

## How To Communicate with Cat Owners

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*... the preference for one particular pet over another is not a trivial matter of taste, but says something important about people's fundamental personality attributes and ways of seeing the world. (1)*

The bond between veterinarian and cat owner is important and can influence the amount of health care a cat receives. Cat owners who have a favourable opinion about their veterinarian are more loyal, less influenced by the cost of care, and more adherent to recommendations. The ability of a veterinarian or veterinary team member to communicate about health care strongly influences the owner's perceptions about the value and quality of care the clinic provides. Good communication skills can be expected to improve owner adherence to recommendations and the quality and amount of care a cat receives.

## Cat people versus dog people

- Several studies have explored the characteristics and personality traits of self-professed 'cat people' compared with 'dog people.' These studies range from informal and unstructured to more formal investigations that use well-recognized personality trait tools and demographic data collection techniques.
- In a 2008 survey of US cat owners compared with dog owners, cat owners were more likely to:  
(2)
  - Be female
  - Be living alone in a multifamily building (e.g., apartment building)
  - Take in a stray (i.e., acquire a cat for free)
  - Have some college education
  - Take the cat to the veterinarian less than once per year
- Women are often more interested in health matters than men and often have primary responsibility for family health care including pets.

## Personality traits

- Some studies have focused on personality traits using the 'Big Five Inventory' personality assessment tool.
  - In those studies, cat owners tend to score higher in the traits of openness (intellectually curious, open to emotion, willing to try new things) and neuroticism (emotionally reactive, vulnerable to stress, and easily frustrated).
  - Scoring high on the trait of neuroticism can increase affection for a pet and anxious attachment. Such owners would likely benefit from targeted communication techniques that recognize the degree of emotional attachment and the more anxious relationship with the pet.
- Other studies have used the 'Interpersonal Adjective Scale.'
  - In those studies, cat owners were relatively introverted and scored lower in warmth or agreeableness than dog owners.

- Cat owners also scored low in dominance (e.g., timid, shy, non-aggressive) but scored high in trust (e.g., obliging, modest, straightforward).
- The general pattern is that the dog owner is more social, interactive, and accepting.
  - The extroversion of dog owners is easily recognized in their participation in dog parks and puppy classes.
  - Cats certainly have different social needs than dogs, and cat owners may be less extroverted than dog owners. This presumed introversion of cat owners can be used in communication strategies, such as targeting key messages via social media which can be consumed at home and in private.
- While this information is helpful to the veterinary team in developing communication tools, it is important to remember that we cannot always stereotype owners so simply, and that other factors (such as culture, economics, and family circumstances) also influence adherence to recommendations.
- Owners usually adopt the role of primary caregiver and potentially surrogate parent. One study suggested that pets could be affected by the way we interact with and manage them, and that both these factors are in turn influenced by our personality differences. (3)
  - Higher owner 'Neuroticism' was associated with an increased likelihood of non-pedigree cat ownership, a decreased likelihood of free access to the outdoors, reporting a cat as having a behavioural problem, displaying more aggressive and anxious/fearful behavioural styles and more stress-related sickness behaviours, as well as having an ongoing medical condition and being overweight.
  - Higher owner 'Extroversion' was associated with an increased likelihood that the cat would be provided free access to the outdoors.
  - Higher owner 'Agreeableness' was associated with a higher level of satisfaction with their cat, and with a greater likelihood of reporting their cats as being of a normal weight.
  - Higher owner 'Conscientiousness' was associated with the cat displaying less anxious/fearful, aggressive, aloof/avoidant behaviour, and more gregarious behaviour.

## Information sources

- Facebook groups are a common source of pet health information (4)
  - In a survey of 769 dog owners & 838 cat owners (mostly from the US), cat owners belonged to as many as 5 pet-related groups.
  - Most common group topics were behaviour, gastrointestinal problems, renal & urinary problems
  - 28% of dog and cat owners indicated that advice from Facebook groups had influenced their decisions regarding veterinary care
  - 20.9% of dog owners and 28.1% of cat owners reported feeling that Facebook groups are a trustworthy source of health information.
- In a survey of UK veterinarians' perceptions of clients' internet use (5)
  - Only 32% of vets give owners specific websites to visit
  - Most give only a verbal recommendation
  - Only 21% write it down
- Information prescriptions are a written referral by a veterinarian or veterinary technician to a consumer health information resource. (6)
  - This is an active role in meeting clients' information needs by guiding them toward valid, accurate online information rather than reacting to poor or incorrect information that clients have accessed.

- Pet owners react favourably to being given information prescriptions:
  - I can make better decisions.
  - It helped me talk with my vet.
  - It added to what my vet told me.
  - I found the information helpful.
  - I trust the information.

## References

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- <sup>3</sup> Finka LR, et al. Owner personality and the wellbeing of their cats share parallels with the parent-child relationship. *PLoS One*. 2019 Feb 5;14(2):e0211862.
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- <sup>5</sup> Kogan LR, et al. United Kingdom Veterinarians' Perceptions of Clients' Internet Use and the Perceived Impact on the Client-Vet Relationship. *Front Vet Sci* 2017;4:180.
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