Part 1

How To Practice With Cats In Mind

Q&A with Dr. Ashlie Saffire, past president of the FelineVMA

Cat ownership is on the rise, presenting a tremendous opportunity for practices, cat caregiversand most importantly, cats. Fountain Report recently asked Ashlie Saffire, DVM, DABVP (Feline), immediate past president of the FelineVMA, to speak about that opportunity and why practices should embrace it. Dr. Saffire is owner and lead veterinarian at Faithful Friends Veterinary Clinic and Cat Specialty Center in Dublin, Ohio, a Gold Level Cat Friendly Practice®. This is Part 1 of a two-part interview. Part 2 will appear in next week's newsletter.



Ashlie Saffire

Fountain Report: What "mental adjustments" must the typical mixed-practice owner make before committing to being more accommodating of cats?

Dr. Saffire: The first adjustment is recognizing that, for decades, much of veterinary medicine has evolved around the canine patient. Our educational models, hospital workflows, examination room designs, communication strategies and even the products we use have largely been developed with canine patients in mind. And then we've expected cats to fit into that same system.

But cats are not small dogs. They're a unique species, with their own behavioral, environmental and medical needs. They experience the world differently, communicate differently and respond to stress differently. When we expect cats to adapt to a veterinary experience that wasn't designed with their needs in mind, we unintentionally create barriers to care. We increase fear-anxiety and distress, making veterinary visits more challenging for everyone involved. What's exciting, though, is that we now understand so much more about feline behavior, stress and the importance of creating a Cat Friendly veterinary environment.

FR: In your website article "How Veterinary Clinics Can Reduce Stress," you mention three steps practices can make to be more cat-friendly: specialized handling, thoughtfully designed spaces and feline-focused care. What is the first step the practice owner and team should make to make the transition? The second? The third?

Dr. Saffire: The first step is making a practice-wide commitment to feline-focused care. It's important to have buy-in from the veterinary team, because implementing

meaningful change is difficult if everyone isn't on the same page. Everyone in the practice needs to understand why these changes matter and commit to providing a more Cat Friendly experience.

The second step is education and training on Cat Friendly handling. The way we approach, interact with and handle cats can significantly influence fear-anxiety, distress, cooperation and their overall veterinary experience. I highly recommend the resources in the **FelineVMA's Cat Friendly Resource Center** as a starting point for the entire team, and the **Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines** for a deeper dive into the specifics of Cat Friendly handling.

The third step is evaluating the practice environment from the cat's perspective. This includes everything from the waiting area to the examination room and the spaces where diagnostic procedures are performed. The FelineVMA has a **new handout** specifically to help a veterinary practice think through the veterinary environment from the cat's perspective, which complements the **Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines.**

FR: What hard costs can a mixed-practice owner expect to make during the transition to more cat-friendliness? Soft costs?

Dr. Saffire: This question addresses one of the biggest misconceptions about creating a more Cat Friendly experience at a practice. Many veterinary professionals assume that creating a more welcoming environment for cats requires expensive renovations, additional equipment or a significant financial commitment. But the reality is that some of the most impactful changes are incredibly simple, inexpensive and can often be accomplished with resources already in the practice.

Take the waiting room, for example. For a cat, sitting in a carrier on the floor while dogs are barking, approaching or sniffing at the carrier can be an incredibly stressful experience. But you don't need to build a separate feline waiting room. Instead, designate a corner for cats and use a bookshelf or other visual barrier to separate them from dogs. At my practice, we ask caregivers to remain in their cars when they arrive. When an examination room is ready, a technician meets them at the entrance, places a pheromone towel over the carrier, and escorts them directly into the examination room. It's a simple workflow change that can dramatically reduce exposure to distressing sights, sounds and smells without facility modifications.

The examination room is another area of consideration. Place the cat on a soft surface rather than directly onto a cold examination table. Have a towel or hideaway box available for them to hide in.

Another important point is that the **Cat Friendly Practice® designation process** is available at no additional cost to FelineVMA members. It's a comprehensive self-assessment program that guides practices through 10 areas of feline care and helps them identify opportunities for improvement.

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So, from a hard-cost perspective, the investment can be surprisingly small. The greater investment is often in the soft costs: educating your team, reevaluating long-standing workflows and helping people become comfortable doing things differently. You can purchase all the pheromones, towels and comfortable mats in the world, but if your team doesn't understand feline behavior or isn't committed to changing how they approach cats, those purchases alone won't make you a Cat Friendly practice. Becoming Cat Friendly is about changing the way we think, changing the way we work, and making a collective commitment to providing better care for cats.