



# Let Your Feline-Friendly Flag Fly

Perception of cat friendliness  
is critical to clients

by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD

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“Again I must remind you that  
A Dog’s a Dog—A CAT’S A CAT.”

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FROM “THE AD-DRESSING OF CATS” BY T. S. ELIOT

**DO YOU LOVE CATS?** Do you love them more than you love other pets, such as dogs, rabbits, rats, guinea pigs, mice, snakes, birds or lizards? Stop equivocating. You can’t love them all equally. But to please cat owners, such as those quoted below, you must love cats the most or, at least, be perceived to do so.

Jill Gormley of San Diego, Calif., said she is partial to the veterinarian “who loves cats as much as I do.” Pat Crane of Easton, Md., said that what draws her to her veterinarian is that he always says to her cat, “Aren’t you beautiful? You’re the prettiest.”

Jim Lemke of La Jolla, Calif., said, “We love our veterinarian, Emily, who arranged for our first cat to be euthanized and cremated. Emily was so kind, gentle, understanding and supportive that I told my wife that when it’s time for us to go, we’re going to let Emily do the job!” Is that feline-friendly?



Some veterinary hospitals have a “hospital cat,” which can be useful both for calming pet owners and demonstrating cat care procedures.

#### Identifying a feline-friendly practice

Sometimes how veterinarians handle cats can be what identifies them as feline-friendly. Although not all veterinarians are so adept at handling cats, the feline-friendly ones have it mastered. They will tell you, for example, that contrary to your animal examination training, you should start with the part of the exam that is easiest for the cat, leaving the most difficult for last.

Other signs of a feline-friendly veterinarian are the presence of softer colors or softer voices, slower movements, calm body language and “equal space” for dog and cat displays in the waiting room. There will also be fewer people in the examining rooms at any one time and lower lights when the cat is in recovery.

Sarah Wisseman of Champaign, Ill., likes the fact that her veterinarian has two entrances, with cats entering on the right side of the waiting room and dogs on the left, with the receptionist in between. “My cat still isn’t happy but does seem to feel safer.”

The cat owner may also see soft blankets or something a cat can get its claws into in the exam room. This suggests that the veterinarian knows that cats are different. The veterinarian will also frequently cover the cold examining table with a carpet or warm towel, and use the towel for swaddling the cat if it has to be restrained for examination or treatment.

Melissa Reed, DVM, of the Turquoise Veterinary Hospital in La Jolla, Calif., told us that as part of her practice’s feline-friendly initiative, the staff has begun to use a synthetic feline pheromone sprayed on the cat’s blanket in the exam room, or installed as a diffuser in the waiting room or exam room. It can help decrease the cat’s stress level.

They have also introduced catnip. “We have catnip mice and loose catnip to offer our patients. We sprinkle the loose catnip on exam tables, in cat carriers or wherever the cat is. Many cats will get excited (vocalizing and rolling in it), and many will look relaxed and calm down. If the cats like the catnip, we have catnip mice that they can take home,” Reed said.

Some veterinary hospitals have a “hospital cat.” The hospital cat at Cheshire Cat Feline Health Center in San Diego, Calif., named Daisy, is dubbed a “lapportunist” because she calmly makes herself welcome on any empty lap. What a soothing effect she has! She calms the pet owners in the waiting room by monopolizing (“lappolizing?”) all those in the room.

In another hospital, the hospital cat is useful for demonstrating such procedures as handling, administering medicine or restraining. That’s a big help for many cat owners.

#### Encouraging cat owners to come back

“It’s the trend,” said Reed. “We’re all aware of the decline in visits from cat owners, so we’re trying to institute practices that will encourage cat owners to come see us more regularly.”

The term “cat-friendly practice” was started back in 2005 by the International Society of Feline Medicine and developed just 2 years ago into a program offered by the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) known as the Cat Friendly Practice® (CFP). Although the AAFP has been around since 1971, the CFP was

developed as surveys revealed that an alarming number of pets—especially cats—are missing preventive care.

Veterinarians are seeing fewer cats, partially because pet ownership declined between 2006 and 2011. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), there were 2 million fewer dogs and 7.6 million fewer cats seen by veterinarians during that period.

Cats are still the most common pets in the United States, totaling around 86 million (compared to 78 million dogs), but studies show that almost twice as many cats as compared to dogs never visit the veterinarian. Of those that do visit, 41% visit only for vaccinations, and 39% visit only if the cat is sick.

Furthermore, if clients bring their cats but don't return, your practice is like a leaking bucket. You keep adding new clients, but some of them are "seeping" out of the holes in the bottom of the bucket—right off your stat chart. The challenge is to "plug the holes in the bucket" and not allow client visits to lapse.



One reason for the decline in cat visits to veterinarians, one that veterinarians can address, is “feline resistance.”

With 33% of households owning at least one cat (and 52% of them owning more than one), a lot of cats need to be served. This represents a great opportunity for veterinary practices that can serve them.

Cat owners on average spend \$186 for a preventive care visit (according to the newly published *AAHA Veterinary Fee Reference*, 8th edition). Do the math. If you got one overdue cat to return each day (or 277 annually), you'd generate over \$50,000 a year in additional revenue!

The oft-cited Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study discovered the reasons for the decline. It found that 80% of cat owners think that their cats are in excellent health and very self-sufficient. It also found, not surprisingly, that the recession was cited as a reason for not visiting the veterinarian. Another reason listed was “consumers substituting Internet research for office visits,” which probably means that veterinarians often see sicker pets because the owner has delayed treatment while trying suggestions found online.

Another reason, one that veterinarians can address, is “feline resistance.” Some 60% of cat owners report that their cats hate going to the veterinarian. Moreover, 38% of cat owners report that they get stressed just thinking about bringing their cat to the practice.

#### **What owners can do about feline resistance**

We heard about feline resistance from nearly every cat owner we talked to—tales of the frantic search for kitty in his favorite hiding places, and the hissing and clawing when the cat is placed in the carrier. It's easy to understand why cat owners would just give up and postpone the annual wellness checkup.

Cat owner Lenore Ringlar said she conquered this problem by making her carrier part of the furniture. She leaves her cat carrier out for her beautiful Burmese cats to enter at

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any time. They like the blankets and treats there, and do not associate the carrier only with a veterinarian visit.

The Cheshire Cat Feline Health Center in San Diego, Calif., owned by Dr. Ann Middleton, spends considerable time coaching their clients about the veterinarian visit. The staff suggest, for example, that the owner take the cat for a ride in the car for short trips of no consequence (such as to the post office or bank), building confidence with each car ride.

They also suggest visiting the veterinarian hospital with the cat once a week, until the cat is habituated, beginning by playing with the cat on the front lawn of the vet's

office, gradually bringing him to the front door and then to standing in the front lobby and visiting with the staff.

Elizabeth Colleran, DVM, MS, who owns two cat-only practices in Portland, Ore., and is spokesperson for the CFP, teaches a PowerPoint class in her community and distributes a brochure, created by the CFP, titled, "Getting Your Cat to the Vet."

April Stotler, the practice manager at Bernardo Heights Veterinary Hospital in San Diego, Calif., points out that the hospital has brochures on its website both on how to prepare for your visit and how to reintroduce the cat at home. A cat returning with scents from the veterinarian visit may be upsetting for other pets in the house.

Stotler suggests that the owner bring treats and have the staff give them to the cat, making the visit a fun experience. Since some pets get along with some individuals better than others, she also encouraged the owner to arrange to see a single staff member with whom the cat is acquainted—and to schedule the cat's appointment during a quieter time of the day.

### Resources

AAHA provides valuable resources that help veterinarian practices implement its stringent standards regarding facilities, equipment, medical skills and management practices.

The American Feline Practice Association is a useful resource to complement AAHA. Its focus is on treatment, equipment and environment, with a continually growing inventory of brochures and videos. One of those brochures is "Feline Handling Guidelines," which, following a thorough review, the AAHA board of directors formally endorsed last March.

To be certified in AAFP's CFP program, members need to follow an online self-monitoring process and examine various practice areas, including staff training and education, the waiting room, feline handling, interaction with clients, facilities, pain management, equipment, client records, diagnostic imaging and treatment.

Review of all of these areas will lead to improvement for any practice. However, viewing each area from the perspective of the cat moves a general practice to becoming a feline-friendly practice. And remember the words of T. S. Eliot: "A Dog's a Dog—A CAT'S A CAT."

### Making house calls to cat owners

Ruth Ripton, the proud owner of a polydactyl cat (sometimes called a Hemingway cat), was delighted when she learned that her local veterinarian would do a house call, often seeing several cats in her retirement community on the same day. More and more veterinary practices are doing this, as they seek new opportunities to serve pet owners.

This makes sense for Arnold Plotnick, MS, DVM, DACVIM of Manhattan Cat Specialists in New York City, because he has a small hospital with only one exam room. The only way for him to see more clients is to have his second doctor visit them off site.

Heather Kovacevich, DVM, is the designated house call doctor on Thursdays for the Drake Center for Veterinary Care in Encinitas, Calif. "Owners are surprised," she said, "when they see their fractious cat become so well behaved

at home. In spite of my picking up cats with the strange gloves and examining them, they are docile. No car ride, no barking dogs in the waiting room.”

Even if Kovacevich has to take the cat with her back to the center, the process goes smoothly. She is trained in handling cats.

Lisa Mekka, DVM, established House Calls for Cats, LLC in St. Paul, Minn. “Many of my patients are senior or geriatric cats who haven’t seen a veterinarian in 6–8 years and now have severe weight loss or other symptoms of internal problems,” she says.

Other calls are for euthanasia. “I understand. It’s distasteful to bring your pet in for that last moment,” she said. Mekka has an agreement with a nearby clinic to use their staff and facilities on Fridays to provide services such as dental cleaning, ultrasound or surgery.

#### Other feline-friendly tips for veterinarians

The feline-friendly practice is sensitive to the subtle signs of cat illnesses. During the annual exam, all veterinarians examine for a heart murmur, enlarged thyroid gland, stiff hips or tooth decay, but it may take an especially “feline-friendly” veterinarian to identify the hidden maladies, which cats use as a survival mechanism in the wild developed to avoid capture.

Colleran recommends that the practice identify the “cat person” on the staff. “Everyone knows who it is. It’s just known,” she says. “Ask that person to be a cat advocate and review treatments, equipment and the hospital environment through the eyes of the cat and its owner. For example, you’ll make sure that you are using the right-sized instruments for dental procedures.”

About a year ago, the Drake Veterinary Center gained the Gold Certification from the CFP, designating a feline-liaison to attend CFP conferences every 2 years. They now provide a cat-only exam room as well as a cats-only boarding area built to specifications that allow a cubby for the cat to hide or snuggle in. Many of the requirements, they found, were consistent with those of AAHA certification.

Allison Jackson of Associates Animal Hospital in Westborough, Mass., said it was worthwhile to explain



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to cat owners that the hospital was utilizing new “low-stress handling” techniques. Its clients discovered that they felt more at ease, and the clinic saw an increase in return visits.

Reed suggested that clinic staff make it a point to know the needs of individual cat patients and add names and issues to the clinic’s alert system. She described one of her clinic’s favorite visitors as an agitated cat that was calm only for the first 10 minutes of his visit. The alert reminded the veterinarian of that fact.

Roberta Raney, practice manager at Cheshire Cat Feline Health Center in San Diego, Calif., points out the longer the cat has to wait, the less cooperative it will be. Therefore, it’s wise to watch your scheduling when it comes to feline patients. Some practices support having pet owners stay in the car with their cat until called and then going directly to the exam room.

Elizabeth Amerling, LVT, CVT, practice manager at Miller Clark Animal Hospital in Mamaroneck, N.Y., sent an email to all her feline clients introducing the hospital’s AAFP accreditation and informing clients of the hospital changes and, of course, putting the AAFP logo on the entry door and website.

Getting the cat owner in the door, however, is only the first step. The challenge to the clinic is to make that first visit count. In addition to demonstrating that the clinic is feline-friendly, the staff members need to practice one-minute “elevator speeches” for use on the phone, website or during the visit that clearly convey to the cat owner the value of preventive care.

Also ask about other household pets, provide take-home resources and offer discounts or loyalty programs to encourage return visits. ✧



Carolyn C. Shadle earned her PhD degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo in interpersonal and organizational communication. She now provides writing and training through ICS, Inc. ([icsworkplacecommunication.com](http://icsworkplacecommunication.com)).



John L. Meyer earned his PhD degree from the University of Minnesota in communication studies. Through ICS, Inc., he writes and provides training in interpersonal communication as well as speech arts.

## Make Your Practice Feline-Friendly

Use these tips to encourage a more cat-friendly workplace:

- Educate clients on preparing their cats for their veterinarian visit.
- Establish a calm environment by lowering the noise level and moving more slowly.
- Master techniques of gentle handling.
- Add personality issues to alerts in the database.
- Make separate entrances for dogs and cats.
- Establish a cats-only exam room.
- Initiate a cats-only boarding area.
- Add a hide-box to boarding condos.
- Offer special cat-only visiting hours.
- Offer house calls.
- Use a synthetic pheromone to spray materials and as a diffuser in the waiting room/exam room.
- Add catnip to the exam room.
- Know the subtle signs of cat illnesses.
- Communicate the value of preventive care.

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