



# The Opportunity

Pet owners don't always hear what we think we tell them (and how to fix that)



**This study has confirmed that veterinary practices have a previously unrecognized opportunity to better communicate not only what is being done in a preventive healthcare exam but how the exam benefits the pet and, by extension, the owner.**



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

# The Opportunity

## Pet owners don't always hear what we think we tell them (and how to fix that)

**WHEN THEY PRESENT** their dog or cat to a veterinary practice for an annual exam, do pet owners truly understand what procedures are being performed and their importance? A recent study conducted by Partners for Healthy Pets confirms that in many cases dog and cat owners fail to recognize what actually happens during a physical exam for their pets and the importance of those services performed. Understandably, when these potential communication gaps exist at the annual checkup, clients are more likely to underutilize necessary preventive care veterinary services. The study results further indicate that veterinary practices have a previously unrecognized opportunity to better communicate not only what is being done in a preventive healthcare exam but how the exam benefits the pet and, by extension, the pet owner.

### **A solution from Partners for Healthy Pets**

Partners for Healthy Pets (PHP) is led by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and is a collaborative alliance of over 100 veterinary associations, colleges of veterinary medicine and animal health companies committed to a vision of overall improved animal health. PHP has developed an elegant survey tool designed to help veterinary practices identify communication gaps that exist between their healthcare teams and clients in the exam setting. Known as *The Opportunity*, the survey is a free resource available on the PHP website (see the Resources Toolbox at [www.partnersforhealthypets.org](http://www.partnersforhealthypets.org)). *The Opportunity* is an exclusive, online survey that enables a veterinary practice to identify the consistency of the practice team's messages and recommendations and what the practice's clients are hearing or understanding. After the practice staff and

individual clients have both completed the survey, real-time results are continually tabulated and available for the practice's review. Where gaps exist between what is said and heard, targeted corrective action can be taken. This is usually in the form of focused communication training for the staff, designed to improve client understanding and satisfaction.

The gaps uncovered by *The Opportunity* are sometimes surprising, revealing significant disconnects between the viewpoints

of the practice staff and their clients. For example, most companion animal practices consider pain assessment to be a standard and very important part of any healthcare visit, something that can directly contribute to the pet's quality of life. The PHP study of *The Opportunity* responses found that, compared to staff survey responses, significantly fewer clients were aware that a pain assessment was part of the exam or that pain assessment is an important component of preventive healthcare. At their pets' most recent exam, fewer than half of dog owners



**A recent study conducted by Partners for Healthy Pets confirms that in many cases dog and cat owners fail to recognize what actually happens during a physical exam for their pets and the importance of those services performed.**

and less than a third of cat owners believed that a pain assessment had been performed. That result contrasted sharply with staff responses. The staff surveys indicated that the great majority of preventive healthcare visits included completion or discussion of a pain assessment by the veterinary team. Clearly, a communication gap exists in the survey population with regard to pain assessment, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the individual practice.

### Study methods

The PHP study evaluated data compiled from *The Opportunity* respondents from April, 2012 to June, 2017, a five-year span. Practices that utilized *The Opportunity* invited their healthcare teams to take the online survey, and also sent survey invitations to their clients whose pets had just received a preventive healthcare physical exam and checkup. Survey participants were not identified by name, so all responses were anonymous and confidential. Practice managers and veterinarians could access their passworded *Opportunity* accounts to view results at any time point and evaluate trends specific for their practices.

The PHP study compiled *The Opportunity* responses from 1,193 staff surveys and 1,360 pet owner surveys (the latter were completed by 833

dog owners and 527 cat owners). This large and geographically diverse survey population contributed to the statistical power of the study results. The PHP study evaluated two outcomes as perceived by practice staff and pet owners: which services were performed during preventive healthcare visits at the participating practices, and the perceived importance of those services.

Study administrators evaluated 10 veterinary service categories for dog owners and 11 categories for cat owners. Pet owners who participated in *The Opportunity* survey were asked two questions:

- “At your dog’s (or cat’s) most recent routine checkup, were the following services discussed with you or provided as part of the visit (yes or no/I don’t remember)?”
- “How important is it for a routine checkup or preventive care visit to include the following services (responses were calibrated on a seven-point scale from not important at all to extremely important)?”

If survey respondents were veterinary staff, the first question was modified to state, “During a preventive healthcare visit to your practice, are the following services typically performed at every exam regardless of the pet’s age (yes or no)?”

**TABLE 1. Communication gaps >10 points related to specific services performed<sup>†</sup>**

<b>I. Services performed for <i>canine</i> patients</b>		
<i>Table shows affirmative response rates to the following survey questions:</i>		
<b>Practices (n = 1,110 staff surveys):</b> During a canine preventive healthcare visit, are the following services typically performed at every exam (yes or no)?		
<b>Clients (n = 833):</b> At your dog's most recent checkup or preventive care visit, were the following services discussed with you or performed (yes or no/do not remember)?		
<b>Canine services</b>	<b>Practices</b>	<b>Clients</b>
Pain assessment	73.0%	45.0%
Dental exam	95.0%	77.2%
Weight & nutritional assessment	89.5%	77.0%
<b>II. Services performed for <i>feline</i> patients</b>		
<i>Table shows positive response rates to the following survey questions:</i>		
<b>Practices (n = 1,164 staff surveys):</b> During a feline preventive healthcare visit, are the following services typically performed at every exam (yes or no)?		
<b>Clients (n = 527):</b> At your cat's most recent checkup or preventive care visit, were the following services discussed with you or performed (yes or no/do not remember)?		
<b>Feline services</b>	<b>Practices</b>	<b>Clients</b>
Retrovirus testing	20.7%	31.9%
Internal parasite test	54.1%	43.5%
Broad-spectrum parasite control	55.5%	44.0%
Pain assessment	68.1%	30.2%
Dental exam	94.6%	78.4%

<sup>†</sup>Differences in practice and client responses were statistically significant (t-test p<0.01).

## Consistent communication gaps revealed

For each of the 10 canine services-performed categories, *The Opportunity* responses provided by pet owners and practice staff were statistically different ( $p < 0.01$ ). As shown in Table 1, the difference was >10 percentage points for three of the canine services-performed categories — pain assessment (28% difference), dental exam (17.8% difference), and weight and nutritional assessment (12.5% difference). In each case, healthcare staff reported much higher rates of services performed than what their clients did, reflecting a clear-cut disparity between what staff and clients believe transpires in a canine healthcare exam. Although the remaining seven canine service categories had lesser statistical differences between what staff and canine pet owners reported, collectively they indicate a trend toward communication gaps in the exam setting.

Similar results were reported for feline services performed. Cat owners and practice staff who participated in *The Opportunity* survey reported >10% difference in five of the 11 feline services-performed categories (Table 1) — retrovirus testing (11.2% difference), internal parasite test (10.6% difference), broad-spectrum parasite control (11.5% difference),

pain assessment (37.9% difference), and dental exam (16.2% difference). Interestingly, more cat owners believed that retroviral testing was performed at their pets' most recent checkup than was reported by the practice staff, 31.9% versus 20.7%. This means that a significant percentage of cat owners believed, incorrectly, that their pet had been tested for feline leukemia virus or feline immunodeficiency virus infection, two potentially fatal diseases. Cat owners and practice staff reported lesser but statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) differences for the other six feline services-performed categories. As with the canine services-performed data, this reflected an overall trend toward communication gaps during feline checkups.

## Underappreciating the importance of exam services

Practice staff and clients also differed in their assessment of the importance of the services performed in a standard preventive healthcare exam. Fewer dog owners believed that any of the 10 healthcare services evaluated in *The Opportunity* survey were important ( $p < 0.01$ ) compared to the practice staff's ratings. The difference was >10% for three services (Table 2): heartworm testing (13.1% fewer clients vs. staff), pain assessment (13.2% fewer clients), and behavioral assessment (18.4% fewer clients). Although the remaining

**TABLE 2. Communication gaps >10 points related to perceived importance of specific services<sup>†</sup>**

<b>I. Perceived importance of services for canine patients</b>				
<i>Table shows response percentages to the following survey question:</i>				
<b>Practice and client (n = 1,110 staff surveys, n = 833 client surveys):</b> How important is it for a routine canine checkup or preventive care visit to include the following services?				
<b>Canine services</b>	<b>Practices</b>		<b>Clients</b>	
	Not important/ Neutral	Important	Not important/ Neutral	Important
Heartworm test	7.2%	92.8%	20.3%	79.7%
Pain assessment	6.5%	93.5%	19.7%	80.3%
Behavioral assessment	10.2%	89.8%	28.6%	71.4%
<b>II. Perceived importance of services for feline patients</b>				
<i>Table shows response percentages to the following survey question:</i>				
<b>Practice and client (n = 1,164 staff surveys, n = 527 client surveys):</b> How important is it for a routine feline checkup or preventive care visit to include the following services?				
<b>Feline services</b>	<b>Practices</b>		<b>Clients</b>	
	Not important/ Neutral	Important	Not important/ Neutral	Important
Retrovirus testing	19.0%	81.0%	39.6%	60.4%
Internal parasite test	7.3%	92.7%	30.2%	69.8%
Broad-spectrum parasite control	6.6%	93.4%	27.6%	72.4%
Pain assessment	6.7%	93.3%	22.5%	77.5%
Behavioral assessment	11.5%	88.5%	30.8%	69.2%

<sup>†</sup>Differences in practice and client responses were statistically significant (t-test p<0.01).

seven canine service categories had lesser differences in importance ratings between clients and staff, the differences were still statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Similarly, fewer cat owners reported that 10 of the 11 feline preventive healthcare services were important compared to the practice staff's assessment (Table 2). The difference was  $>10\%$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) for five services: retrovirus testing (20.6% fewer clients vs. staff), internal parasite testing (22.9% fewer clients), broad-spectrum parasite control (21.0% fewer clients), pain assessment (15.8% fewer clients), and behavioral assessment (19.3%

fewer clients). For the remaining feline service categories, the differences in importance ratings between clients and staff were  $<10\%$  but still statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Collectively, the data indicated that practices were missing an opportunity to communicate and educate pet owners on the importance of those elements necessary for optimum preventive healthcare.

### **Why the communication gaps are important**

*The Opportunity* survey results revealed consistent gaps between clients and practice staff perceptions of which services are actually

#### **Services evaluated in The Opportunity survey**

*The Opportunity* survey asked practice staff and pet owner clients to rate following services performed in a typical preventive healthcare exam (staff) or their most recent preventive healthcare visit for their dog or cat (pet owners):

- General physical exam
- Heartworm test
- Internal parasite testing
- Broad-spectrum parasite control
- Pain assessment
- Dental exam and recommendations
- Behavioral assessment
- Weight and nutritional assessment and recommendations
- Vaccinations
- Retrovirus testing (cats only)
- Follow-up plan based on assessments and recommendations

performed in a checkup and whether those services are important. While the differences between staff and pet owners were not always large, they were statistically significant in all cases. *More importantly, they show a recurring trend indicating that the practice staff believes most preventive healthcare services are more important than their clients perceive them to be. Moreover, there is some confusion on the part of clients about which services are actually performed during an exam for their pets.* Thus, in many cases, the client is not fully aware of what is going on during the exam. By any

measure, these are serious disconnects that undervalue the preventive healthcare services provided by companion animal practices.

The growing consensus among veterinary practice experts is that these types of gaps in understanding underscore the importance of the staff effectively explaining not only *what services are being recommended or performed but, most importantly, why specific procedures are performed* during a yearly checkup. The “take-home messages” of *The Opportunity* survey study are that 1) the survey



**Good communication skills are an essential part of a productive visit, and certain exam components (e.g., pain assessment and dental exams) are especially fertile ground for a give-and-take dialog between the clinical staff and client.**

can identify previously unrecognized communication gaps and, 2) gaps are most likely present even in the best practices. By default, practices that utilize *The Opportunity* to reveal their specific communication gaps have taken the first step to provide better and more valued healthcare for clients.

Good communication skills are an essential part of a productive visit, and certain exam components (e.g., pain assessment and dental exams) are especially fertile ground for a give-and-take dialog between the clinical staff and client. For example, proactively explaining to the client the protocol for a pain assessment (joint manipulation, spinal and joint palpation, gait analysis, probing questions about behavior changes, the patient's mobility and exercise tolerance) will enhance the client's awareness and understanding of this important aspect of the pet's health, including that a pain assessment is part of the exam. In other words, good communication initiated by the staff is the "fix" for ensuring that a client has full appreciation and understanding of the components of a preventive healthcare exam and their importance.

### **Communication gap-closing tools from PHP**

When good communication skills are applied during a visit – the setting

where the practice and its clients routinely interact – it helps ensure that the pet owner understands and values each component of the exam. This, in turn, drives the delivery and effectiveness of preventive healthcare, ultimately improving the pet's quality of life and its relationship with its owner. Partners for Healthy Pets provides a free, professionally developed suite of online tools designed to enhance staff-client communication. *The Opportunity* survey, discussed earlier in this report, is a diagnostic communication tool that identifies communication gaps between the practice staff and clients. Using the completed survey results, the healthcare team can then target those specific areas for improving staff-client dialog.

### **Evidence *The Opportunity* Survey Can Work in Your Practice – Success Stories!**

The PHP website includes actual case history success stories where *The Opportunity* benefited companion animal practices. It is noteworthy that the two case histories described below involved established, very successful and respected practices. Even though these practices operated at a high service level, they were still able to improve their performance as judged by their clients by focusing on communication gaps revealed by *The Opportunity*.

**THE CAT DOCTOR, AN  
ALL-FELINE AAHA PRACTICE,  
PHILADELPHIA, PA**

The Cat Doctor, owned by Diane Eigner, VMD, has served southeast Pennsylvania since 1983. Motivated by an already strong commitment to practice culture, Dr. Eigner invited all her clients and entire healthcare team to take *The Opportunity* survey on two occasions, six months apart. Survey results unexpectedly revealed a significant gap in the delivery of two healthcare services as perceived by the practice staff versus clients – behavioral assessment and pain assessment. The staff reported that these two services were performed in more than three-fourths of patient checkups. In contrast, fewer than half of clients reported observing these two services being performed in exams for their pets.

Despite a strong preexisting commitment by The Cat Doctor’s staff to behavior and pain assessment, Dr. Eigner realized that the healthcare team had to focus even more on engaging clients in these two areas of feline health. Elevating the staff’s approach to explaining the purpose and ways of cat behavior and pain assessment became a topic at staff meetings. The give-and-take exchanges among the staff proved to be an enjoyable team-building exercise. Results of the second survey revealed that the perception gap between staff and clients for the

two services had closed significantly. “The survey responses told us that we could do a better job of explaining and discussing two very important aspects of cat ownership,” Dr. Eigner explained. “It helped us improve our practice and build on our past success.”

**“BEST VETERINARIAN” PRACTICE  
IN NEW HAMPSHIRE**

The Stratham-Newfields Veterinary Hospital (SNVH) in Newfields, New Hampshire is AAHA-accredited and certified as an AAFP Cat Friendly Practice. The practice is a six-time winner of the Market Surveys of America “Best Veterinarian” category for the Stratham-Exeter area of New Hampshire. The entire 14-member healthcare team took *The Opportunity* survey, as well as about 20% of the client base. The post-survey report indicated that there was close correlation between staff and pet owner responses for all canine and feline service categories. This outcome was not overly surprising given the practice’s long-standing emphasis on client communication and preventive healthcare. However, participating in *The Opportunity* had important benefits for the practice other than identifying staff-client communication gaps:

- Discussing the survey internally reenergized the SNVH staff to renew its focus on preventive healthcare.
- The survey process helped



reinforce the practice culture of making the interests of its patients its first priority.

- Asking for their opinions reminded SNVH clients that the staff considers them to be a full partner in the welfare of their pets.
- The survey indicated to SNVH clients that the practice is a learning organization interested in continuous improvement, thus strengthening clients' commitment to the practice.
- Because of the survey experience, the SNVH staff became enthusiastic about using the other resources in the PHP Toolbox, including those on improving client communications (e.g., the entire staff watched the Words that Work videos from the PHP website).

### **Other gap-closing resources from the PHP Toolbox**

The PHP website ([www.partnersforhealthypets.org](http://www.partnersforhealthypets.org)) includes a communications module with other tools for strengthening the dialog between practice healthcare teams and their clients. The PHP communications resources include videos and scripts that demonstrate ways to effectively communicate with clients and to help them recognize the value and importance of preventive care. Research has shown that pet owners are willing to make changes and embrace preventive healthcare visits if they know it will benefit their pets. The videos and scripts show how a few simple words in the exam room or during a client conversation can make a big difference in acceptance

### Putting Together a Plan to Address Staff-Client Communication Gaps

Communication gaps between the healthcare team and the practice's clients can be identified using *The Opportunity* survey and then addressed using the other communications tools available on the Partners for Healthy Pets (PHP) website. In addition, an excellent workbook is available from the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association (VHMA)—*Preventive Pet Healthcare, Your*



*Guide to Becoming a Practice Champion.*

The VMHA Guide includes a proven, step-

by-step approach (pages 51-60 in the *Guide*) to addressing the communication gaps identified in *The Opportunity* survey.

It is often helpful if the practice designates one of its staff members to be a champion or advocate of communications designed to promote preventive healthcare to clients. This person could have a regular staff meeting time slot to discuss preventive healthcare client communications

and to ask for the healthcare team's ideas, feedback, and communication training progress.

In summary, developing and improving staff preventive healthcare communication skills can be facilitated by using the following resources:

- *The Opportunity* survey.
- The online videos and downloadable scripts from the PHP Words that Work videos, which are especially suitable for role-play exercises.
- The other communications tools available in the PHP website Toolbox.
- The VHMA *Preventive Pet Healthcare, Your Guide to Becoming a Practice Champion*, accessible on the VMHA website ([www.vmha.org](http://www.vmha.org)).
- Individual communications training for staff members who may need additional practice to be able to confidently interact with clients.
- For purposes of advanced training, outside resources or on-site, customized training conducted by a communications expert.

of a veterinarian's recommendations and compliance. Examples of the videos include:

- Effective vs. ineffective ways to talk about heartworm prevention
- Taking the patient's history and relationship building
- Discussing pet nutrition
- Discussing dental health and oral exams
- Describing the physical exam and its importance in maintaining a pet's health
- A Words that Work video series (with supporting scripts) that discusses how to have successful preventive healthcare conversations with clients. Individual videos cover specific topics, including history taking and relationship building, conveying value during a physical exam, and dental, heartworm and nutrition discussions.

## Summary

More than five years of data compiled from staff and client responses to *The Opportunity* survey confirm that pet owners and practice teams have significantly different perceptions of (1) what services are provided by companion animal practices during a preventive healthcare exam, and (2) the importance of these services to the health and quality of life for canine and feline pets. Closing the gaps between client and staff perceptions of preventive healthcare

delivery and the importance of specific services is heavily dependent on the staff's communications skills and a practice culture of proactive client communication and education. Veterinary practices have free access to professionally developed online communication tools available from Partners of Healthy Pets. These materials are a proven resource for enhancing staff communications skills to close gaps in the dialog between the practice healthcare team and their clients. Case history success stories confirm that the combination of *The Opportunity* survey to identify communication gaps and PHP communication tools to improve staff-client communication skills are an effective strategy to improve the health and wellbeing of canine and feline patients.

## Acknowledgment

*PHP would like to gratefully acknowledge Jeremy Kees, Ph.D., the Richard J. and Barbara Naclerio Endowed Chair in Business, Professor of Marketing and Director of the Center for Marketing and Consumer Insights, Villanova University School of Business, Villanova, Pennsylvania for his contributions to the development of The Opportunity survey and his analysis of the data contained in this report.*



**partners**  
FOR HEALTHY PETS

[www.partnersforhealthypets.org](http://www.partnersforhealthypets.org)

