

## 7 Strategies to Calm Angry Clients

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### Meet Your Consultant



Best known as the “Queen of Scripts,” Wendy Myers knows the right words will lead clients to say yes to your medical recommendations, driving patient and practice health. As founder of Communication Solutions for Veterinarians, she teaches practical skills through online courses, onsite and virtual consulting, and conferences. Wendy’s experience as a partner with eight veterinarians in an AAHA-accredited specialty and emergency hospital helped her understand issues that practice owners and managers face. A certified veterinary journalist, she has authored six books and has monthly columns in *Veterinary Practice News* and *dvm360* magazines, ensuring her industry knowledge is relevant for today’s veterinary teams. Learn how Wendy can train your team at [csvetscourses.com](http://csvetscourses.com).

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Appointments are overloaded, you’re operating short-staffed, and now a jerk client is yelling at you. Again. What you’ll learn:

- Let explosive clients “release their steam”
- Keep your cool...always
- Actively listen and confirm client concerns
- Control the discussion with facts
- Present solutions and get clients to agree
- Stop potential problems before they start

**BONUS:** Facilitator’s guide to implement the training

“The client started yelling the moment I answered the call. She went on and on about how her pet is sick and must be seen TODAY. She said the client service representative (me) was rude, and the doctor was ‘all about the money.’ I wanted to shout back and hang up.” Has this happened to you?

Clients get angry for lots of reasons, some justified and others ridiculous. Your service didn’t meet their expectations. They made assumptions about treatments or costs. The pet’s illness occurred at an inconvenient time. They were having a bad day.

Because clients will always challenge you, know what to do before situations occur. When you respond professionally, you will be seen as a trusted expert who is a problem solver. Let’s learn conflict-resolution strategies to save your sanity and rescue client relationships.

### Strategy 1: Use the client’s name

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The first step is to find out the person’s name and use it. Communication expert and author Dale Carnegie explains, “A person’s name is to that person, the sweetest, most important sound in any language.”<sup>1</sup> Hearing your name activates your brain more than any other type of input.<sup>2</sup> Using names can change how you see others and perhaps how they see you.

People want to be talked “with” not “at.” Using names shows respect and that you value the relationship. Names let you connect with clients rather than feeling they’re another transaction being processed.

For a shortcut to get names, look at caller ID on your phone to see if the person’s name and/or phone number are listed. Quickly look up the name or phone number in your practice-management software to

access the electronic medical record for details to help you during the conversation. If the caller is anonymous or the phone number isn't in your database, simply ask for caller and pet names.

**SAY THIS:** *"I'm concerned your pet is sick. May I ask your name and your pet's name so I may access the medical record and see how we can help you?"*

The word "concerned" expresses empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others.<sup>3</sup> Repeating names makes clients feel important and plays a huge role in calming them down.

### **Strategy 2: Let explosive clients "release their steam"**

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My pressure cooker has a steam release valve, which allows steam to escape before you may safely remove the lid. If you open a pressure cooker before emptying the steam, it will explode. The same is true of angry clients.

Take clients' anger seriously.<sup>4</sup> When clients are hopping mad, pay attention but do not disturb. Furious people need to release their steam. Let them talk. Be patient. This is the next step in deescalating the situation. Show empathy with statements such as, *"I understand you are upset. Please tell me what happened, <client name>."*

Resist the urge to interrupt, even if clients say something that isn't true. Interruptions will ignite more anger. Subtly show you are listening with words such as "OK" and *"Thank you for sharing that information."* This assures clients you are paying attention and want to know the whole story.

### **Strategy 3: Keep your cool...always**

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Your instinct may be to go into fight or flight mode, defending yourself or attacking the aggressor. Returning anger will be inefficient and ineffective. Your negative response is like throwing gasoline on the client's explosive behavior. Telling a client to "calm down" can be perceived as patronizing and will often have the opposite effect.

Most clients don't mean the hateful things they say when they're angry. You've heard it before: "If I can't pay, you're just going to let my dog die?" or "Veterinarians are all about the money." Remember, clients are not angry with you. They are dissatisfied with an aspect of your services or products.

If you want clients to behave, you must be professional and kind, too. However, you don't deserve bully behavior such as clients who shout expletives. Explain the expected behavior and how it will result in a solution.

**SAY THIS:** *"If I hear that language again, I won't be able to help you and your pet. We need to find a better way to communicate so we may find a solution together."*

The word "language" is neutral compared to "If you don't quit cussing," which may be perceived as confrontational and lead to more negative words. Use "we" to lead clients to the collaborative behavior you want rather than "you," which blames them.

If you don't stay calm, it will be impossible to find out and solve the client's problem. Ways to stay calm:

- **Have a slight smile.** If you're on the phone, smiling will relax you, and your tone of voice will be more friendly. If you're face-to-face, maintain a neutral expression to show you want to learn more.

- **Take deep, calming breaths.** Breathe quietly so it's not obvious to the client, which could come across as creepy. Breathe with a slow and steady rhythm. It's OK to wait a moment and collect your thoughts rather than responding immediately. When you demonstrate a calm and professional demeanor, the client may be unconsciously compelled to mirror your attitude.<sup>5</sup>
- **Ask questions.** Instead of trying to show them why they're wrong, ask questions that require clients to focus on facts. Questions let you shift the client from emotional aspects of the complaint to focusing on solutions. Ask questions such as, *"What information was shared with you about the cost of care?"* *"What questions can I answer about the tests we discussed?"* *"What information did you find online that we can discuss?"*

#### **Strategy 4: Actively listen and confirm client concerns**

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By complaining to you, clients want two results: 1) You understand the pain and frustration they experienced, and 2) They want you to solve the problem. If you rush the conversation, clients may feel you are ignoring their frustration.

Your goal is to find out why the client is upset. What went wrong? Where did breakdown in communication occur? What does the client expect you to do?

To make clients feel heard and understood, use active listening skills. Active listening means stopping and digesting words your clients say.<sup>6</sup> If you're formulating your rebuttal while clients talk, you are not actively listening. Tips to achieve active listening:

- Don't mentally formulate your response while clients are speaking.
- Never interrupt.
- Make eye contact.
- Ask questions for clarification.
- Repeat core concerns to show understanding.
- Keep an open posture. Don't cross your arms or stand behind a reception counter or exam table.

Once clients are done venting, use reassuring statements such as:

- *"I understand this caused you real stress and concern."*
- *"I understand this situation is frustrating for you."*
- *"You took the right step by bringing your pet to us for diagnosis and treatment."*
- *"I know it was frustrating and inconvenient that you did not receive the medication when you were expecting it."*

Repeat and paraphrase what clients tell you to confirm that you understand. When you hear an important point, repeat it. Say, *"Let me make sure I understand. You gave your dog his last arthritis pill this morning, and then called to get a refill. You left a message with our client service representative. You expected to pick up the medication at 5 p.m. It wasn't ready when you arrived. Am I correct so far?"*

#### **Strategy 5: Control the discussion with facts**

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Anecdotes and argumentative statements can derail your discussion. Have facts at hand to keep control of the conversation. Let's say a client questions surgical fees during checkout. Take him to an exam room, manager or doctor office, or employee break room where you can have a private, uninterrupted conversation. Say, *"Let's step into an exam room where you may have my complete attention and we can find a solution together."* Bring the signed treatment plan and invoice into the exam room or

access these electronic documents on a computer where the client may see them. Use consent forms to backup your position. Clients should always sign a treatment plan and anesthetic consent form, which gives you legal permission to treat. If the client ignores these documents, calmly repeat them to show you will uphold factual information.

**SAY THIS:** *“Thank you for sharing your concerns about the cost of your pet’s surgery with me. I have a better understanding of your perspective now. We want you to be happy with the surgery that <pet name> received. Let’s review the treatment plan together. I will answer any questions you have. [Discuss purpose of exam, preanesthetic testing, surgical monitoring, IV catheter and fluids, pain medication, nursing care, etc.] These services reflect our surgical standards of care to ensure your pet has a comfortable experience and quality outcome. Here is the treatment plan that describes the services and fees, which you signed. What questions can I answer about these services or fees?” <Client responds.> “Are you satisfied with the information I have provided?”*

Let’s review key phrases:

- **Open with an empathic statement.** Thank the client for sharing his concern and explain you want him to be happy with your service.
- **Revisit the benefits of your services.** Share the “WHY” behind your surgical protocols. When discussing preanesthetic testing, support why testing is “included,” avoiding the term “required.” “Included” shows testing is medically necessary rather than “required,” which may lead clients to argue over “hospital policy.” Explain that performing preanesthetic testing is *“like an internal physical exam that lets us check organ function and helps us identify any unknown diseases or potential health risks before we administer anesthesia. We also will have a baseline as part of your pet’s medical history so we can measure her future health status and identify subtle changes early.”*
- **Never use the term “estimate.”** You’ll focus the conversation on price. “Treatment plan” emphasizes medical care. Point out that the client signed the consent, *“Your signature gave us permission to perform these services for <pet name> and indicates you accepted our fees.”*
- **Invite questions.** The phrase *“What questions can I answer?”* encourages clients to seek clarification and is more effective than the yes-or-no approach of, “Do you have questions?”
- **Reaffirm the commitment.** *“You made the right decision to choose treatment for your pet. Are you satisfied with the information I have provided?”*

### **Strategy 6: Present solutions and get clients to agree**

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Find common ground, which will create feelings of empathy and understanding. Helpful statements:

- *“We both want the best outcome for your pet. Let’s discuss treatment choices and fees so you can decide how you want us to proceed.”*
- *“We both want your pet to receive timely medication refills. Let’s talk about ways to make refills easier and faster in the future.”*
- *“We agree that the results of this treatment/surgery did not go as expected.”*

Once you bring clients from anger to rational emotions, deliver solutions. Let’s say you diagnosed advanced dental disease and discussed treatment with the client. Lead the client to decide now and book the procedure.

**SAY THIS:** “<Client name>, we discussed <pet name>’s Grade 4 dental and several extractions. I am concerned about her oral pain. I showed you problem areas in her mouth and photos of the steps of the procedure to help you understand the critical need to treat now. We both want to relieve <pet name>’s dental pain and improve her oral health, which impacts overall health. Our next available procedures are <Date 1> or <Date 2>. Which do you prefer?”

### **Strategy 7: Stop potential problems before they start**

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Listening to angry clients can benefit your practice. You learn what clients value about your products and services. Consider every conversation as important client feedback. Complaints will help you uncover internal processes that need fixed or misconceptions about services or products that need clearer explanations. Your hospital should constantly make improvements that are good for clients and your team. Smoother processes and clear communication will help you maintain loyal client relationships and attract new pet owners.

Let’s look at two common scenarios. See how to apply the 7 strategies and prevent the same problem from happening AGAIN.

#### **Problem: Blood work is overdue for a medication refill**

A client calls to request a refill on his dog’s arthritis medication. You check the medical record and see a blood test is overdue. The client starts yelling.

#### **Strategy 1: Use the client’s name**

Use caller ID or ask the caller’s name so you may access the electronic medical record.

**SAY THIS:** “I’m happy to help you with your dog’s medication refill. May I please have your name and your dog’s name so I may access the medical record?”

Let’s say your hospital requires a physical exam within 1 year and a drug-monitoring test every 6 months for refills of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Check exam and testing history in the medical record. You see this dog is 1 month overdue for a drug-monitoring test. Don’t deny the refill based on “hospital policy” because you will incite more anger.

#### **Strategy 2: Let explosive clients “release their steam”**

The client gave the last pill today, worries his dog will be in pain without the next dose tomorrow morning, and starts yelling. Let him vent. Avoid the urge to interrupt. Wait until he completes his thoughts to reply. To show you are listening over the phone, use verbal cues such as “Mm-hm,” “OK,” or “I see.”

#### **Strategy 3: Keep your cool...always**

Take slow, deep breaths. Smile to improve your tone of voice. Take notes as the client explains his frustration.

#### **Strategy 4: Actively listen and confirm client concerns**

**SAY THIS:** “Brian, I understand the urgency of your dog’s medication refill. You want Max to be comfortable and need his medication to be refilled today.”

#### **Strategy 5: Control the discussion with facts**

**SAY THIS:** “Max has had a physical exam within 1 year. His last drug-monitoring test was due on <date>. Our doctors perform a blood test every 6 months for dogs on arthritis medication used to treat pain and inflammation. This test checks for potential side effects on the liver, kidneys, and digestive tract such as ulcers.<sup>7</sup> The test ensures that organs are healthy enough for

*your dog to take this medication and gives us a baseline to monitor any changes as treatment continues.”*

### **Strategy 6: Present solutions and get clients to agree**

Doctors should define conditions for short-term refills when diagnostic tests are overdue. Based on appointment availability, choose from two options:

#### **Option 1: Schedule a technician appointment today for the test**

**SAY THIS:** *“We both want Max to be comfortable. We can see Max today for a 15-minute technician appointment to collect the blood sample and run the test. The doctor will review the results, and we will refill the medication while you are here. I have a technician appointment available at 2 or 3 p.m. Which do you prefer?”*

Use the yes-or-yes technique to lead the client to book the drug-monitoring test now. Avoid the yes-or-no choice of “Do you want to make an appointment?”

#### **Option 2: Schedule a doctor appointment if an exam and test are overdue**

**SAY THIS:** *“We both want Max to be comfortable. Because our next available appointment is next week, the doctor will refill a one-week supply today, and we will schedule an appointment for Max’s exam and drug-monitoring test. Do you prefer <Date 1, time> or <Date 2, time>?”*

After you book the appointment, tell the client when the short-term refill will be available for pickup today.

### **Strategy 7: Stop potential problems before they start**

Eliminate these confrontational conversations with a simple solution: **Send drug-monitoring reminders.** While most practices remind for annual exams, many forget diagnostic reminders for arthritis, heart, seizure, thyroid, and other medications. Just as you send reminders for heartworm/tick and intestinal parasite tests, apply the same strategy to drug monitoring.

Have doctors identify which medications need drug monitoring and the frequency of tests. Let’s say the doctor wants to test a dog that takes NSAIDs for arthritis every 6 months. Send the first reminder 30 days ahead so the client has ample time to schedule before the next refill is due.

**TEXT/APP THIS:** <Pet name> is due for a drug-monitoring test, which is required before the next medication refill on <date>. We will collect a blood sample during a technician appointment. Click here to schedule online, download our app, or call 555-555-5555.

#### **EMAIL THIS:**

Subject line: <Pet name> needs a lab test before next medication refill on <date> | Click to schedule  
Message: <Pet name> is due for a lab test. Drug monitoring is necessary for <pet name> to continue to safely take <medication name> and is required before the next refill on <date>. During a technician appointment, we will collect a blood sample and run the test. Click here to schedule online, download our app at <link>, or call 555-555-5555. We want to provide timely testing and refills for <pet name>.

**Use “Blood work required before next refill” stickers.** This bright-colored sticker will prompt clients to act before the last pills are gone. When clients pick up medications, lead them to forward book technician appointments for drug-monitoring tests. Order stickers from your veterinary distributor.

**Bloodwork required  
before next refill**

**SAY THIS:** *“This is your last refill before a drug-monitoring test will be due. Let’s schedule a 15-minute technician appointment for the blood sample collection. I have an appointment available next Tuesday at 1 p.m. or Wednesday at 11 a.m. Which do you prefer?”*

**Problem: A client has a sick pet that needs to be seen TODAY.**

A client calls with a sick pet but your schedule is full. Focus on what you CAN do.

**Strategy 1: Use the client's name**

**SAY THIS:** *"Pam, I'm concerned that Pixie is sick. Let me see how we can help you today."*

Access the appointment schedule to see which options are available (see Strategy 7 for solutions).

**Strategy 2: Let explosive clients "release their steam"**

The client goes on and on about her dog's symptoms, how she's been coming to your hospital for years, and "paid" for your recent expansion. Listen and let her know you're paying attention with phrases such as *"I understand your concerns."* Wait until she's finished to respond.

**Strategy 3: Keep your cool...always**

Take notes about key symptoms so you may ask follow-up questions and put details in the medical record for the doctor. Breathe slow, even breaths.

**Strategy 4: Actively listen and confirm client concerns**

Use empathetic statements such as *"I know you are worried about Pixie"* and *"We want to help her feel better."*

**Strategy 5: Control the discussion with facts**

Never tell the client, "Sorry, our schedule is full. You'll have to go to the emergency clinic." Be a problem solver and see which choices you may be able to offer for care.

**Strategy 6: Present solutions and get clients to agree**

It's as predictable as death and taxes that clients will call each morning with sick patients that need to be seen today. Plan for it in your schedule! Choose from options based upon today's schedule:

**Option 1) Schedule an urgent care exam.** Your hospital should block 3 to 4 urgent care slots per doctor per day. In a multi-doctor practice, stagger urgent care slots among veterinarians by one hour to avoid traffic jams in the treatment area for workups. For example, Doctor 1 will have an urgent care slot at 9 a.m. while Doctor 2 has hers at 10 a.m.

**SAY THIS:** *"<Client name>, we want to help <pet name> feel better. I have an urgent care exam available at 1 or 3 p.m. Which do you prefer?"*

An urgent care exam should be 1 ½ times the fee of your preventive exam. If your preventive exam is \$60, your urgent care exam will be \$90. If your hospital charges a higher exam fee for urgent care, let the client know upfront. Say, *"Your urgent care appointment will be 30 minutes. Because we reserve urgent care appointments in our daily schedule to see sick patients the same day, our urgent care exam fee is \$\_\_."*

If the client questions the higher price, explain your fee with confidence, *"Just as you pay different exam fees at your family physician, an urgent care center, and an emergency trauma center, our veterinary hospital charges specific exam fees based upon the length of the exam, doctors' expertise, and urgency of care. We know you value access to care the same day so we may help your pet."*

**Option 2) Offer a day admission.** Never say "drop-off appointment," which devalues your professional services and sounds ridiculous. You would never "drop off" Grandma at a hospital. A technician should

get the patient's vital signs and perform an initial health assessment upon intake. A cat that the client says, "ain't doin' right" could be experiencing a medical emergency such as urinary obstruction.

**SAY THIS:** *"I'm concerned that your pet is sick. Although our schedule is full, we can admit your pet to the hospital for the day. For 15 minutes, you will meet with a technician, who will ask you questions about your pet's symptoms and get its vital signs. A doctor will examine your pet during the day, and then contact you about next steps. We will provide a treatment plan and get your approval in advance. You may pick up your pet between 4 and 6 p.m. Because we will care for your pet throughout the day, there is a day admission fee of \$\_\_\_. We can admit your pet at 8:00 or 8:30 a.m. Which do you prefer?"*

Charge a 1- to 12-hour hospitalization fee to cover nursing care in addition to the urgent care exam fee. Set a limit on the number of day admission appointments that your hospital will see per day based upon the number of doctors working.

**Option 3) Come in and wait.**

See the patient as "work-in." Have the client arrive during times when doctors are seeing other checkups, which are shorter and more predictable appointments. The doctor may be able to examine the pet between two checkups, explain which diagnostics or treatments are needed to the client, and have the inpatient technician team begin workups. The client will wait in the lobby while the inpatient team performs diagnostics, and the doctor continues seeing appointments. Once results are ready, the doctor will review them with the waiting client between other appointments. Charge an urgent care exam for this work-in service.

**Strategy 7: Stop potential problems before they start**

Each quarter, review the number of urgent care slots that you pre-block in the schedule. Are the number of urgent care slots perfect, too many, or too few? You may experience seasonal differences. Many hospitals see 10% to 20% increases in sick patient visits during spring and summer months due to injuries and illnesses from outdoor activities.

Review the volume of urgent care slots by weekday, too. Most hospitals see more sick patients on Mondays because they were closed on Sunday, Fridays because clients took a "wait and see if my pet gets better" approach, and Saturdays because most clients are off work and it's a convenient time to seek veterinary care.

Constant improvements in processes will prevent negative client interactions and improve workplace experiences for your team.

**Which goals will you implement from this training?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

# Facilitator's Guide: 7 Strategies to Calm Angry Clients

Choose a facilitator to lead your team's discussion. Create plans to implement goals you learned in this training program.

## 1. Which phrases and techniques will you use to improve your active listening skills?

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## 2. List the top three scenarios that upset clients at your hospital.

Scenario 1: \_\_\_\_\_

What changes could you make to prevent this problem before it starts?

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Scenario 2: \_\_\_\_\_

What changes could you make to prevent this problem before it starts?

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Scenario 3: \_\_\_\_\_

What changes could you make to prevent this problem before it starts?

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