



MILLENNIALS & PET OWNERSHIP:Focusing on the Human Animal Bond.....

Millennials may be saving the day! They are taking their heads out of their phones and showing up at your clinic for preventive care visits. They get it, and cats may benefit even more than dogs. However, to keep these clients, their concerns and needs must be addressed.

So many veterinary nurses are millennials themselves, and it's you, the veterinary nurse, who may deliver exactly what those millennials are seeking.

While pet ownership has overall been on the rise since 2000, unfortunately, routine care visits have suffered a significant decline. The American Veterinary Medical Association response, called Partners for Healthy Pets, and various other studies have addressed the problem and have provided information on why annual exams for pets have been down. They have also offered several tools to help.

In fact, millennials might be leading the way to the real solution.

When you think about it, millennial attachment to their pets isn't shocking. This is the generation that dubbed their pets "fur babies" and refers to themselves as pet parents. I understand how some professionals – especially some 'old timers' cringe over this terminology, but arguably the human-animal bond has never been stronger – and that is a good thing for our industry. For starters, a record number of animals will get dressed up for Halloween and sales of clothing for pets are at an all-time high. According to the American Pet Products Association (APPA) Pet Owners Survey 2017–2018, just over 70 percent of millennial dog caretakers, and 55 percent of millennial cat caretakers, say that their pet "is like a child."

While almost all age groups enjoy using social media, many millennials live there in

a sort of alternative reality. And they aren't alone, their pets are right there with them.

Who would have predicted that cats would become the most searched topic on the web? Cat cafes now exist in most major American cities, and when they are visited a super highway of cute images speed through Instagram. Some celebrity cats have thousands or even millions of followers around the world. Grumpy Cat, Maru, Lil Bub, Venus, and Cole and Marmalade, are among the rock star celebrity cats that are household names, and all of this is being driven by millennials.

Now, combine all that with some additional data. Only 21 percent of millennials are married. In contrast, 42 percent of Baby Boomers were married at the same age. Most millennials have at least one pet and are living in apartments in greater numbers today than in previous generations. They are also more likely to have cats than Baby Boomers did at the same age.

Even though debt is a factor among younger millennials, it decreases significantly amongst older millennials. More importantly, millennials are willing to spend money on their pets, even if they don't have it.

However, there are caveats.

Millennials are the most educated generation to date, and are also the most connected. If there's even the slightest doubt or any question of information they receive, they look online for answers – and increasingly that's what people in all demographics may increasingly do. No



one's word, including the veterinary professional, is any longer considered gospel.

Also, like for all clients, perception is reality. So if millennials perceive their beloved fur child isn't being treated well, or that they are not receiving value for what they paid, they won't hesitate to find another clinic which better matches their expectations.

According to *Millennials and the Human Animal Bond*, a Human Animal Bond Research Initiative and Banfield study...



77% of millennials would have a more favorable view of their veterinarian if they discussed the health benefits of the human-animal bond with them.



74% of millennials would be more likely to visit their veterinarian if they discussed the health benefits of the human-animal bond with them.



25% of millennials

always talk to their veterinarians about the health benefits of pet ownership, more than other generation.

While loyalty isn't what it once was, there are still ways to bond even fickle millennials to our practices. This also helps explain why Cat Friendly Practices, the Fear Free Initiative, which is the idea of addressing emotional health and well-being, and the Human-Animal Bond Certified Practices, which focus on the client's emotional well-being and the human-animal bond, have been so successful.

There is no doubt that the Fear Free initiative has been responsible for a major paradigm shift. In roughly three years' time, not only do most veterinary professionals know about this initiative, but the public is actively seeking out Fear Free certified professionals and Fear Free practices. Although, there is no data (yet) to demonstrate that millennials are leading the way to Fear Free, there is data to demonstrate millennials are leading the way on increasing veterinary visits. This helps conclude that millennials

Fear Free is exactly what the doctor ordered for millennials.

are mostly responsible for championing the Fear Free ideology. There's no doubt that Fear Free is exactly what the doctor ordered for millennials.

Cat Friendly Practices have provided compelling data on how practices are benefiting, beginning with 75 percent agreeing feline visits have increased for check-ups; 80 percent of clients responding with positive feedback to the Cat Friendly approach; and 79 percent of cat friendly practices noting an increase in revenue.

Clearly what millennials are seeking has been answered with bond centered approaches and that's what Fear Free and Cat Friendly practices both inherently address.

No matter what their age happens to be, veterinary nurses in my experience, are in sync with what millennials are seeking. You guys get it!

Since we have illustrated that the veterinary professionals' word is no longer gospel, rather than be offended, veterinary nurses are often willing to Google questions right along with clients, which can lead to open discussions about why asking "Dr. Google" may not always be the best choice, but also guiding clients to more legitimate online veterinary resources.

I am actively speaking at veterinary conferences (and am open to speaking on technician tracks too) about how millennial clients are behind what I believe is a turnaround in preventive care. However, without receptivity to what these clients want and need, it cannot happen, and it's nurses who are at the front line welcoming this change for the better. **J**

ABOUT STEVE DALE

Steve Dale, CABC (certified animal behavior consultant) is co-editor of *Decoding Your Dog* (authored by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists) and is a contributor to many veterinary books including *The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management* (edited by Dr. Susan Little) and *Treatment and Care of the Geriatric Veterinary Patient* (edited Dr. Mary Gardner and Dr. Dani McVety). He's a columnist for *Veterinary Practice News* and *Pet Vet Magazine*, and a contributing editor at *CATSTER*. He is host of two national radio shows, and is heard on WGN radio, Chicago. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Winn Feline Foundation and Human Animal Bond Association. And he speaks at conferences around the world. Among his many honors the AVMA Humane Award and he's in the Dog Writer's Association Hall of Fame. And is a frequent speaker at conferences around the world. His blog is www.stevedale.tv.

