



Emergency Communication Planning

Article by Roxanne Hawn

Who needs to know what when things go sideways?

It's far better to create an emergency communication plan before you need one. Think of it like a diagnostic differential with various if/then scenarios putting certain actions into motion, depending upon the severity of the emergency and how long it might take your practice to become operational again.

For planning purposes: Let's focus on emergencies that directly affect your ability in the short term to serve patients and clients, such as:

- Physical / structural issues in or near the facility (fire, water main break, natural disaster)
- Sudden illness, injury or death among your team

Decision 1

The first decision the practice leadership and team needs to make is if the emergency, indeed, requires a suspension of veterinary services as well as full-scale alerts to clients.

Even if a lot goes wrong, talented, prepared and professional practice teams may still be able to rally to

keep things going while isolating the trouble as much as possible—especially if it's a big facility.

Considerations include simply not having the ability to do proper work in the facility's spaces, needing to protect the safety of clients, patients and staff, or knowing that the team itself needs to regroup mentally and emotionally before attempting to work again caring for patients.

For example, if the plumbing fails and water or sewage floods the building, then you cannot work. Or, let's say a severe summer storm rips through the area and takes a chunk of your roofing with it or knocks a tree into your front door, then it's a safety issue. Finally, if your team faces a suicide or other sudden death, they'll need time to process the news without the pressure of serving patients or clients.

Decision 2

Once it's decided that the practice does need to suspend service and alert people, then the next step is to figure out simple language and a short message to explain the situation and how it will affect clients and patients. Pre-

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write a few statements that you may need in the future so that you have them at the ready.

At the very least, create a template that you can fill in such as Mad Libs.

[Date/Time] - [Name of Practice] is experiencing a [type of problem]. All scheduled appointments and surgeries for [dates] are cancelled and will need to be rescheduled. We expect a return to full services on [date]. Thank you for your patience.

Examples:

December 19, 2019 – ABC Animal Hospital is experiencing a storm damage emergency. All scheduled appointments and surgeries for Thursday, December 19, and Friday, December 20, are cancelled and will need to be rescheduled. We expect a return to full services on Monday, December 23. Thank you for your patience.

December 27, 2019 – ABC Animal Hospital is experiencing a profound loss. We're devastated to report the death of Dr. Smith early this morning. All scheduled appointments and surgeries for today are cancelled. We will be in touch to reschedule today's appointments. We expect a return to full services on Monday, December 30. Thank you for your patience and for honoring the need for privacy at this sad time.

Decision 3

The next step is figuring out who needs to know what's going on right away, as well as who else needs to know after that. Imagine the emergency as the epicenter, and start in the middle of the ripples with your emergency communication plan:

- Any client currently in the practice with their pets
- Any client who is offsite but has a pet currently in the practice
- Any client on the schedule later in the day of the incident when the service interruption begins
- Any client on the schedule for the days after the incident, if recovery will take more time
- Any client who may be affected as the future schedule accommodates those bumped during the emergency
- Clients in general who may be affected by the service interruption for things like food or prescription refills

Decision 4

Most likely, you can use different methods to communicate in an emergency with people in these various circles of need, moving out from the epicenter.



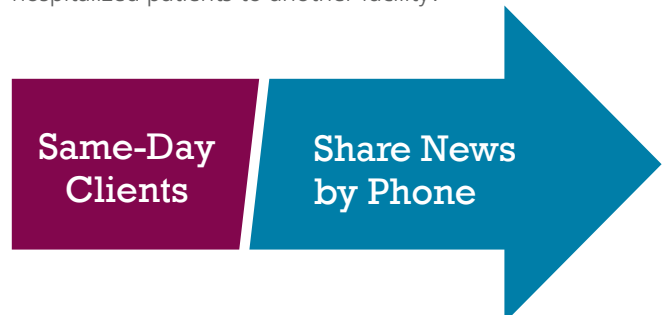
Client in the Practice > Team Member Shares News

Face to Face: Designate a team member or a few to personally explain the situation and help each client and pet exit the facility.



Pet in the Practice > Team Member Shares News by

Phone: Designate a team member to call each client about the situation and alert them to your plans. For example, do they need to come pick up their pets at the facility or another safer location? Or do you have plans to transfer hospitalized patients to another facility?



Clients With Same-Day Appointments > Team Member

Shares News by Phone: Designate a team member to call each client to make sure they don't arrive during the emergency and to reschedule, if there is time to do so, and clarity about when the practice will be operational again.



Clients With Appointments in the Coming Days > Share News by Email and/or Text: Get mass messages out to clients with appointments in the coming days via email and/or text. The message may include reason for cancellation and instructions on when to contact the practice to reschedule, if you aren't able to reschedule right away due to ongoing recovery from the emergency.



Other Clients Who May Be Affected > Share News by Email and/or Text: Get mass messages out letting people know about the unexpected interruption of service.



Everyone > Share News via a Social Media Blitz: Post messages to your social media accounts, alerting clients who follow you online to the emergency shutdown so that people know not to come and why you may not be answering the phones, etc.

Decision 5

After most of the emergency is behind you and whatever required recovery is at least well underway, plan how much additional information, if any, the team can or should share, especially if the situation requires privacy.

It's a good idea to plan conversational pivots in advance so that you stay on topic and on task for appointments while still acknowledging when clients express concern over the situation:

Damage to the building: "Thank you for asking. It was an interesting experience, for sure. We're glad to be back up and running. Now, let's see about [pet's name]."

Death within the team: "Thank you. It's a sad time for all of us. We appreciate your support. It's helpful to focus on the work we love. Now, let's see about [pet's name]."

The power of planning

Nobody likes to borrow trouble, but taking the time to brainstorm how to handle sharing news about emergencies is an important step toward being prepared. When something happens, you'll know what to do first and why.

It's easy to get tongue-tied and for communication to get muddled during the stress of an emergency. Take a breath and focus on sharing the smallest, most accurate dose of information to keep things simple and clear.



Roxanne Hawn is a professional writer and award-winning blogger based in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. A former writer/editor for the American Animal Hospital Association and the American Humane Association, she has written about veterinary medicine and pet topics for nearly 20 years. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, Reader's Digest, Natural Home, Bankrate.com, WebMD, The Bark, Modern Dog, and many high-profile outlets. Her first book is called *Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate*.