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Advice: How to Handle Chronically Tardy Clients

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Dear Second Opinion,

Like many veterinary hospitals, our clinic is experiencing increased demand for our services right now. We are so heavily scheduled that clients who arrive late or simply don't show up for their appointments can really throw us off.

For example, last week I had a client arrive 15 minutes late to her appointment on a day that we had no additional openings. She was apologetic, but this wasn't her first time being late. Because of the delay in starting her appointment, the clients scheduled after her, including a euthanasia, ended up having to wait because I was running behind. Her pet will need several follow-up appointments in the near future, so I can see this scenario happening again.

What are some ways to deal with chronically late clients?

—*Running Behind 'Cause You Can't Tell Time*

Dear Running Behind,

I feel your pain! I know how disruptive and frustrating late-arriving clients can be. The challenges you're experiencing are shared industry-wide—especially since the start of the pandemic.

While there are many routes you can take to improve things, I will focus on two questions today. First, does your practice have an established policy for late arrivals? Second, how is the policy communicated? If you do not currently have a written policy, that's where I'd start.

Here's an example of what that could look like:

"A grace period of 10 minutes will be permitted for unforeseen delays you may encounter while traveling to *PRACTICE NAME* for your pet's appointment. If you arrive more than 10 minutes after your pet's appointment start time, you will be asked to reschedule for a later date. This process helps ensure that pets arriving on time are seen in a timely manner."

The second part of the equation is how these expectations are communicated to clients. At my practice, we have added our late arrival policy to the electronic forms new clients complete as part of their pet's first visit. The policy is also on the Client Rights & Responsibilities page on our website, and embedded in our email and SMS appointment confirmations. In our appointment confirmations, we also encourage clients to arrive 10 minutes before their pet's scheduled appointment start time to "*ensure there is sufficient time to complete our check-in process.*"

For consistently late clients, an additional tactic to consider is having someone in a position of authority share how the tardy client's behavior impacts your team and other pets needing care.

The veterinarian or other practice leader might take a moment to shift out of the ordinary course of the appointment or a transactional conversation:

"Mrs. Smith, may I share something unrelated to Max's ear infection? I don't mean to put you on the spot, and the last thing I want to do is make you feel bad, but I've noticed you frequently arrive late for Max's appointments, and I'm not sure you realize how it impacts our team. When you arrive late, our team has to scramble to catch up, which sometimes results in delayed care for other clients and pets that did arrive on time. I'm confident that you are not arriving late on purpose. As I'm sure you know, our team has been stretched thin lately due to the increased demand for pet care, and if arriving on time is something you could help me with, I would consider it a personal favor. Would you be willing to prioritize arriving on time for future appointments?"

An earnest and authentic personal request like this can permanently impact the behavior of some clients. Others, of course, will not be swayed. In my experience, it's worth the effort and energy to make an appeal like this if it's the difference between keeping a valued client and being forced to send them elsewhere.

No matter how comprehensive your policy or how well you communicate it to clients, some people will still arrive late. In some instances, tardiness can be a complex problem unrelated to a client being "scatterbrained" or intentionally disrespecting your team. For some clients, arriving on time will likely remain a long-term challenge. It is up to you whether to tolerate their behavior within the scope of your policy or encourage chronic offenders to seek care for their pets elsewhere.

Remember, you are not alone as you work through this. It's a challenge we're all facing. I hope that getting a policy in place and ensuring it is consistently shared with clients will help alleviate some of your team's frustration and, at the very least, provide your team with guidance for when to require late-arriving clients to reschedule. You've got this!

Sincerely,

Ben Spinks

For global readers, a calculator to convert laboratory values, dosages, and other measurements to SI units [can be found here](#).

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