

Episode 19 | The Truth About Client Shaming in Vet Med

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The Joyful DVM
PODCAST

with Dr. Cari Wise
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Client shaming on social media, what drives you to do it, and what you're totally missing in the process, that's what we're talking about in Episode 19.

Welcome to the Joyful DVM Podcast. I'm your host, Veterinarian, and Certified Life Coach, Cari Wise. Whether you're dealing with the challenges in Vet Med, struggling with self-confidence, or you're just trying to figure out how to create a life and a career that you actually enjoy, you'll find encouragement, education, and empowering concepts, you can apply right away. Let's get started.

Hey everybody! Welcome to Episode 19. Before we jump in, I want to give a shout out to listener cbettag1 who wrote this review on iTunes, "Exactly what the vet ordered! Great podcasts and exactly the kind of content the profession needs. We need to reflect critically on our own thought processes so we can change those and be happier in the long run. Thumbs up. Keep up the good work! Cbettag1, thank you so much for such a kind review. I really appreciate you listening. And for all of you out there, if you'd like a shout out on the podcast, jump over into iTunes, leave us a review, and you just might hear me call out your handle in a future episode.

So today here in Episode 19, we're going to be talking about Client Shaming. And I want to start out and just describe what the concept is and how we're seeing it more frequently at this time in the world. So client shaming is when we put out kind of a public service announcement or PSA, if you will, on our social media. So whether that be our personal profiles, our clinic pages, our Instagram accounts, either personal or professional, those types of places, maybe even LinkedIn, where we're putting out this public service announcement about what we think clients should be doing in relation to veterinary hospitals at any given point in time. This is not a new thing. It's a strategy that a lot of us have used for a long time to try to passively-aggressively adjust client behavior.

So specifically, right now, when we're in the world of this pandemic, many of us are still functioning in curbside appointments, which, in a lot of cases has limited the number of appointments that we see in a day. It's definitely created more structure around what we're allowed and able to kind of add on at the last minute, compared to how we used to do business, when it was, everything was open and people could just kind of come and go. So we've had to put some structure in place and be very aware of our time and the extent of what we can accomplish in a given day because of this pandemic. And as a result, we've had to interact with our clients in a totally different way. Now the clients are just like any other human. They're just like you and me. They're like any other human right now who's at a bit of a heightened level of stress overall. And then you add to that their concern over their pets. They may seem a little extra. What we miss though, is that we're all a little extra.

That all being said, client shaming is coming into a place where we're starting to post these things on social media around, "Hey, just keep in mind. We're an essential service and your pet's ear infection may not be an emergency today. We may not be able to get you in for that. So if you call and you

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went in for an ear infection, just realize you're not the only thing going on right now. It may be a few days. Or your dog who's been scratching for three weeks isn't an emergency today. Perhaps, you know, we could get you in down the road. Or that bump on your dog that's been there for three months isn't an emergency today". So what is happening is that we're taking these requests that the clients are making and we're becoming offended by them, quite honestly, because we're seeing their requests as being inconsiderate or disrespectful to what we are experiencing as veterinary professionals. And instead of dealing with this on a one on one basis, we're going to social media and we're putting out these blanket, passive-aggressive posts, which are usually pretty long, and the ones that I've been seeing where we're really trying. But the motive is I believe to try to get people to understand what you're going through. But what's happening is that you're truly attacking your client base. It's not gonna land well, my friends.

So we have to understand exactly why we're doing what we're doing. And this is the part that I think we're totally missing. On the one hand, we've already identified that everything right now in the world is a little extra. Everybody's a little extra stressed out.

So when your emotional capacity, your tank, if you will, is running rather low, there's always going to be something that kind of tips you over the edge. And you never know what that's going to be. Many of us are experiencing that something with our clients, over some medical concern of their pet. And us, as veterinary professionals, we may see that it's not that big of a deal, but for the client, it's everything. Right? They're worried about their pet and they're reaching out to you for help. And then they're not able to get in. They get frustrated. They don't understand why you can't get them in right away because they're concerned today. So they perceive it as an emergency today. And prior to this time in the world, we usually would work those kinds of cases in. But what's true is they were never emergencies, right? The ear infection that the owner noticed today and is panicked about today isn't necessarily an emergency today because it probably didn't start today and waiting until tomorrow or two days from now isn't going to make a difference in the longevity, in the outcome of that pet.

Now, that being said, that was always true, but that's not the way that we have done business with them in the past. And so if we think about that and we realize that there are multiple things going on right now, that we can also maybe start to see that the solution isn't necessarily just putting out a blanket kind of request that the clients' change their behavior. It's also not useful to get frustrated by it.

So here's what's happening. We have a situation in our veterinary hospitals, where we have done a very good job at cultivating a client base. So you likely have thousands of people who bring their pets to you. Now we're in the middle of a pandemic. The way that we do business, day in and day out, has changed. We see appointments in a completely different structure. Most of us are using/doing drop off appointments. There's a limited number of slots. We're not able to work things in like we used to

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be. So our overall structure of the way that we function, day in and day out, in the practice has changed. Not all of your clients know that. Yes, we've been doing this for months, but if you go back and you look at the data for your hospital, odds are the vast majority of your clients are only coming in one, two, or three times a year. Most of them aren't coming in any more often than that. And a lot of them are only coming in once or twice a year, just for the preventive care because you've educated them so well, they know that this is necessary. So what we've taught them in the past is preventive care is very important. Getting in front of medical problems is the way to go and they've learned and they've listened. And so now what's happening is they're coming to you when these things pop up and you're getting offended because you're believing that they can't possibly understand what you're going through. If they understood they wouldn't be asking to get in same day for an ear infection. You think everybody should know this by now because you've been doing it for months. But what you totally miss is that that client may not have at any point in the last six months, since we've been dealing with this pandemic, may not have at any point, had a reason to engage with your hospital. Their normal cycle may not have come around yet. So this information that you are exhausted by relaying over and over and over again, has never been communicated to this one client.

We educate clients, one client at a time. There are certainly some efficiencies, some ways that we can get around that. But what's happening and what's driving us to put these blanket client shaming posts out into social media is not the individual requests for appointments and the individual conversations. It's the accumulation of those over time and what you're believing the clients should understand by now. It's also what you're making their requests mean as far as whether or not they respect you and whether or not they understand what you're going through. They're completely unrelated. What's actually happening is that you have a client base who needs veterinary services. And they've gotten veterinary services the same way for years and years and years. And now it's different - one client at a time -as people have called for appointments that you've had to educate them on the new way of doing things. Some of those clients have reacted very well to that. Some of those clients have been fussy. Whether or not they're fussy, or they act as fine about it, not something you can control because you've already decided how you're going to function in this pandemic at this point in time. Humans always get to do whatever humans want to do. It's when they're getting fussy about what you've decided to do that you're taking that personally and you get offended. You believe that they shouldn't feel upset or angry or frustrated with your change in procedure. You think that they should understand that because there's a pandemic you've had to make some changes and that they should respect that. We don't get to control what they think. They may not like it. They don't have to like it. That doesn't mean that you have to change what you do.

Unfortunately, in the veterinary community, because we are so compassion-driven and we are often people-pleasers, up until the time of the pandemic, we really let some of these, negative client behaviors drive what we did. Remember, there's the 90-10 rule: 10% of your clients make up 90% of

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your headaches. And I bet if you'd take a moment to take a look at who's fussing the most, who's complaining the most about the way that you're doing things, it's probably your 10%. Your wonderful clients, the ones that you have as your star clients, your VIPs, those clients are likely understanding when you're educating them on how things are being done now. They're probably not the ones that are coming back at you in anger and frustration. The actual thing, this highlights for us is that our unwillingness to deal with the 10% before this pandemic is actually creating more frustration with us right now. If we had, before this ever happened, if we had dealt with that 10%, if we had communicated our expectation for how we work together, if we've been very clear in defining our appointment times and holding appointment times and holding people accountable for being there, letting emergencies really only be emergencies, not caving and giving in every time somebody called and wanted something last minute and wanted to be worked into the schedule, if we had been more deliberate in the way that we did our scheduling and the way that we did our time, we maintained our time, then this would not be as much of an issue today. I just want us to see that. If we had been able to set our boundaries, we had clear policies and procedures around the way that we functioned as animal hospitals, as far as how appointments were created, how they were followed up, all of those kinds of things, then the people who didn't want to play by the rules would have already self-selected to go elsewhere. We might have also been more willing to have conversations with the people who really were not a great fit for our facilities, and we would have already sent them on their way somewhere else.

Unfortunately, our normal human instinct to be afraid of confrontation kept us from doing that. Our people-pleasing and perfectionistic nature had us making decisions to work them in, even when we didn't want to, before all of this happened. And now what's happened, is that in the face of this pandemic and the way that we're doing things and the way that we really believe strongly that we must continue to do things to keep our staff safe, and maybe even depending on where you live, you may have some regulations with your city and things like that, those kinds of reasons are stronger than your fear of telling them No. So the fear of telling them No that you had before that fear, that kept you from firing them as clients, that fear is overridden by your belief in what you're doing right now. So you are telling them No. And then those people are frustrated and they're coming back at you with that frustration. And then you're taking it very personally. This is just highlighting the opportunity to see that some clients are not a good fit for your practice. And that's okay. It's scarcity mindset over client base and money that keeps us saying yes to these people. It's our compassion driven nature. It is our perfectionism and people-pleasing nature. Our fear of getting a negative review on social media. But get what, guess what guys, when you get, let all this frustration build-up to the point that you go out and you post one of these client shaming posts on your social media accounts, that's going to hurt your practice way more than any one-off crazy review from a client that obviously isn't a right fit when anybody else in the world reads that review. The one-off crazy reviews that don't, are not consistent with everything else that they, that other client's experience, the ones that are not consistent with every other review on your site, you don't have to worry about the one-

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off crazies because people understand that sometimes people post crazy stuff and they disregard it because it's not their experience. And because the majority of the things are totally singing a different tune. But when you go out and you blast the client base with generalized client shaming posts, instead of individually dealing with the problems, you're actually going to repel a lot of your clients that aren't even doing that. We just need to see this. We actually ended up doing exactly the thing that we're so frustrated with.

If we'll just take a step back and recognize that our frustration with having to relay the same information over and over and over again, it may be the 2000th time that you've had to explain to a client how you're doing business now, how they need to schedule ahead, how you're not working in emergencies unless they're true emergencies, how you're referring to other facilities when needed, the thousandth or 2000th time that you've done that your frustration level is just going to creep up and up and up because you're believing that you shouldn't have to keep reminding people. What you're missing is that you're likely not reminding the same people over and over again. You're educating one client at a time. So that compassion that you had, as you explained, all this stuff to the clients in the first 30 days of this new way of practicing versus now, months later, can you see a difference in the way that you're doing it?

Many of us are believing that the client should just know, but I have to ask you, "How would they know?" If you didn't communicate it, wow would they know? Now, I said, I was gonna give you a couple of tips, a couple of ideas. If you have an email for your client base, then send out an email, if you haven't already. This is how we're doing business now. This is what it looks like. This is why same-day appointments are very rare. It's just not possible given the constraints that we're practicing under. Explain it. Tell them how to do it the right way. You also, if that's not going to get your client base, send them a letter. Yeah. It's going to take some manpower on the front end for you, but let's get the information out.

People can never meet a standard that you don't explain. If you have an expectation of behavior, but you've never communicated that then you can't really be frustrated with them for failing to meet it. They just don't know. How about instead of getting frustrated and letting that frustration drive us to post rants on social media, about clients being ungrateful, how about instead, we take a step back and identify, "Where do I have power in this? Where may I have contributed to this?" And then as the clients who refuse to comply with what you have in place show up and act out as they have probably done in the past, how about we have some courage to have that tough conversation to say, "Hey, I don't think that our hospital and your needs as a veterinary client are a good fit. Let me get you your records and you can find a hospital that can serve you better". That's always part of your prerogative. The thing is, many of us have never done that. Instead, we decide to bask in the frustration of the 10% of the people who always want more than what you give - the ones you can never actually give enough to, the ones who always went in at the last minute, the ones who don't abide by the rules and

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late for their appointments. They don't follow through on what you say. That 10% of your client base that you're afraid to say no to, that you're afraid to fire because you're afraid of their backlash, they're the ones that are driving 90% of the burden of your job. This is your opportunity to just call out the 10%.

Let's focus on the clients that we want to serve. Let's focus on the clients who are in alignment with what we're trying to do. And then let's also recognize that the clients who are calling in, because they just noticed an ear infection and they're worried, and they want to get in today, the ones who were calling in, because they've realized there's a bump on their dog and it's been growing and it, they're now they're worried about it, and they do have a little extra time.

Yeah, it's true. Some people do have a little extra time right now. So they're noticing more things, but let's just recognize that the reason that they're calling you is for two reasons. Number one, they're concerned about their pet. And number two, you educated them very, very well, and you told them, "Sooner is better than later". This is the message that we've communicated to our clients. This is the example of exactly what we've been trying to teach them. And now that they're engaging with us in a way that we have taught them to engage, we are offended because we think they should know better. It's ridiculous.

My friends, we have to get control of our own emotions. When it's all said and done, the client shaming, and then the sitting around and commiserating and complaining about client behavior, those are actions that are driven by an emotion within you. They're likely driven by frustration and entitlement. This is going to be some tough love, but it's true.

Frustration - the clients keep asking for more, the clients keep asking for appointments, same-day appointments, the clients keep asking to be squeezed in - you're frustrated because you want them to behave differently than they are. You can't control the humans. They're going to keep asking. So if every time they ask, you're believing that they shouldn't, just recognize frustration is your only option there.

Entitlement, that's number two. They shouldn't be: they shouldn't be asking me. This is a pandemic. They should know better. All of that has you believing that you should be experiencing something different within your veterinary hospitals than you're experiencing right now. Just like we always blame clients for being entitled. Entitled to getting in on the same day. Entitled to getting things for free. Entitled to getting our cell phone number. Like all of that stuff. We are very quick to point out where clients should be entitled or are acting entitled. And the reason that we're frustrated by that is because we're believing if they did an act, interact with us in an entitled way that we would feel better. Like at the end of the day, that's really what that's all about. We want them to be different than they are so that we can feel better. But you're doing now the same thing to yourself because you're

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also believing that you're entitled to a workday that's not chaotic.

Now, can you want a workday that's not chaotic? Absolutely. Can you create a workday that's less chaotic? Absolutely. But, you know what it takes? It takes having solid policies and procedures in place and communicating those to the clients so they know what the expectations are. So that they have the opportunity to meet the expectations. Instead, what most of us do is we have this idea in our mind of exactly how we want our days to run, we've never communicated any expectations to clients. We've caved when they've shown up late. We've worked them in when they've called with a non-emergent appointment and they just wanted to get in same day. We've done this over and over and over again. And so what we've taught them is that it doesn't matter what time you show up for your appointment. That it doesn't matter if you called in three days in advance or the same day, you can get in no matter what. That's what we've taught them. And then we're frustrated by the reality that that creates for us. Those longer days, those chaotic schedules. We've taught them that. This requires us to put on our leadership skills.

As hospital leaders, we have to define what do we want our hospital to function as. What are the policies and procedures around appointments and about late appointments and about emergencies? We gotta put those policies in place. We've got to communicate that expectation. Then everybody's got to stay on board. You can't have a policy that nobody actually enforces.

So, leaders, this is on you, to decide how you want your hospital to run. And then when your staff follows your direction, you got to have their back. You're going to have clients who are going to get upset with the new way you're doing things. But that's going to weed themselves out. That's going to last for a while. Then your best clients are still going to be there. Your 10% problem, clients are going to go somewhere else. Your headaches, your neck headaches are going to go down. I promise you. But the way to get the clients to behave differently, my friends, is not by shaming them on social media. That's going to make you feel better for a split second. Everybody liking and thumb-upping your points, that's other veterinary professionals. That's not your clients.

I want you to look at your posts. I want you to come from the outside. I want you to look at your post as if you were a client reading that. How would you know that it wasn't directed at you? You wouldn't. I, for one, as I see businesses, and it's not just a veterinary thing, my friends. This is happening not only in veterinary medicine but in all service-based industries. This kind of behavior, this social posting of the client shaming is happening a lot. As I see this, I'm making a mental note of businesses that all no longer engage with as a client. Not because their service has been bad in the past, but because the messaging they're putting out into the world right now is not in alignment with who I want to do business with. I don't want to be on the receiving end of client shaming.

I get that we're stressed out. Please, don't misunderstand. The whole world is stressed out right now.

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And I get that our days are crazy. That trying to figure out how to do curbside and everything with on the phone and we've communicated back and forth, and just the not having the human interaction, that does make the job more challenging. I get that. But if you turn against your clients, instead of looking inward to see how has my lack of policy and procedure actually contributed to what we're experiencing right now, if you don't look inward to see that, and you don't embrace this opportunity to get that stuff real tight, then you're going to be frustrated as this continues. And as you come out of it, you're going to fall right back into the same patterns of squeezing people in at the last minute for no good reason, for allowing people to show up late for appointments without asking them to reschedule. You're going to continue to work longer days because you can't possibly get done in one day what everything that you've agreed to do. You're going to continue that pattern on the other side of this. If there's one opportunity that this pandemic has given us, it is the opportunity to question everything that we've done in the past.

Everything is different right now. There's never been a better time to adjust the way that you do business than right now. And that's going to require, for some of you, considering letting go of some of those clients that are making up a huge percentage of your headaches. Recognize the only reason that you haven't done that so far is because of fear - fear of their reaction to your decision.

But what you're missing is every time you continue to serve people who are not in alignment with the way that you want to practice medicine, every time you continue to choose to serve them, you're choosing their emotions over your own. You're keeping them happy at the expense of your own happiness. And you're not even doing a very good job of that if we're being honest, because those people, they're still complaining. If you can't see anything else, just see when it comes to the emotions, humans are responsible for their own. We cannot create emotions in other people. Emotions come from our own thoughts only. And if you can't plant their thoughts, you can't create their emotions.

This requires us to have a little bit of courage to identify exactly how we want to do things, and then to communicate that. And then to just let the clients sort themselves out. Some are going to stay. The vast majority are going to stay. They're going to understand. These are the clients that already respect your time. That already schedule in advance. That already follow all your directions. Those guys aren't going anywhere. But the ones that always pushed the envelope, who always wanted more than what you were willing to give, who didn't follow through with their appointments, were no shows, showed up late, who wanted in for like last minute every single time, those clients were never a good fit. That is heightened right now. And it's the experiences that you're having with those clients that's making this one-client-one-education cycle seem like more than it is. It's those clients that are pushing you to your breaking point, where you go out and you blast the client base on social media. Just recognize it's not your entire client base that's the problem. It really isn't. It's a very small percentage of them, coupled with a misunderstanding of what communicating the new way of doing business has the impact that's had.

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If you haven't intentionally made a plan to communicate with your client base how things work now, then just realize that you're going to keep having the same conversation over and over and over again. Because until they need you, they don't become aware of how you're doing business. One client, one opportunity to educate. Now, once you've done that, you've got to hold your word. You can't keep bending to the bullies if you will, the clients who have never followed your rules. Right now, you're protected in a way behind, what you "have to do" because of this pandemic. But those clients are not happy. I'm sure they're frustrated. They're communicating that. They're yelling. I know they are. We see it all the time. But what's happening is because those interactions with clients are so intense, we're drawing a conclusion that all the clients are behaving that way. And it's not true. It's a fraction of your clients that are behaving that way. And if you get real honest with yourself, those clients are probably in your lower 10%. They were not a good fit in the first place. And this may be just your best opportunity to part ways, bless and release. Send them on a way to find an animal hospital that functions the way they are looking for service. And just allow yourselves to really lean into and embrace the clients who do comply with what you want to do, who are aligned with your practice, who are your ideal client for the way that you want to do things, your client base will grow from there. I promise you. It's the 10% that's sucking away your joy. Let's not lash out at the hundred percent as a way to try to solve it. It makes sense why we do it because it's much safer, from our own thought perspective, it's more, more, much safer just to put out a public service announcement and hope everybody gets it. But what it actually is, it's passive-aggressive nature, it's not likely going to reach all the clients. You're going to continue to be frustrated because you're going to believe that you told everybody. And at the end of the day, your frustration comes from you wanting your clients to be different than they are. And that entitlement to believing that they should be.

If we just realize the clients are the clients and we are the professionals. We get to decide what services we provide. And then they can decide whether or not we're a good fit. That's all that needs to happen here. If they don't want to interact with your hospital and receive veterinary services, the way that you want to provide them, that's not a problem for you. You do not need to change the way that you do business to make the clients happy. That's never going to work long time. It's going to suck away your joy and it gives away all of your power. Instead use this opportunity to get super clear on how you want to practice veterinary medicine, how you want your hospital facilities to run day in and day out. Get that outline. Get your policies and procedures in place. Start communicating that as a team, everybody on the same page. You start doing that, the clients are either going to be on board or they're not. The ones that aren't blessed and released, they'll go find someplace that works better for them. The ones that are, you're going to fill up your client base with those, your days are going to get easier. You're going to get control of your time again. You're going to take all your power back. And you're no longer going to feel like a victim of your veterinary practice or of the clients you serve.

Alright, my friends! Food for thought on client shaming. I hope this helps. And I'll see you next week.

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Thank you for listening to the Joyful DVM Podcast. If you'd like to learn more about the concept and ideas discussed here, and how to apply them to your own life, to create confidence and empowerment for yourself, you'll love Vet Life Academy. To check it out and learn more, visit joyfuldvm.com/vetlifeacademy. And if you're loving this podcast, I'd appreciate it if you'd share it with your friends and leave us a review on iTunes.

We can change what's possible in VetMed together.