

General Session

Moderator: Mark Hilton

SECRET SAUCE SERVICE – The indispensable condiment

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Abstract

Humans determine our status as indispensable. The designation is often subjective. It is earned and revocable at any time. Clients can be hard to understand.

Humans are emotional beings. Though our species is distinguished by a highly developed pre-frontal cortex – the ‘thinking brain’ – many of our choices and preferences are profoundly influenced by the deeper limbic brain. When activated, the limbic brain overpowers logical thinking. The limbic structures contain our motivational motor, our memory center, and are where the dopamine reward circuitry resides.

I suggest that if we endeavour to become indispensable to our human clients, then we have to offer more than technical acumen; we should strive to *be rewarding* if we want to build a meaningful, trusting, ongoing relationship.

Research on physician-patient communications has revealed that patients want 3 things from their doctor: 1) competence in data collection and decision-making; 2) a relationship; and 3) coaching.

Our training and expertise are centered on 4-legged animals. As trained observers we are very good at 1, above. Our professional destiny is affected on our skills at 2 and 3. There is scope for most of us to get more training in soft skills as we strive to become indispensable.

Key words: practice management, communication

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Their unsmiling faces say as much as the words they spoke.

I clipped an article from a farming publication several years ago. I’ve kept it for good reason. A pair of stern-looking New Zealand dairy farmers looks back at me from the yellowed page in my file. The copy features an interview with a husband and wife who advocated frugal farming. The husband advised: “...*Steer clear at all times of animal health input [from veterinarians] unless vital on the farm.*” When I first read it, my response was quiet, personal, and unfavorable. After the emotional moment passed, I realized this was neither a new sentiment in the agriculture community nor one that was limited to New Zealand. No, thank you, this is a man who had “*just-ified*” our profession. He tends to think that we’re *just* vets. You know - animal mechanics - and that our capabilities and contributions are held captive by our animal health credentials.

Regardless of what sector of society we work in, we have much more to offer than being “just a vet.” Our degree is just the beginning of our education. One of the pillars of a DVM, VMD, or BVSc credential is that we are problem solvers. Trained observers. Diagnostic detectives. And as we ply our skills – whether it’s digging in the literature or in an abdomen, whether we’re working on farms or in a clinic, whether we’re in a business or a bureaucracy – we are trained to be observing, assessing and collecting. We are a resource - gathering insights, information and experience that could well be valuable to our customers. So when they require our services, don’t do what they ask of us. Do more!

Our customers think they want us to fix animal health problems. That’s our job and we do it to the best of our ability. However, if that’s all we do then they haven’t benefited fully from our power. Unless we can look up from the problem at hand, assess the whole situation (human factors included) and direct our considerable experience, expertise, and objectivity at what [else] is going on then we’re... well, just a vet.

Our power lies in being able to communicate with the customer to define a bigger picture and to divine a better

solution. If we combine our technical skills with connecting and coaching tools, a recipe for secret sauce service begins to come together. Taking time to relate and understand by asking questions and *listening*, defining goals and creating plans, communicating about observations, possibilities and progress in ways that engage and motivate the client not only helps them advance their business but it keeps us fresh and relevant.

This isn't always easy, especially when we may be working with customers who come from a DIY culture and may see themselves as their own best advisors. However, if we don't see, show and sell the benefit of our full power we run the risk of being a "just-ified" profession.

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