

# Matching Patient Care with the Client's Pocketbook: Are Wellness Plans the Solution?

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Well-documented concerns regarding the decline in client visits to veterinary practices are driving a renewed interest in designing creative programs to get pets to their veterinarian on a timely basis, get them there more frequently, and provide a budget-friendly payment plan for necessary healthcare.

Two ideas getting more attention are 1) wellness packages of bundled healthcare services the client pays for up front or with installment billing, and 2) breed-specific healthcare to establish a life-time plan a client can follow, and that the practice can use to consistently customize care for each patient.

While wellness package plans have been in the news a lot lately, relatively few practices have yet to offer this option. Only 20 percent of the practices surveyed in Benchmarks 2012 by Wutchiett Tumblin and Associates and *Veterinary Economics* currently offer wellness packages. The majority of the practices that don't offer wellness packages prefer not to reduce the price of their services. The other most commonly cited reasons for not offering wellness packages are not knowing what services to include and not knowing how to price the package.

Offering packaged, budget-friendly wellness plans may be one solution for getting clients in the door more frequently – which is good for the pet's health, good for the doctor-client relationship, and good for the bottom line. But does offering bundled care at a reduced rate devalue your services in the clients' mind? Key points to continue to convey the value of your services include:

- Providing services is about nurturing relationships and providing quality experiences. Make it easy for clients to use your services, deliver quality every time, and show how much you care. Remember – it's not about you; it's about the pet and the client.
- Membership in a wellness plan creates a community. We're all part of multiple communities. Our family is a community. We live in a community. Our church, softball team, or book club is a community. Our veterinary practice (whether you own it, work there, or visit it with your pet) is a community. Membership in our communities make us feel special – and the more special you make your clients feel, the more bonded they are to your practice.
- Support locally-owned business. Independently-owned businesses help create a vibrant community tapestry and personality that's different from any other place. Locally-owned businesses create excitement and fun, increase local employment and relationships, and lower transportation and environmental costs. Plus, more money stays in the community.
- The importance of the pet's healthcare. By enrolling in a wellness plan, the client can budget for the necessary wellness and preventive care.
- Enrolling in a wellness plan encourages more frequent visits. Without membership in the plan, the client may not have purchased all the services included in the pet's wellness plan. And, more frequent visits often result in providing additional, necessary care that's outside the wellness plan. The result – more care for the pet and more revenue for the practice that you might not otherwise have received.

## Creating a breed-specific community

Successful businesses in both service-based and product-based industries recognize the importance of creating a client experience that is relevant to the individual client, custom built for them, and different than they can get anywhere else. In veterinary medicine where the services offered and the products sold are essentially the same from practice to practice, breed-specific care is customizable for each patient and provides an opportunity to set your practice apart from your competitors and create a WOW factor for the client.

Being aware of breed risk is helpful for both preventive care and when pets present for illness. Researchers estimate that 40 percent of dogs are affected by genetically-inherited diseases. Using a breed-specific approach provides a fantastic opportunity to enhance the consistency of patient care, strengthen client relationships, and improve the practice's bottom line. Client response has been strong in the majority of practices who use this approach, and client compliance with necessary care is improved.

Clients seek advice and information about their pets' healthcare needs from many sources – some more reputable than others. Breed-specific health plans offer an opportunity to continue to demonstrate your medical expertise and reinforce why your counsel is best. Resources to help you get started include: [www.healthypetu.com](http://www.healthypetu.com); [www.akc.org/breeds](http://www.akc.org/breeds); [www.vet.cam.ac.uk/iddid](http://www.vet.cam.ac.uk/iddid); [www.breedriskprevention.com](http://www.breedriskprevention.com); The Genetic Connection by Lowell Ackerman, DVM, DACVD; [www.genesis4pets.com](http://www.genesis4pets.com).

**Shannon Pigott, CVPM, ACC, founder and president of VetThink, Inc. recommends the following steps**

- Start with the top three to five breeds you see in your practice.
- Create breed-specific standards based on age utilizing the above resources.
- Decide which diseases you can detect early and intervene with medical care and support.
- Utilize your practice management software to set up, track and monitor your breed-specific plans and lifetime monitoring.
- Promote your breed-specific plans on your website, in your client communications (newsletter, direct mail, e-mail, text messaging, etc.), and with social media.
- Teach your team to “speak” breed medicine.

So do the research to determine if packaged wellness plans and breed-specific guidelines are a good fit for your practice. There’s a lot to consider – from what to include to how to price and administer the plans. Benchmarks 2012 – A Study of Well-Managed Practices includes “how to” information, management recommendations and tools to help you get started.