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# The Human Side of Veterinary Medicine

## The secret of professionalism

Once in a while we rediscover professionalism and arrive at the same tepid conclusion—it's intangible, but its importance is hard to overestimate. Professionalism is more than knowledge, skill, and experience—clients are unable to assess those attributes. Amiability isn't the answer either—nice guys are a dime a dozen, and don't finish first. What, then, is professionalism and its secret?

Some speculate that professionalism is the result of accretion and that when the accretive process is over and done, we ooze instant professionalism. We have professionalism right down to the bone—in the way we walk and talk, in the way we wear our white coat, in the way we respond to clients, and in the way we go about our daily work. It's grand! Others theorize that professionalism is the extent to which we develop our attributes and use them to serve our clients, our patients, our community. It evolves without cease, limited only by our resolve to develop even more professionalism. It demands continuous attention and effort. Both theories agree that professionalism is an asset, a highly usable asset, a profitable asset that allows us to present our best qualities to those we contact, yet both fall short of defining professional-

ism. Perhaps by examining the various elements of professionalism, we may begin to determine its ageless secret.

Courtesy is one of the sharpest tools in our professionalism kit. After clients have been coming to us for a few years, there is a tendency for us to take them for granted. We downplay courtesy, forget to do things we did on their first visit, years ago. Those who maintain good client relationships observe the niceties of courtesy whether the clients' visit is their first or hundredth. There's courtesy in respecting our clients' time and in being pleasant. There's courtesy in keeping our facility clean. There's courtesy in listening with a full and sympathetic ear while our clients speak. There's courtesy in being agreeable, avoiding argument. Not much of a secret so far.

Caring is another element of professionalism. We may enter an animal hospital, find it in need of a coat of paint, cramped, chaotic, far from an award-winning facility. But the reception room is filled with satisfied clients. What's the big secret? One look at the veterinarian and staff tells why—they are caring people with caring looks, caring voices, caring actions. We may be unable to help a client's beloved animal, but we can show we care, at no added expense. It's necessary to show the client we care.

Professionalism revolves around communication. Our

communication may take place in our reception room, examining room, or office, over our telephone lines, or in our computer printout or newsletter. Although the process of communication resists generalities, there are some inviolable rules: The first is to listen to clients and discover their manner of communicating. The second is to talk with them on their own level, rather than above, below, or down to them. The third rule is to have speaking and listening roles in about equal measure. We should engage in dialogue, not monologue. The fourth is to let clients talk without interruption. If we have anything to say, we can say it after they have finished. To be sure we have the gist of the clients' viewpoints, we can restate their comments in other language. Many of us have forgotten how to listen and converse with nonveterinarians. We become a "jargonaut," forgetting to use clearly understandable nomenclature. We should let comfortable words flow naturally.

It would be ridiculous to assert that ignorance is a mark of professionalism, but reckless exhibition of intelligence does not pay, and can be a millstone around our professional neck. If we are more intelligent than our clients (or think we are), we may act as though we are, patronize them, look down on them, talk down to them—and unwittingly force them into the hands of a veterinarian who represents "just plain folks." Rampant exhibi-

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tion of supposed superiority is inexcusable. We are smarter in veterinary medicine and probably nothing else. We can learn something from each client.

We can lose a client by failing to do what we say we will do. If new in practice, it is tempting for us to promise the world, and that's okay if we can deliver it, but our clients may expect us to do just that and to do so forever. Our practice may grow, making it more difficult to do it. Old clients may be disappointed. We should remember that around the corner is a young veterinarian just starting out, promising the world and delivering it—the same promises we made five or ten years ago.

Praise wins the attention, confidence, friendship, and support of clients. It is possible to be more generous with our compliments without being mushy or insincere. We can compliment things that beg complimenting: "My, Reggie is a well-cared-for puppy." We can compliment our clients by asking them for advice or information: "How do you keep Bosco's coat so shiny?" Compliment them on their choice of pet: "Eleanor is certainly an intelligent and affectionate cat." Feed their own high estimate of themselves. Above all, though, it must be sincere praise. We should not be afraid that our praise will be construed as flattery. There is a way to avoid the flattery pitfall: if we compliment something the client considers important, they will think it praise; if we compliment something they don't care a fig about, they will think it flattery.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking we are doing pretty good, especially when livin' is easy, the fish are jumpin', and money is flowing in. Clients may think us less than a red-hot item, but unless we ask we will never know.

An introspective questionnaire may be in order. It can be an eye-opener to see ourselves as others see us. Our clients may fail to share our aggrandized opinion of ourselves: "big shots" who make them feel small, "know-it-alls" who can't be told a thing, "gabbers" so intoxicated by the exuberance of their own verbosity they never let them get a word in edgewise, or "clairvoyants" who act as though they can read their mind. All these have committed the sin of unprofessionalism. But clients have veterinarians they like immensely: those who use understandable words, those who are patient, those who explain and teach, those who value their time, and those who are friendly.

The veterinarian with obvious professionalism may not be the most intelligent or even the most personable, but they are certainly the most interesting and interested. They exhibit interest in everything and anything, especially their clients and their problems. They are interested in their clients' opinions, no matter how different from their own. This is more than garden-variety or feigned interest, it is sincere interest, intelligent interest. They think they can learn something. Interested, they listen, and listening is that oft-forgotten half of communication.

Attitude is yet another important element of professionalism. It includes our smile, demeanor, speech, and body language. Our attitude toward ourselves must be right. We must like ourselves, respect ourselves, respect our work, believe in our work. Our attitude toward our profession must be right. Our attitude toward our clients and staff must be right. Our attitude toward other veterinarians must be right. In essence, our attitude toward the world must be right.

"Packaging" proclaims our professionalism. We are well-aware of the packaging of products and the role it plays in selling goods, but sometimes pay scant attention to our personal packaging. It includes "dressing for success," and that may mean nothing more than frequent change of our white coat or coveralls.

It's easy for us to run out of steam, lose our bounce, become less interested. The years roll by, and we get tired of the sameness of it all. We are like an actor after his thousandth stage performance. We lose our zip. We bore ourselves and others. That dreadful duo, boredom and burnout, rears its ugly head—the bane of the veterinarian trapped in practice, no longer interested in practice, bored by practice. There is a preventive, and although not a panacea, sometimes a cure—interest in the person on the other side of the examining table. It will keep us interested many times a day, day after day, year on end. It has been sustaining veterinarians for years, keeping them from becoming jaded. We should retain our youthful interest.

If we look at five veterinarians in five practices in the same general area, offering the same services, equally trained, with equal fees, all five on a par insofar as age, experience, and skill are concerned, one could be getting most of the business while the remaining four divide the scraps. We often think that veterinarians with professionalism have something special—and they do. It's little things, little techniques of fostering and maintaining good rapport with clients, little techniques of making themselves amiable, attractive, believable. They have gotten their message across. The secret of professionalism is: there is no secret.