LANGUAGE THAT WORKS
CHANGING THE WAY WE TALK ABOUT VETERINARY CARE

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Message from CareCredit and Pets Best
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pet owners want to do
WHAT’S BEST FOR THEIR ANIMALS

But they don’t always bring their animals in for regular check-ups, and they don’t always follow the veterinary team’s recommendations. Research shows that changing the way we talk about veterinary care can significantly influence owners’ perceptions about the value and importance of regular veterinary care.

What’s inside: This book offers a close look at the words and phrases that veterinary teams should—and shouldn’t—use when talking with pet owners. Changing how we say things to clients can help pet owners better understand the value of preventive care, and ultimately lead to healthier animals.

Where the info comes from: AVMA partnered with Maslansky + Partners, a corporate and public affairs market research firm, to conduct language-focused research with pet owners across the United States. This research uncovered the most resonant language to talk about the value of veterinary medicine and encourage pet owners to prioritize wellness visits.
a fundamental communication shift:
MAKE IT PERSONAL
Pet owners say they fundamentally value veterinary medicine. But infrequent visits are often the reality.

This is due to three main factors:

1. They think the veterinarian is just for emergencies and illnesses.

2. They get services for their pet elsewhere.

3. They’re money conscious.

What’s the solution?

The best way to address owner concerns is by making veterinary care personal. Research shows that pet owners value three main things when it comes to their veterinarian: expertise, a strong relationship, and personalized recommendations. Pet owners understand that a strong and trusting relationship enables the veterinarian to provide better care and more customized recommendations in every area of their pet’s care—from vaccines and medications to nutrition and behavior.

By focusing on experience, the relationship, and individualized care, we can address pet owners’ concerns while promoting the importance of regular veterinary care.
here’s **HOW:**

“**Veterinarians are just for emergencies. If my pet looks healthy, I don’t need to bring it to the veterinarian.**”

☑️ **Response:**
Regular check-ups help the whole veterinary team get to know you and your pet. They let us take time to build a strong and trusting relationship with you both. Getting to know what’s normal for your pet while it’s healthy can help me spot anything unusual before it potentially becomes a big problem.

“I get plenty of support for my pet from other providers, like our groomer, trainer, the pet store, and even the internet.”

☑️ **Response:**
The best veterinary care is personalized veterinary care. Once we have a relationship with your pet, our team can make specific recommendations that suit your pet’s breed, age, lifestyle, temperament, and overall health. Your veterinarian is an invaluable source of information—certainly in the medical sphere, but also beyond. We can refer you to many other specialists and services in the area—such as trainers, groomers, and kennels—that your pet might need or benefit from in the future.

“Veterinary care is too expensive. I don't want to put a price on my pet's life, but I can't afford such costly care.”

☑️ **Response:**
I completely understand your financial concerns, and we can work with you to explore a full range of flexible care and treatment options to fit your budget. We also can look into flexible payment plans and insurance options.
language

THAT WORKS
Fundamentally shifting how we communicate about veterinary care can make a big difference. An emotional appeal is the most effective way to talk with pet owners about veterinary care.

This is true no matter the specific topic:

- **a** Why go to the veterinarian?
- **b** When to go to the veterinarian?
- **c** What do you get from the veterinarian?
- **d** How do you pay for veterinary services?

AVMA’s in-depth research with pet owners nationwide has unveiled strategies that work best for talking with owners about the value of veterinary care and encouraging consistent check-ups.
What’s the most resonant value proposition of veterinary care? How can we best connect with pet owners to encourage them to choose to get their pets to the clinic more regularly for check-ups and preventive care?

Focus on relationship

The best way in to a conversation about why to see a veterinarian is to focus on pet owners’ relationship with their pet. Owners know intuitively that preventive care is what’s best for their pets’ long-term health. Focusing on veterinary care as a responsibility isn’t effective because the reminder feels chastising. Instead, clients prefer to focus on the relationship they have with their pets.

Say this:

“Veterinary care is one of the best ways to keep your pet healthy and happy for years to come.”

Not this:

“Veterinary care is a responsibility that comes along with being a pet owner.”
Position pet owners as their pet’s advocate.

This reminds clients of their responsibility without being overbearing.

** Say this:  
“It’s important to remember pets can’t communicate about their own health.”

** Not this:  
“You need to be responsible and bring your pet in to see the veterinarian yearly.”

“Animals tend to hide illness, so it’s not always obvious if there’s something wrong.”

“I won’t know if something is wrong with your pet unless you bring it in.”

Connect to the real-life positive outcomes of regular veterinary care.

By providing recognizable examples of avoidable conditions, you can help pet owners relate the benefits of preventive care to their own pet.

** Say this:  
“Taking these regular, preventive measures helps your pet avoid preventable illnesses like rabies, Lyme disease, and parasite infestations such as fleas, ticks, and worms.”

** Not this:  
“If you want to keep your pet healthy, make sure you see your veterinarian regularly.”
Some approaches to promoting regular care actually do more harm than good.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>What it looks like</th>
<th>Why it falls flat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comparing pets directly to humans</td>
<td>“When a baby is born, parents visit the pediatrician for scheduled immunizations.”</td>
<td>Despite how much pet owners love their pets, they push back on parallels that suggest pets need the exact same care as a human family member.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Driving urgency with statistics        | “17% of dog owners and 46% of cat owners don’t visit the veterinarian even once a year.” | Statistics can do more harm than good, often reinforcing to pet owners they’re not alone in infrequent visits. |
|                                       | “1 in 200 dogs becomes infected with heartworm, which a routine vaccine can prevent.” |                                                                                                          |

| Using scare tactics                    | “Skipping visits to the veterinarian can leave a pet vulnerable.”                       | Pet owners often have a negative response to words like “vulnerable” and “deadly” that threaten the worst case. They prefer a more positive approach. |
|                                       | “We need to catch a problem before it has a chance to potentially become deadly.”       |                                                                                                          |
language spotlight: CHECK-UPS

The term “check-ups” resonates most with pet owners. In this study, 41% of owners chose “check-ups” as the best way to talk about wellness visits. It feels all-encompassing, and suggests they’ll leave the veterinarian feeling reassured about their pet’s health. They describe the language as a hopeful way of conveying the importance of protecting their pet from problems down the road—without using scare tactics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Check-ups</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellness visits</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointments</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What’s the most convincing way to encourage pet owners to prioritize routine, preventive care? And critically—how do we best communicate with pet owners who haven’t been regular or consistent in getting to the hospital for veterinary visits?

Don’t make assumptions about what’s kept them from regular veterinary visits.

It can feel intrusive and “none of your business.” People also don’t like to be reminded that they haven’t been getting regular care for their pet.

✅ Say this:

“Whether you visited the veterinarian last month or last year, regular check-ups at each stage of your pet’s life are important.”

❌ Not this:

“Life happens. Maybe you moved to a new city or you recently had a baby. Whatever the reason, it’s easy to forget that it’s been a few years since your last visit to the veterinarian.”

Reassure them it’s easy to pick back up if they haven’t been regular.

Some pet owners have the notion that if they haven’t gone to the veterinarian in a while, there’s no point going now. It’s important to let them know that the veterinarian is still able to meet them wherever they are. Pet owners said hearing the veterinary team say they can help “catch up” and “get up to speed” felt personal, positive, and motivating.

✅ Say this:

“Your veterinarian can help you catch up on your pet’s healthcare needs.”
When to go to the veterinarian?

Emphasize that care is important at each stage of their pet’s life.
This lets pet owners know that if they missed a check-up last year, or even for several years, their pet will still benefit from seeing the veterinarian now.

✓ Say this:

“Veterinary medicine plays an important role at each stage of your pet’s life.”

Connect regular, routine care to a strong relationship with the pet’s veterinarian.
Pet owners say that they value a strong relationship with their veterinarian. Show how regular, routine check-ups can help strengthen that relationship.

✓ Say this:

“Regular check-ups allow your veterinarian to build a strong relationship with you and your pet. Getting to know your pet now—while s/he is healthy—is important because that familiarity will help me provide better care down the road if something were to go wrong.”
language spotlight: ROUTINE AND REGULAR

How should we discuss the needed frequency of check-ups? Most owners—80%—chose the words “routine” and “regular” as the best way to promote regularity without being overbearing. Just 20% said yearly, while no one said frequent.

Pet owners chose the best ways to promote regularity without being overbearing:

- **80%** “routine” and “regular”
- **20%** “yearly”
- **0%** “frequently”
pro tip:
COMMUNICATING WITH NEW PET OWNERS

Research suggests that new pet owners are more likely to visit the veterinarian frequently. So this is an excellent time to establish good habits when it comes to their pet’s care.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language to use</th>
<th>Why it works</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“A visit to the veterinarian is the best way to start your pet off on the right paw.”</td>
<td>Communicates the importance of early visits in a playful tone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Check off the boxes for important procedures (e.g., parasite control), vaccines, and recommendations (e.g., training advice) early in your pet’s life.”</td>
<td>Provides a high-level look at details of what to expect during early veterinary visits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bringing your puppy or kitten in for regular check-ups is the first step in building a strong relationship with your veterinarian.”</td>
<td>Establishes the early years as key to fostering a strong relationship, which pet owners value.</td>
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What’s the best way to position the role of the veterinarian, especially when it comes to topics not directly related to medical care? What’s the right language to connect the dots between a strong relationship with the veterinarian and better, more personalized care?

**Set your expertise apart by highlighting experience, not training.**

In a head-to-head comparison, pet owners agreed that it’s experience, not education, that best measures a veterinarian’s expertise. In particular, language that illustrates experience with different animals and conditions resonates.

✔ **Say this:**

“Our veterinarians see and care for hundreds of pets of all shapes, sizes, types, and breeds each year.”

“From vaccines and medications to nutrition and behavior, your veterinarian draws upon their experience to develop a care plan that’s personalized to your pet’s specific needs.”
What do you get from the veterinarian? 

**DOESN’T WORK**

Keep in mind that some approaches to highlighting expertise can backfire.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>What it looks like</th>
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<tr>
<td>Equating academic credentials with expertise</td>
<td>“Veterinarians complete an average of 4 ½ years of undergraduate education—and then veterinary school is another 4 years.”</td>
<td>Pet owners know veterinarians go to school, and they don’t question our credentials. Focusing on our education not only is unnecessary, but also can leave them wondering if we feel there’s something we need to prove.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggesting veterinarians know better than others</td>
<td>“When it comes to your pet’s anatomy, behavior, nutrition, and welfare, no one is more committed, experienced, or better equipped than veterinarians.”</td>
<td>The idea that only veterinarians are qualified to help is a turnoff. Pet owners feel that we’re belittling the many other sources they trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting science, research, and evidence</td>
<td>“Only a veterinarian can provide science, research, and evidence-based guidance.” “Veterinarians lead with science, providing trusted and evidence-based information.”</td>
<td>Some pet owners suggest science can be manipulated.</td>
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</table>
Of anything a veterinarian could offer, “personalized recommendations” stood out as the most valuable to pet owners, differentiating veterinarians from other sources that provide generic support. This aligns with how pet owners see their veterinarian’s role—one source of knowledge among many, with the owner ultimately making the final decision.

“A veterinarian provides pet owners with _____”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of pet owners chose:</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answers</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insight</td>
<td>6%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

“A veterinarian can provide you with _____”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of pet owners chose:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personalized recommendations</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations that are right for you</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailored recommendations</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations that take into account your life</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations that reflect your circumstances</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### pro tip:
**BUILDING CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS**

Pet owners want a strong relationship with their veterinarian. To clients, the word “relationship” signals that the veterinarian is trustworthy, will make their pet feel comfortable, and goes out of the way to provide personalized service.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Language to use</th>
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<tr>
<td>“You can ask your veterinarian about anything related to your pet’s health and welfare.”</td>
<td>Lets pet owners know the veterinarian is available for anything they need—and on their terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Whether it’s over a quick phone call, email, text message or in a routine check-up, you can always turn to your veterinarian.”</td>
<td>Shows the relationship can extend beyond the physical bounds of the office and makes veterinary care feel more accessible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Your veterinarian can provide personalized recommendations for anything related to your pet’s care—from vaccines and medications to nutrition and behavior.”</td>
<td>Fortifies the notion that once a relationship is established, a veterinarian can provide personalized recommendations related to many different aspects of a pet’s care.</td>
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What’s the most resonant way to break down the cost barriers associated with veterinary care? How do we empower pet owners to have conversations with the veterinarian about cost of care, and explore flexible treatment and payment options?

**Address the elephant in the room head-on: cost**

Pet owners’ first association with veterinary care is money—but for the most part, they aren’t budgeting for regular veterinary care and aren’t aware of payment options. Owners appreciate when their veterinarian demonstrates understanding about cost of care and even voices a desire to help make veterinary care more affordable.

✅ Say this:

“Veterinary care is expensive, and it’s often a reason even the most loving of pet owners have to make difficult decisions around what they can and can’t afford.”
Show that cost doesn’t have to be prohibitive by providing various options.

The availability of “options” conveys that veterinary care isn’t one-size-fits-all, and neither is cost. Pet owners know that veterinary practices need to make a profit, but they’re also willing to believe that their veterinarian would be on their side to explore financial options.

✅ Say this:

“Your veterinarian can work with you to develop flexible care and treatment options for your budget.”

“There may be more than one treatment, medication, or procedure that can provide a good result.”

“Our veterinary practice can help you with payment options and other financial tools to afford veterinary care.”
Empower pet owners to ask questions about the cost of veterinary care and possible treatment options.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>“Ask me any questions about the cost of care.”</td>
<td>Communicates that the veterinarian will partner with pet owners to find best options</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<td>“Start conversations with your veterinarian about the cost of care.”</td>
<td>Feels intimidating, like too much of an effort, and puts the onus on the pet owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Speak up about the cost of care.”</td>
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</table>
Connect options to cost-saving preventive care.

Tying options to routine care helps pet owners see they can afford veterinary care on an ongoing basis. It also highlights the idea that budgeting isn’t just for emergencies, but also for prevention.

✓ Say this:

“Asking about the options available to you can help ensure your pet is getting the routine care he or she needs—which often ends up saving money in the long run.”

“Pet health insurance is one option that can help defray the cost of veterinary care—both for routine check-ups and for emergencies.”
A word of caution. Even though pet owners want to know they have options, be mindful not to use language that can be perceived as judgmental. Pet owners value their relationship with us, and they’d prefer to work with us on alternative treatment options rather than just be referred elsewhere. Sometimes a referral to a more affordable provider may be the best option, but it’s important to make them feel they’re not being judged if that’s the end result.

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<td>“Everyone at the veterinary practice is committed to finding an option that works for you.”</td>
<td>Communicates that the veterinary team is on the pet owner’s side and cost shouldn’t prevent animals from getting the care they need.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<td>“If your veterinarian can’t meet your budget, we’re always willing to refer you to a lower-cost clinic.”</td>
<td>Feels judgmental and off-putting, like the pet owner isn’t “good enough” for your practice.</td>
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the importance
OF THE RIGHT
LANGUAGE
Connect with clients and build relationships.

As veterinarians, we know the surest way to keep pets healthy is through preventive care. But veterinary medicine is about more than just science. In order to provide the best possible care to our patients, we need to connect with clients on a foundational level. When our clients trust us, they’re more receptive to our recommendations—and more likely to get their pets the care they need.

The right language helps us build that connection. By using specific words and phrases, we’re able to show pet owners that we understand and can meet their main concerns:

• **Clinical experience**
• **Personal relationship**
• **Customized care**

By simply *changing the way we communicate with clients*, we’re one valuable step closer to building stronger and more trusting client relationships, increasing compliance, and maximizing patient outcomes.
stay competitive
WITH AVMA RESOURCES

Whether you work in a small clinic or a large hospital, AVMA has the resources you need to thrive in practice. Find practical tools to build business profitability, strengthen your veterinary team, enhance client relationships, manage operations, implement and optimize telehealth, and much more.

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