In the Villa of the Sick Cat—A Lesson in Customer Care

By Caroline Jordan, MBA

If you're a pet owner, you know the stress of having a sick pet and you know that having a great veterinarian is a wonderful thing. My cat, Zoe, came down with a nasty infection that had me racing off to the vet's office last week with an unhappy, howling kitty in tow. (She's doing much better now.)

This was my first visit to this vet's office, having just moved here last year. When I arrived, the building was under construction. Lots of hammering, sawing, and loud noises—not exactly the controlled, calm atmosphere preferred by a sick pet. But fortunately, Zoe lives in the House of Perpetual Construction Projects, so she did okay.

But, what really struck me was the construction project itself. The waiting room has been transformed into an Italian Villa with high ceilings, a graceful figure-eight-shaped pool in the center of the room, a decorative fountain, and "faux" plants. It is gorgeous and would make a great setting for a romantic Italian meal complete with fine wine and a strolling violinist.

My first reaction on walking in was "This is beautiful, I wonder how high my vet bill will be." As Zoe and I sat waiting (and waiting and waiting and waiting), I watched all the other customers coming through the door. Each one looked around at the beautiful setting and said "I wonder how much this is going to cost me."

The newly designed waiting rooms and exam rooms were not designed for the customers—dogs and cats. They weren't designed for the humans bringing in their pets for medical care. It's a total ego design. Impressive. Elegant. Grand.

And instead of all the customers (animal and human) being wowed by the design, they reacted negatively. You see, sick cats and dogs want quiet, dark spaces and they want their visit to the vet's office to be over quickly. Instead, the new design with its concrete floor (fashionably treated to look like a sun kissed rock patio) and its soaring ceilings means that every time the phone rings, the noise reverberates throughout the waiting area. The poor scheduling means that a sick pet has to stay in that waiting room for what must seem an eternity. And of course, the humans immediately understand that the money to pay for this project has to come from somewhere…namely their wallets.

Fortunately, our new vet turned out to be competent and caring and Zoe is recovering nicely. But, the business lesson remains. Focus on what your customers care about and you'll never go wrong.

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