

Chapter 1

A Crisis of Trust

Something's breaking in veterinary medicine. You can feel it.

It's in the tension at the front desk when a client argues about a bill. It's in the rushed explanation of rising costs that doesn't land right. It's in the burnout hiding behind a tech's forced smile. It's in the heavy silence of a team huddled up after another brutal day.

At its core, this is about one thing: trust.

Trust between clients and hospital teams. Trust between teams and their leaders. Trust in the profession as a whole.

And the scary part? The trust that used to be the bedrock of veterinary care? It's eroding. Fast. Clients can feel it. Teams can feel it. Everyone can.

The New Client Reality

Today's pet owners are not the same as they were 10—or even 5—years ago. They're more informed, more emotionally invested, and more outspoken. They're Googling symptoms, watching vet

influencers on TikTok, and treating their pets as full-blown family members.

U.S. pet ownership now spans more than 65% of households, and annual pet industry spending exceeded \$150 billion in 2024 alone—with veterinary care accounting for nearly \$40 billion of that total.

Their expectations are sky-high. They want collaboration. They want transparency. They want to feel like partners in their pet's care, not passive bystanders. And when those expectations aren't met, trust breaks.

And here's the kicker: broken trust doesn't just fade quietly. It explodes—through nasty online reviews, angry voicemails, and stories they retell at dinner parties about “that terrible vet visit.”

The Money Problem

Then there's the elephant in the room: costs.

Veterinary care costs are climbing, especially post-pandemic. Pet owners are spending more than ever before, but many feel like their friendly neighborhood clinic has turned into a business first, care team second.

Over the past two decades, the cost of veterinary care has risen more than 60% faster than general inflation. Today, the average routine vet visit now runs roughly \$214 for a dog and \$138 for a cat—before diagnostics, medications, or procedures are added.

And it's not always about the number on the bill—it's the surprise of the bill. Clients feel blindsided, confused about line items, and frustrated by quotes that weren't fully explained. The American Pet Products Association reports that pet care spending is at an all-time high, but most clients still say they don't understand what they're paying for. That's a recipe for suspicion, resentment, and eventually withdrawal.

In recent national surveys, more than HALF of U.S. pet owners report they have skipped or delayed veterinary care due to cost in the past year alone.

When trust is shaky and bills are high, the emotional math stops adding up.

The Pressure Cooker Inside Hospitals

You want to know what trust erosion *actually* looks like? It's not some giant PR crisis. It's a Tuesday morning at Haven Veterinary Hospital.

Amanda is at the front desk, juggling three ringing lines and a client who showed up 10 minutes late but still expects to be seen "right now." Her eyes are darting between the phones, the clipboard, and the lobby door that just opened again. On call three, a woman named Kelly launches in, voice already hot:

"I requested Rufus's refill three days ago and nobody called me back!"

Amanda stiffens. She *knows* that refill was approved yesterday, but she can't find the note in the system. Kelly keeps talking, faster, louder.

Meanwhile, a tech walks by and mutters, "Here we go again," under her breath. Everyone hears it. Amanda's face turns red. She promises to "look into it," hangs up, and exhales hard.

Now pause that moment. No one died. No one cursed. But trust *just cracked*.

Kelly hung up thinking the clinic doesn't care. Amanda walked away thinking her team doesn't have her back. The doctor down the hall just heard the tension and silently added "another fire" to his list of reasons he's exhausted.

That's how trust erodes—drip, drip, drip. Not in the big blowups, but in the micro-misses that pile up.

If you want to rebuild trust, start here: fix the small breaks. Simplify the damn refill process. Give Amanda a system that actually supports her. Because no amount of marketing will save you if your team can't deliver the basics with empathy and consistency.

Inside too many hospitals, things are falling apart. Teams are being squeezed to fit in more (and often shorter) appointments, often while understaffed. Teams are thereby slammed and often feel like they're ill-equipped with the time and resources they need to practice quality medicine. Morale tanks.

Veterinary visit frequency has dropped in recent years, while the time between visits has increased by nearly 50%. At the exact same moment demand is rising, staffing levels are collapsing.

As a result, details and follow-ups get missed. Empathy fades when you're four patients behind and two team members called out. Communication becomes transactional. Comfort goes out the window. Clients expect more, but the experience is often worse.

For clients, that leads to disappointment.

For teams, it leads to exhaustion.

For everyone, it leads to the slow erosion of goodwill.

It's Not Because We Don't Care

Here's the part that hurts: it's not because our people don't care. If my 10+ years in the veterinary industry have taught me anything, it's this: our industry does a fantastic job of attracting well-intentioned people and leaders who authentically want to do good in the world—for both animals and their owners. What our industry doesn't tend to do very well is equip our teams and leaders with the necessary support they need to act on those genuine intentions effectively. But here's the blunt truth: good intentions

aren't enough if the system doesn't support them. And right now, the system is failing.

As a result, our teams are quietly falling apart inside: between 30 and 40% of veterinarians report high levels of burnout. Average staff turnover in veterinary hospitals now runs between 15 and 20% annually—nearly double what is considered “healthy.” The estimated annual cost of burnout to the veterinary industry? About \$2 billion per year.

Our teams are overwhelmed, overworked, and underappreciated. They're told to do more with less: squeeze in one more patient, calm one more angry client, and deliver compassion at record speed with fewer resources. They're absorbing the emotional weight of an industry under stress, and it's crushing them. Burnout is rampant. Turnover is brutal. Mental health struggles are everywhere. And this is happening even though the teams showing up every day are doing it with the most genuine intentions. Nothing frustrates or saddens me more than seeing an animal hospital team struggling with overwhelm or seeing their intentions questioned by frustrated clients yelling at them in a crowded lobby ... When behind the scenes those team members get out of bed, every morning, simply trying to do as much good as possible for animals and their owners, often at great personal sacrifice.

The Training Gap

Another part of the problem? Training. Or more accurately, the lack of it.

Too many hospital teams are thrown straight into the fire without any real education on how to manage client experiences (CXs): how to build trust, communicate about costs, or show empathy when emotions run high.

The vast majority of veterinary professionals report receiving little to no formal training on conflict resolution, emotional intelligence,

or client communication before being placed in high-stress client-facing roles.

And yet, the reality in our industry is that client trust is decreasing. Too often, both clients and teams feel like the other side just doesn't care about or understand them. They feel unseen, unheard, and unappreciated. They speak seemingly different languages and too often assume the worst of each other.

The Accountability Problem

Right now, CX—client experience—isn't treated as a core priority. It's treated as extra credit. Something you'll get to if there's time. And because CX and client-team trust building isn't always treated as a core function or hospital priority, there's often no accountability for it. "It's not my job," some say. "I have more urgent things to worry about." And in many ways, they're right: it feels like a luxury. But in reality, it's the foundation.

When teams are depleted, they can't go above and beyond. Clients feel that detachment. They leave disappointed, or angry. They complain. That complaint lands on the front desk or on a technician already running on fumes. And the cycle begins again: clients are unhappy, so teams grow defensive, and empathy fades.

"I hate people. I love animals." You hear that phrase more often now in our industry. But let's be real: that's not hate. It's grief. It's exhaustion borne from increasingly stressful interactions with clients. Or it's a coping mechanism, stemming from compassion fatigue. But behind it is often grief: grief over what this work used to feel like and what it's becoming.

The Leadership Gap

Behind it all is another issue: leadership.

It's not that our leaders don't care. They do! But most haven't been equipped with the right tools. CX is treated like fire control instead of fire prevention. A way to put out complaints, not a strategy to build trust.

Most leaders in hospitals were never trained on how to build joyful, inclusive cultures. Or how to train teams on communication and empathy. Or how to retain talent and inspire pride in the work and in the hospital's mission. They're doing the best they can with what they have, but what they have isn't enough.

And the ripple effects are massive. Clients come less often. Pets miss treatment. Word-of-mouth dries up. Staff churn accelerates. Revenue dips, prices rise, and clients get angrier. The cycle keeps spinning.

Here's the Good News

I don't believe it has to stay this way. I've seen hospitals turn things around. I've watched leaders embrace real strategies—not band-aids—and rebuild trust within their teams and between staff and clients, from the ground up.

I'm not going to sell you some magic “cure all” for everything wrong in veterinary medicine. That doesn't exist. But I can tell you this: the systems, strategies, and exercises in this book *work*. They've improved team morale and retention. They've increased client trust. They've boosted hospital performance. They've led to better pet outcomes.

And none of that is coincidence. It's all connected.

This book isn't about quick fixes. It's not about posters on the wall or chocolate chip cookies in the break room. It's about equipping leaders, at every level, to rebuild trust. To create places where clients and teams feel safe, seen, and valued.

Where We're Headed

So, here's our road map.

We're going to start by first describing what NOT to do: jumping straight to CX training and forcing tactics or behaviors on your team without first establishing a foundation and clear "why."

Then I'll show you the Veterinary Trust Flywheel—a model that proves how successful CX strategy starts with a focus on your team's culture, clarity, and safety and how a better team experience drives better CX, better team retention, and better outcomes, all of which drive better financial health for your hospital.

Then we'll get tactical. We'll talk about what pet owners really want from you and your team. Then, I'll outline a six-step process you can put into play in your hospital tomorrow. We'll talk leadership. Then, we'll talk about CX strategies and practices that actually work for clients, based on their deepest needs and expectations of your hospital team. We'll talk specific roles—doctors, techs, and Client Service Representatives (CSRs). We'll even talk about how to repair trust in complex environments like specialty hospitals.

And because I don't believe in fluff, I've loaded the appendix with practical tools and guides you can actually use. Not theory. Not slogans. Tools.

This isn't just a book. It's an invitation.

To lead.

To care.

To rebuild trust.

To create a hospital where both your team and your clients *want* to be.

Buckle up.

Summary

Without trust, veterinary medicine breaks. With it, everything thrives. Let's set this profession back in motion.

Veterinary medicine is in a trust crisis. You feel it at the front desk when a client blows up over a bill. You see it in your tech's eyes when burnout hides behind a forced smile. You hear it in the silence of a team that's just been through another exhausting day. At the root of it all? Trust is breaking.

And here's the blunt truth: without trust, nothing works. Not your medicine, not your client relationships, not your business. Trust is the oxygen of this profession. And right now, too many hospitals are suffocating.

But here's the part that should fire you up: this is fixable. The good news is that trust isn't some mystical unicorn we can't define. It's practical. It's learnable. And it can be rebuilt. I've seen it happen. Hospitals that were falling apart have turned the ship around by committing to trust as their core strategy.

That's what this book is about. Not Band-Aids. Not gimmicks. Real, repeatable systems that give your people the support they deserve, your clients the experience they crave, and your business the momentum it needs to thrive.

Later in this book, I'm going to hand you the blueprint: the Veterinary Trust Flywheel. It's the engine that shows exactly how investing in your team sets off a chain reaction: better CXs, better medicine, stronger business results, and reinvestment right back into your people. Push after push, the wheel starts spinning. And once it's spinning? Good luck stopping it.

So, buckle up. Chapter 2 is where we start turning the wheel.

Suggested Readings

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