



CERTIFICATION *and* ACCREDITATION

(What's the big deal?)

by Carolyn Shadle, Ph.D.

Certification and accreditation are credentialing processes common to many industries—education, investment, public relations, construction, health care, and, yes, the animal care industry. They affirm a level of competency, authority, or credibility offered by third parties, sometimes known as “accredited certification bodies.” Certification and accreditation are usually awarded by recognized experts in their industry to establish standards, most often voluntarily, as opposed to being adopted by regulators as legal requirements.

These two processes are at times referred to interchangeably but there is a distinct difference. Certification is a process in which individuals demonstrate their knowledge to others through third party testing. Accreditation is an approval given to facilities, clinics, or hospitals usually requiring on-site evaluation to verify the meeting of accreditation standards. Both types of credentialing are for a limited period of time. Certification usually requires continuing education credits for renewing. Accreditation requires submission of updated materials and on-site evaluation for renewal.

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In the animal care industry, there are a growing number of credentialing bodies:

American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) Accreditation

American Association of Feline Practitioners' Cat Friendly Program

Animal Behavior Institute Certification

Animal Care Worker Certification

Animal Control Officer Certification

Animal Hospice & Palliative Care Certificate

Certification in Low Stress Handling of Dogs and Cats

Certification for Professional Pet Sitters

College, university, and veterinary school certificates and degrees

Dog Groomers Certification

Dog Trainers Certification

Farm Animal Welfare Care Certification

Fear Free Certification

Human-Animal Bond Certificate

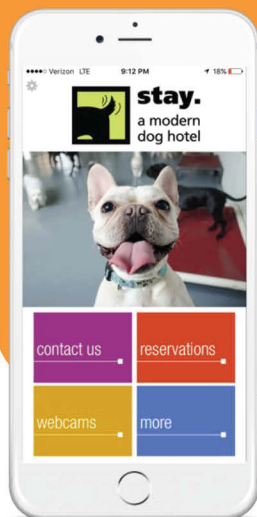
Karen Pryor Academy for Animal Training and Behavior

Many in the animal care industry do not offer a comprehensive accreditation, but other credentialing processes are offered. The Association of Professional Dog Trainers, Professional Dog Walkers Association, and Pet Sitters International, through membership, offer training and advice, or, in some cases, a credit check, insurance, or bonding.

Others in the pet care space offer certifications on some aspect of their care. The Professional Animal Care Certification Council (PACCC), for example, offers three levels of certification for the pet care professional, but not for the facility: Certified Professional Animal Care Provider, Certified Professional Animal Care Manager, and Certified Professional Animal Care Operator.

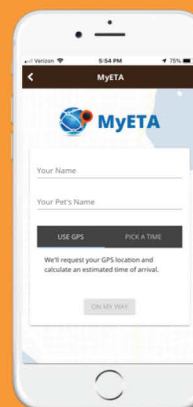
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Risk Management & Safety Facility Certification, and Infectious Disease Management Certification. Unlike the individual professional certifications, the Risk Management & Safety Facility Certification provides a professional and credible way for facility owners to identify appropriate, proven risk management and safety best practices to help reduce losses. Even though this certification directly relates to the safety of staff there is an added benefit for the pets in the care of certified facilities. A safe work environment creates a safer place for pets to stay. Most hazards that would harm humans are just as harmful to pets. To achieve this certification, facility owners must meet standards and have an on-site evaluation. Some insurance carriers have identified this certification as ultimately having a positive impact on insurance premium costs.

A Closer Look at Veterinarian Credentialing

When it comes to a comprehensive certification in the pet care industry, Marty Becker, DVM, considers the AAHA Accreditation to be the gold standard for veterinarians. He says:

“Since 1933, for almost nine decades (86 years), this highly respected organization has elevated the practice of veterinary medicine. To be an AAHA-certified practice, a practice must have a passing score on about 1,000 standards. Not self-assessment or certification designed to be easily attained (more for marketing purposes than gaining valuable new skills), but passing a rigorous, constantly evolving certification, by outside experts, typically licensed veterinary technicians.”

Dr. Becker goes on to claim that the newest “and perhaps most successful of all new certifications” for individuals and for a veterinary practice is the Fear Free Certification which, it should be noted, was founded by him. While AAHA certification, according to Dr. Becker, looks at quality of medicine/facilities/protocols/team focusing on the physical wellbeing of the pets, Fear Free, he explains, focuses on gaining valuable expertise in looking after the emotional wellbeing of animals (plus enrichment activities.)

AAHA advertises their accreditation as “the difference between ordinary and extraordinary.” The organization also offers tangible benefits like subscriptions to

their magazine, journal, and blogs, free or discounted training, priority notification of new AAHA guidelines, discounts on products and services, and access to AAHA’s Preferred Providers. AAHA-accredited hospitals also have access to an online tool for measuring clients’ satisfaction, enabling them to address clients’ needs and, thus, retain clients and obtain new ones through favorable word-of-mouth.

“Accountability is the cornerstone of accreditation or certification,” says Debbie Boone, BS, CCS, CVPM, of 2 Manage Vets Consulting. She says: “It’s like being on a diet and having to weigh in before your peers. It helps you keep on track...Most of the practices that pass their accreditation volunteer to be scrutinized and want to hold themselves to high standards as a personal philosophy about who they are and what they want to be in the world.”

Julie Reck, DVM, owner of Veterinary Medical Center of Fort Mill, South Carolina, holds the AAHA accreditation, the Fear Free Practice Certification, and the Silver Status Feline Friendly recognition. She states that the feline friendly certification process, all done through online submission, was not as intense as the AAHA accreditation process, which involved an on-site evaluator. In any case, however, she found the accreditation definitely elevates the level of care the team provides to patients.

David Murvin, of PetWell Partners, highlights the principle that “if it’s not documented, it doesn’t exist,” thereby providing consistency of care and in training new doctors and new techs. Ultimately this is what a credentialing body is trying to achieve, documentation of knowledge and meeting of industry standards.

Credentialing in the Pet Care Industry Benefits Owners and Staff

Richard Starks, who has owned many pet care facilities, jumped at the opportunity to have his large South Tampa Pet Resort achieve IBPSA’s Risk Management & Safety Facility Certification. He knew that “outside eyes” were needed to uncover shortcomings that he was not able to catch, despite having been in multiple businesses for many years. He mentioned, for example, the need to address the noise level, which he hadn’t thought about.

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Starks likes to quote Richard Branson, who said, “If you take care of your people, they will take care of the clients,” and in turn, Starks would add, your business. Appreciating concern for staff safety leads to fewer turnovers in staff and clients appreciate seeing familiar faces when they bring their pets—that’s bound to help the business.

Kari Campbell, who owns Dog Tired Doggie Daycare in Anchorage, Alaska, received certifications from PACCC in order to see where she was in the industry. Tested by an independent third party, she found the questions on the exam to be challenging. The process “tested her entire body of knowledge,” she says.

The process of preparing and applying for credentialing not only clarifies processes and procedures, but also raises team morale. Team members may gain a sense of pride in knowing that they are working to the highest standards in the profession and delivering care efficiently and effectively.

Credentialing is a Benefit to Clients

Nan Boss, DVM, owner of Best Friends Veterinary Center in Grafton, Wisconsin, shared input from a practice receptionist who said: “Accredited life means taking pride in the standard of care we provide to our clients. We strive for excellence here, and it shows in our patient care as well as our cleanliness and education protocols. We work very hard to make sure that each client has the tools they need to keep their pets happy and healthy for as long as possible.”

Clients who take their pets to an AAHA-accredited practice may know that that practice has been evaluated on nearly 1,000 standards of care that impact the health of their pets. AAHA surveyed pet owners after they learned about the AAHA accreditation. They found that 85 percent of pet owners surveyed said they would choose an AAHA-accredited veterinary hospital over a non-accredited one, and 51 percent said that they would drive farther for an AAHA-accredited hospital.

While many admit that credentialing of any kind is still not well known or understood by clients in the boarding industry, Dog Tired Doggie Daycare’s Kari Campbell points out that PACCC provides a rack card

which she can provide to her pet parents to inform them of her achievements, and she participates in educational opportunities at fairs.

Campbell is putting into practice what Murvin of PetWell Partners advises accredited hospitals to do: post their accreditation plaque where clients can see it at check-in and again in the waiting room, with a poster that describes its meaning.

Credentialing is a Benefit to the Business

Stephanie Brooks, owner of Tail Lights Dogs in South Carolina, is a Certified Professional Animal Care Manager through PACCC. She notes that because South Carolina has no real requirements for dog daycares, she appreciated finding PACCC with its high standards.

South Tampa Pet Resort’s Richard Starks said that one of the benefits of achieving IBPSA’s Risk Management & Safety Facility Certification for his business was the “housecleaning” that resulted. For example, when reviewing the standards sheet, he realized that his business stored many different chemicals, some no longer needed. He found reviewing the proper procedure for accident reporting will serve as a protection for workers’ compensation, if needed.

Kim Vaughn, owner of Ruff Housing Dog Daycare and Lodging with three locations in North Carolina, has been in business for 11 years, and is going through the Risk Management & Safety Facility Certification process. She says that being able to ask questions of the IBPSA inspector was useful in clarifying OSHA requirements that applied to her business.

AAHA-accredited hospitals are also discovering benefits as 44 percent of pet owners surveyed said they would pay more for an AAHA-accredited hospital. It was also found that AAHA-accredited practices each post an average income of \$1,711,102 per year, exceeding the national average by \$662,055. These hospitals also have the opportunity to belong to a Veterinary Management Group, which is comprised of noncompeting AAHA-accredited practices through which owners and managers can openly discuss challenges, share success stories, and benefit from mutual support.

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As everyone in the pet care profession knows, consolidation has been taking place for some time and will undoubtedly continue. Murvin, who co-founded PetWell Partners in 2013, now has hospitals in 35 locations. He is keen on the accreditation process and wants it to play a big role in raising standards. He has been working with AAHA for the development of the Practice Network Accreditation which provides the accreditation of a single parent company that owns practices within a practice network. To achieve practice network accreditation, the organization must have 90 percent of its practices accredited or preaccredited by AAHA, with a goal of having 100 percent of its practices accredited. Murvin believes it “provides structure for team members of the hospital to come together to seek improvement...It empowers the team to work together.” And it forces team members to agree on “the way we do it here.”

Debbie Boone of 2 Manage Vets Consulting states that she’s always believed that “by properly educating our clients about our accreditation we could differentiate our practices from the multitude of other hospitals in our town.”

Kari Campbell found that she also differentiated herself on the basis of her certification. She recounts that unfortunately a dog recently died in a nearby care center. During the investigation, she was brought in because of her PACCC certification and found that she has “cache in the community,” something she had not expected.

With consolidation taking place in the industry, whether it’s Pet Paradise or Banfield, Starks points out that credentialing enables businesses to ward-off being gobbled up, or, on the other hand, to be ready to be bought out, if that’s in the business plan.

What’s Required?

“Stressful,” “challenging,” “time-consuming,” “costly” were words used by those who have been through it to describe the credentialing process.

All agreed that commitment is required. IBPSA’s Risk Management & Safety Facility Certification requires a thoughtful, notably detailed process. After reading the



Kayla Conrad of Albon Dog Ranch in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, with her Canine Pet Care Provider certification from IBPSA. As seen in the background, credentials are on display at the dog boarding and daycare facility.

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manual on achieving this certification, Starks was sure he wanted to do what was required to be certified, so he hired a consultant to do a walk-through to point out what was needed to be certified, resulting in 34 pages of recommended corrections. He then committed to spending the time and money necessary to be successfully evaluated within 60 days.

Time is required. Campbell said that she was able to prepare through a practice exam, and, in the process, realized that she had to study a lot, even though she'd been in business for 15 years.

Financial resources are required. To address the costs, Murvin's network provides resources to assist member hospitals in improving their physical layout. It's his belief that for "every AAHA requirement there is a solution." For example, he cites a hospital that had a surgery suite with a sink, which was a violation. He worked with the hospital to cap the plumbing in the surgery suite and add a sink outside of the room for prep, a cost-effective solution.

Starks acknowledges that his corrections were costly and understands that the shock of the cost deters some businesses. Upon closer examination, however, he found that the consultant helped him see that correcting items that had never caused a problem might prevent a lawsuit in the future, saving him much money and heartache.

Why Not Go for Accreditation or Certification?

About 15 percent of veterinary practices are AAHA-accredited. There are no statistics for other pet care professionals or venues, such as boarding facilities, but since the certification process is young, it can be assumed that the vast majority are not accredited. Why is that?

Some assume that their business is too small (i.e., a one-doctor only practice). As for the AAHA accreditation, it holds the belief that even small practices or those without state-of-the-art facilities can provide excellent service.

Unlike those who have been in business for a long time, like Vaughn of Ruff Housing Dog Daycare, new

boarding businesses fear that they will have too many requirements to deal with and are not ready to invest the time and money needed for certification.

Some are confident that they are already providing a high level of care and service and choose not to invest the time and money necessary for the process of credentialing. That is a fair argument, unless you agree that even the best businesses have room to learn and grow. Often, we don't know what we don't know.

Rachel Abrams, who works with the Fear Free certification for both individual professionals and for practices, has identified five "buckets," as she calls them, into which she categorizes those who have not taken advantage of the certification process. They:

assume that being "Fear Free" just involves giving treats, and they already do that.

believe they would not be able to comply and don't even look into what is required.

believe their practice is already certified because individuals within the practice are certified.

are too overwhelmed with existing work and the mere thought of extra tasks, so they haven't read the website or downloaded the standards.

assume they can't complete the assessment in the one-year allowed and don't know they can read the standards and begin implementation before they even apply.

Alana Hunter, of PACCC, has also given thought to the "why not" question. She says:

it's still a relatively new credential, so the industry at large is not as aware of it as they will become over time.

there are requirements that have to be met such as time in position/ownership that some are working on before they can become eligible to be certified.

there are some who are pursuing the educational knowledge needed to be able to pass a certification exam, so they're not prepared yet.

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What can be learned from credentialing?

Those creating credentialing processes have found three things that they hold in common:

The roll-out is not perfect the first time, and, in fact, the standards and requirements will be updated regularly.

Promotion is important to customers and clients and to business owners, including making sure the website makes it easy for busy readers to grasp the most important information up front.

Owners, in general, value the development of standards and procedures and certifications that can recognize such.

Given the value of credentials, it appears the time and

cost are worth it. Carmen Rustenbeck, CEO of IBPSA, notes: "Credentialing in our industry has not yet found traction. However recent events in the news concerning pet deaths have caused pet owners to take a look at the expertise of pet care providers. Credentialing is the best way to show our knowledge and skills." Rustenbeck acknowledges that currently in the boarding industry there is not a facility accreditation process, but tells us that IBPSA is currently working on a facility accreditation program and sees the Risk Management & Safety Facility Certification as the first step towards accreditation. One can only assume these credentialing processes will be on the increase, and increasingly recognized by customers.

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