

Why I choose to be an on-call veterinarian

By Bradley W. Carmichael DVM

After graduating from The Ohio State College of Veterinary Medicine, I joined my father's practice and I have been an on call veterinarian ever since; sharing the duties with my fellow associates. Our clinic uses phone consultations to assist our clients who believe they have emergencies. My father took calls for 35 years, and was highly skilled at helping his patients over the phone. I learned from a master.

When I recently purchased my father's practice, it would have been reasonable to take the path of every other area veterinarian and turn on the answering machine at the end of the work day. The message goes like this "Sorry, we're closed, if you believe your pet is having an emergency drive to an emergency hospital." But I won't do that and here's why:

Worried pet owners need their veterinarian's advice.

Only a veterinarian is qualified to determine whether or not an animal's condition requires an emergency clinic visit. Veterinarians have a thorough knowledge of disease processes, and their specific outcomes, that the public does not. Left to make decisions on their own, pet owners will make errors in judgment by avoiding trips to emergency clinics when they need to be there, or visiting clinics when they should not.

Emergency clinics make the job convenient.

I'm thrilled to have high quality emergency clinics in our area, and I'm happy to refer my patients to them when they require high quality emergency care. It's convenient for me to take a phone call when I don't have to leave my home for these cases. My clients are highly receptive to the idea that they will receive better care during late or weekend emergencies at a properly staffed facility, than I could give them when my clinic is closed and without any available support staff. However, the majority of clients, with whom I consult, learn they can stay at home, which means less overcrowding in the emergency clinics, and better care for the cases that need to be there.

Revenue.

When my clients can safely wait to see me the next day, I capture the revenue that would have gone elsewhere. Any doctor with bills to pay should be more than willing to catch one extra case a week. One extra case a week can change your bottom line drastically.

Customer service.

Good Business 101: Give your clients what they want. Provide a value added service to your client base and be rewarded with their continued business.

Practice growth.

I grow my practice every week with pet owners who are leaving their current veterinarian because they had an emergency and called their doctor, and got an answering machine. It infuriates pet owners when they feel abandoned during crises. I receive a large number of referrals from my own clients who spread the word that we care enough about our patients to offer advice about their care even when we are closed.

Client loyalty.

My clients know I truly care about their pets when I talk to them during an emotionally charged crisis. They tell me I'm the sweetest man they know, and thank me with warm regards and gifts. I build a trust with them, and when clients trust you they are more likely to be compliant pet owners.

A balanced home life.

It's possible! I designed and currently utilize a program called After Hours Assurance™. My clients pay a fee to speak with me about their emergency concerns after hours. I receive very few calls, and they are all sincerely concerned clients. I am not endlessly hassled by phone calls at all hours, and I have a rewarding home and family life.

It's emotionally rewarding.

We became veterinarians because we want to help people, we love to help animals, and it makes us feel good when we do. There's no better way to help an animal lover than to be available when they are worried.

I choose to be an on-call veterinarian because I have found a way to balance the needs of my patients, my clients, and my home life. I hope to help other veterinarians take this path as well, not because misery loves company, but because it can be convenient, profitable and rewarding.

Bradley Carmichael, DVM is owner of Pleasant Valley Veterinary Clinic in McMurray, PA and CEO of On Call Solutions, LLC (provider of After Hours Assurance). He is also the 2009 President of the Ohio State Veterinary Medicine Alumnae Society, industry lecturer and participates on multiple industry boards.