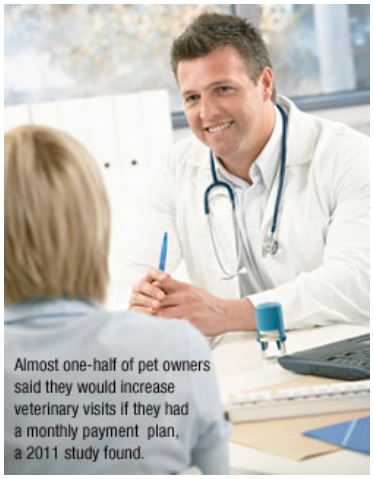
Marketing Preventive Health Plans

One option to keep pet owners on budget and pets on track with wellness care—and boost your bottom line along the way.

By Paula Andruss



Like many Americans, economy-weary pet owners are keeping a close eye on their wallets.

A 2011 Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study conducted by Bayer HealthCare Animal Health found that amid declining veterinary visits, 47 percent of dog owners said they would take their dogs for veterinary care if each visit was less expensive, and 59 percent would do the same if they knew they could prevent problems and expensive treatment later. The numbers were similar for cat owners (54 percent and 56 percent respectively).

One option to help clients keep veterinary costs within their budgets is to offer preventive health plans. Preventive health plans, also known as wellness programs, are pre-paid blocks of preventive healthcare services that clients can pay for in monthly installments over the course of a year. Commonly offered services may include office calls, vaccines and dentals, and the plans may also offer discounts on other services outside of the plan. The plans use a membership platform that enrolls clients for a 12-month period and automatically renews at the end of that time.

“The pet benefits by getting all the preventive care the veterinarian wants to give, and the client benefits by being able to pay for the care with low monthly payments,” says Will Novak, DVM, an expert on pet wellness programs.

The Bayer study found that pet owners are open to the concept: 46 percent of dog owners and 44 percent of cat owners said that a monthly payment plan for wellness package would increase their veterinary visits.

Pet-specific Plans



Several types of preventive health plans are available, depending on the type and age of the pet. WellPet Plans, operated by Pasco, Wash.-based Prevent Plans LLC, offers different levels of plans for adult cats, adult dogs, kittens, puppies and horses. There are three levels for adult pets that cover different amounts of services at varying price ranges (known as Platinum, Gold and Silver), and two levels of plans for puppies, kittens and horses. WellPet Plans acts as a plan administrator for the practice, trains employees in enrolling clients, provides a web-based management system for the plans and handles the back-office administrative work. WellPet also provides marketing support. The plans can be modified to meet practice needs. Membership, pricing and included services can be customized to suit client demographics, build or reinforce a practice’s brand and support the practice’s care philosophy. “We take the paperwork and other difficult activities off the shoulders of the practice so they can focus on the care,” says Daniel J. Patton, founder and CEO of Prevent Plans LLC.

Managing the Cost of Care

Patton says preventative health programs help improve pet owners’ compliance by removing the cost barrier to good care, which is especially important in today’s tight economy. “Preventive health services,



like office visits, vaccines and diagnostics, all decrease clients' acceptance rates on other health services their pet needs," he explains. "But with a plan, they feel they can afford it because they're not paying for it that day. They're thinking, 'Now I have the money to have that mass looked at, or that ear infection treated."'

Pam Galliers, practice manager for Parkway Veterinary Clinic, has seen those thoughts in action in her Plymouth, Mich., practice. "Our clients are doing more services, like dentals, that they normally think they might not be able to afford," she says. "The care is improved because the clients are also keeping their pets up to date on vaccines, fecals and heartworm testing."

Although clients accept more services, they also get cost savings and a more manageable way to pay for their pets' care. Galliers' practice offers Platinum, Gold and Silver plans for adult dogs, puppies, cats and kittens. She estimates that the cost savings to a dog/puppy owner is anywhere from $264 to $607 a year, depending on the plan.

When executed properly, the plans can increase practice revenues as well. "The practice gets a guaranteed revenue stream that provides strong residual revenue— that money is still coming in whether those clients brings their pets in or not," says Patton.

Marketing Is Key

To initiate enrollment, Patton says successful marketing of the plans depends on participation by the entire practice team. While WellPet Plans provides marketing materials including customized posters, brochures and website content, he says the best execution comes from the combined efforts of staff members. "For the plans to be effective there's a process that must be followed, and every member of the staff is a part of that process," he says.

Increasing Compliance

Top motivators for pet owners

I would take my pet to the veterinarian more often if ...

	Dog Owners	Cat Owners
If I knew I could prevent problems and expensive treatment later	59%	56%
If I was convinced it would help my pet live longer	59%	53%
Each visit was less expensive	47%	54%

Source: 2011 Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study

In addition to placing posters in exam rooms and advertising on the website, Galliers' practice provides brochures in the lobby as well as at check-in and checkout counters. But the staff is also a key component. "Our receptionist discusses it with clients when they are checking in, and our technicians follow up with pet owners while in the exam rooms," she says.

Stephanie McKennon, practice manager for Pet Medical Center of Pasco in Pasco, Wash., says her practice also emphasizes marketing to phone shoppers. "When people call to ask about our prices, we always present it to them in the context of, 'You can do it the more expensive way, or you can join WellPet Plans and it will be this much lower.'"

She credits that simple script for increasing new client acceptance rates dramatically, and says new client enrollment numbers are up by at least 60 percent as a result. Most practices using the plans target all of their clients for enrollment, save for emergencies and those with critical illnesses that are not expected to live more than a few months. "We think pets of all types and ages can benefit from them," says McKennon.

Enrollment Incentives

Novak estimates that successful practices will have more than 40 percent of existing clients on plans and

will sign up one-third of new clients on the first visit. Patton suggests setting practice enrollment goals. He says that typically, a one-doctor practice will see 5 to 7 new plans a week, and a twodoctor practice will see 10 to 14 new enrollments, especially new clients. “A third of all new clients that walk in the door typically sign up, but we’ve seen some practices where that number is as high as 35 percent to 40 percent,” Patton says.

McKennon’s practice sets a weekly target of five plans a week. Staff incentives for success include rewards such as coffee for the staff, pedicures or a restaurant dinner. In Galliers’ office, the staff receives a small percentage of every plan sold. They donate half of that monthly amount to different local animal charities, and save the other half for things they might use or do together as a group.

Scripts for Success

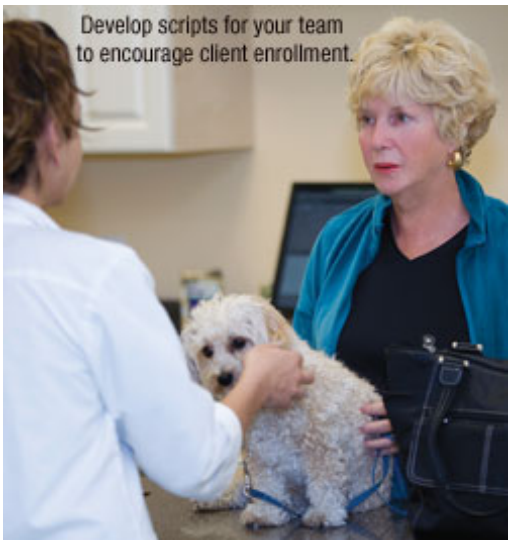
Practice scripts for gaining plan acceptance vary. Galliers’ receptionist starts out by asking if the client has heard of their preventive plans, and then explains that they would pay a flat monthly rate over 12 months as opposed to paying the bill for that day. She also mentions that if the pet is signed up for one plan but needs something not included in it, there’s a discount available, except for medications and foods. “We tell them it is designed to cover your pet’s routine annual health care and it can offer significant savings,” she says.

To monitor and manage clients after they’re enrolled, WellPet Plans tracks information including client utilization, doctor production, accounts receivables and issues such as pet deaths or client cancellations (a rarity). Practices then have access to WellPet Plan’s system to see their client’s usage and payment patterns.

“The benefits of preventive health plans to the pet, the practice and the clients are so many that they make it a win for everyone involved,” Novak says. “Especially when an experienced partner helps manage your program.”

The Team Approach

Make enrolling clients in wellness plans a team effort. Here’s how each member can contribute:



Veterinarians

• Encourage clients by talking about the benefits of the plans.
• Help clients identify which plan is right for them.

Technicians

• Quickly and simply explain value equations to clients in the exam rooms.
• Understand all plans thoroughly so you can answer client questions.

Receptionists

• Drive initial interest in plans using scripts and providing clients brochures and basic information.
• Explain to clients that if they sign up that day, any preventive services done are included and they’ll receive a discount for any services outside the plan.
• Write up paperwork to enroll clients who decide to join the plan that day.

Practice Managers

• Create cost comparisons of the practice’s preventive services fee schedule versus the plan.
• Develop scripts for each staff position.

• Set enrollment expectations and goals for the staff; hold them responsible for those objectives.
• Ensure that every point of client contact is involved with trying to get clients enrolled.

Paula Andruss is a Cincinnati, Ohio-based writer and editor.

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