such as vaccinations, heartworm checks, and dental prophylaxis. These messages are typically matter-of-fact and frequently impersonal. In some cases, they may subtly admonish the client for not adhering to recommended procedures or service schedules. This approach does little to enhance the relationship between the practice and its clients. To some clients, such reminders may be considered a nuisance, insensitive, or commercialistic. In other words, the *content* of most reminder systems leaves much to be desired and does little to motivate a timely response.



**FIGURE 1.** Partners for Healthy Pets inactive client re-engagement reminders focus on the wellbeing of patients as the practice's primary objective and consist of empathetic messages that are distinct from service-specific reminder messages. The messages shown here equate regular checkups with food and love as the basis for a long and active relationship between the pets and their owners.

Not focusing on *client status* is another failing of many reminder systems. Most programs focus on *active* clients who have visited the practice within the previous 12 months, not *inactive* clients who can help drive growth if they return to the practice for the care their pets need. As a result, conventional, service-specific reminder programs fail to re-engage and restore clients to active status, in effect creating a

self-imposed constraint on practice growth. Importantly, when active clients fail to respond to service-specific reminders, they may not receive an alternate type of follow-up reminder from the practice. In such cases, there is a risk that these clients will become inactive. Experts have noted that the longer a client remains inactive, the less important preventive care becomes to that individual.<sup>5</sup>



## What Makes the PHP Inactive Client Reminder Program Different?

There are two main features that set apart the PHP inactive client re-engagement reminder program from other, typical reminder programs. The first is the criteria upon which patients are targeted for the communication. The PHP program is based on the client's visitation history, not a timetable for a specific service. The program asks practices to identify pet owners who have been inactive for a specific period. For example, practices could target those pet owners who have been absent from the practice for 14 months or more.

The second key difference is the message itself. A service-specific reminder (e.g., for heartworm testing) is not the most persuasive message because it does not focus primarily on, or overlooks altogether, the relationship between the pet, the owner, and the veterinary practice. Instead of service-specific reminders, the PHP reminder program consists of an empathetic message that emphasizes three compelling points:

- Recognition that pet owners want to provide great care for their pets, but they often have busy lives, which makes it difficult to bring their pets in for regular exams.
- Sincere concern from the practice for their pets' health by

emphasizing the importance of regular checkups.

- A pet's annual exam is as important as food and love.

Simply stated, the PHP messaging focuses on the bond between the pets and their owners. By implication, the PHP reminders convey that the practice's primary motivation is not on delivery of specific services at specified intervals, but on the wellbeing of its patients. This distinction is subtle, but it expresses an underlying characteristic of successful practices—concern for the patient and a commitment to the relationship between the pet and the owner, which ultimately reinforces the veterinarian-client-pet relationship that forms the basis of healthy practices.

The PHP inactive client reminder program messaging is, in fact, consistent with the culture in most veterinary practices. Practice teams are generally empathetic and concerned that patients who have missed their regular exams are not getting essential care. The empathy for which the veterinary medical profession is known is not a marketing ploy. Rather, it goes to the core of the veterinarian's oath and the philosophy that prevails in most practices—namely, a desire to deliver the optimal care that patients need at the right time. The PHP reminder messages are designed

**TABLE 1. Inactive client response during the first 180 days in practices that implemented the Partners for Healthy Pets inactive client reminder program.**

Practice Size	No. of Practices	No. of Patients Targeted	No. of Patients Visiting	Visit Rate	Total no. of Visits	Avg. Visits per Practice	Total Additional Revenue Generated	Avg. Revenue per Visit	Avg. Additional Revenue Generated per Practice
Large	342	562,646	49,569	8.8%	82,141	240	\$13,747,766	\$167.37	\$40,198
Medium	638	607,051	51,316	8.5%	84,057	132	\$13,275,437	\$157.93	\$20,198
Small	632	326,918	25,691	7.9%	40,797	65	\$6,141,287	\$150.53	\$9,717
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,612</b>	1,496,615	126,576	<b>8.5%</b>	206,995	<b>128</b>	\$33,164,490	\$160.22	<b>\$20,574</b>

Large practices: \$2M and above in annual revenue, medium practices: \$1M–\$2M, small practices: less than \$1M

to support regular preventive health-care as the basis for the highest level of service and the foundation of a practice's relationships with its patients and clients.

## Proven Impact of Empathetic Reminder Messages

### SIX-MONTH RESPONSE

During 2015–2016, 1,612 practices enrolled in PHP's inactive client re-engagement program with Vetstreet. The data results convincingly demonstrated the program's ability to re-engage inactive clients. Within 180 days of sending a reminder message, practices that used the PHP program:

- Had an overall 8.5% inactive-client response rate (i.e., the percentage of clients who responded to the email and brought their pets in for an appointment), which is

considered high by overall industry standards.

- Reactivated an average of 128 lapsed client visits per practice.
- Generated an average of \$20,574 revenue per practice from the targeted population of previously inactive clients.

Most importantly, these quantitative outcomes confirm that a sizeable population (n=126,576) of previously inactive patients were reconnected to their practices and began receiving essential services needed for optimum health and wellbeing.

The 180-day response to the inactive client re-engagement reminder program in small, medium, and large practices is shown in Table 1. Large practices had slightly higher visitation rates and average revenue per



**The study showed overall outstanding results and impressive responses from cat owners, owners of senior pets, and long-term inactive owners.**

visit compared to those of medium and small practices. However, all practice sizes realized sizeable boosts in preventive healthcare services by previously inactive clients. Because implementing the PHP reminder program is cost free or nearly so, the increased number of client visits represents an undiluted contribution to practice income.

#### **RESPONSE BY OWNERS OF SENIOR PETS**

Owners of older pets are relatively less likely to take their dogs or cats to a veterinarian for regular healthcare exams.<sup>3</sup> This is a concern because senior dogs and cats are the members of the pet population at greatest risk of developing chronic and degenerative diseases that result in a declining quality of life or in pet relinquishment. Early

intervention in this higher-risk patient population can mitigate the onset and severity of age-associated disease conditions, something that many senior pet owners may not appreciate.

Thus, a particularly encouraging result of the PHP client reminder rollout study was a relatively strong response by owners of senior dogs and cats. For example, cats 13-14 years old had the highest 90-day response rate (10%) of any feline age group, and dogs 10-11 years old had the highest 90-day response rate (8%) of any canine age group. 45% of patients in the rollout study were dogs and cats  $\geq 7$  years old. These data confirmed that senior pets represent a sizeable population of inactive patients who should certainly be targeted for re-engagement with the practice.



### CAT OWNER RESPONSE

Cat owners are less likely than dog owners to present their animals for professional veterinary care.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the animal's resistance to transportation and examination, many owners mistakenly believe that indoor cats do not need regular checkups.<sup>3</sup> Other prevalent attitudes are that cats are independent, can fend for themselves, and are less likely to need attention to their welfare.<sup>7</sup> It was noteworthy that the reminder program's 90-day response rate was slightly higher for feline patients (n=535,796) than for canine patients (n=960,819), 7.2% versus 6.2%, respectively. When the reminder notification was accompanied by a discount offer, the 90-day response rate increased to 7.7% for cats versus 6.1% for dogs. This suggests that cat owner clients are receptive to empathetic, feline-specific reminder messages and might be even more responsive than dog owners after a lengthy absentee period.

### RESPONSE IN LONG-TERM INACTIVE CLIENTS

Veterinarians should not be deterred from sending reminder messages based on the length of time a client has been inactive, nor should they assume that clients who have been absent for several years will not respond to the practice's outreach. For example, while some of the patients who were inactive for

**TABLE 2. Client reminder program inactive patient responses within first two months of enrollment by length of inactive period.**

Months Since Last Visit	Percentage of Total Responding Patients
14–18 months	41.2%
19–24 months	20.2%
More than 24 months	20.8%
More than 36 months	14.3%
Unknown*	3.5%
Total	100.0%

\*These veterinary practices changed software systems during the evaluation, so the number of months elapsed could not be determined.

14–18 months might have returned without the PHP reminder program, the number of patients who came in for exams after an extended absence was nevertheless impressive. As shown in Table 2, 35% of patients who re-engaged with practices had been absent for more than two years, including many patients who were absent for more than three years.

### Utilizing Inactive Client Reminder Messages in Your Practice

The professionally produced resources utilized in the PHP inactive client reminder program are available to veterinary practices at no cost on the PHP website, [partnersforhealthypets.org](http://partnersforhealthypets.org). Go to the PHP website's "Resources

**How to Use the PHP Reminder Program Immediately**

- Go to the PHP website ([partnersforhealthypets.org](http://partnersforhealthypets.org)) and click on the “Resources Toolbox” link. Select “Inactive Client Program.”
- Review the instructions and make choices suitable for your practice.
- Provide reminder message materials to your practice software vendor, or send the email reminders from your practice’s general email platform.
- Begin welcoming back previously lapsed clients into your practice again!

Toolbox” link to find complete program details and access to the free reminder message resources. Then, follow the instructions for implementing an inactive client reminder program using PHP’s illustrated email messages.

Veterinarians and practice managers should review the various messaging options (e.g., with a discount offer, personalized messages with the patient’s name, canine- and feline-specific messages) and decide which are most appropriate for their practices. Reminder messages can either be embedded in emails or sent as email attachments to inactive clients.

**Summary**

Veterinary practice teams want to deliver the highest quality of care to patients. To ensure pets receive the preventive healthcare they need when

they need it, we encourage you to engage with *all* of your clients, including those with absentee pets, and show them that you care. The end result is a win-win for all—healthier patients and a healthier practice.

Take advantage of the PHP inactive client re-engagement reminder resources. You will find the program straightforward and well worth the effort. Once your program is up and running, you can begin to enjoy the renewed relationships between your practice team and the previously “missing” clients who bring their pets in for exams and services. By re-engaging inactive clients, not on the basis of specific services but to provide comprehensive preventive healthcare, your practice is also implementing the model that our profession now considers to be the key to long-term veterinarian–client–pet relationships and practice growth.<sup>8</sup>

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