

5 tips to create a more inviting waiting room

By Julie A. Jacob

Is your waiting room creating a good first impression? Clients see it as soon as they step through the door, and that initial view needs to be positive.

Here are tips from architects with experience designing veterinary clinics on how to create a functional, comfortable, and attractive waiting room, whether you are building a new facility from the ground up or remodeling an existing space.

1) Determine the 'right' size

The first step is to settle on the number of exam rooms you want in your practice. Then, based on that decision, the size of your waiting room should be determined.

"The exam rooms and waiting room compete with the same amount of space, and you need to proportion things correctly," says Sean McMurray, AIA, NCARB, AAA, a principal architect with Animal Arts in Boulder, Colo. He says the trend is away from large waiting areas and toward smaller, cozier spaces.

"Some people want a larger waiting area, and that's fine, but I think that's becoming less and less common."

A porch or patio with benches and chairs can expand the footprint of a small waiting room at a clinic in an area with a milder climate.

"Over the past two years, we've been getting more requests from clients for front porches and outdoor waiting areas," says Roger Layman, AIA, owner of Veterinary Architecture Unleashed in Davidson, N.C. "People got used to waiting in their cars or outside during COVID, and people like the fresh air."

2) Focus on the reception desk

The reception desk is the focal point and nerve center of the waiting room. Its location, size, and design should be carefully thought out.

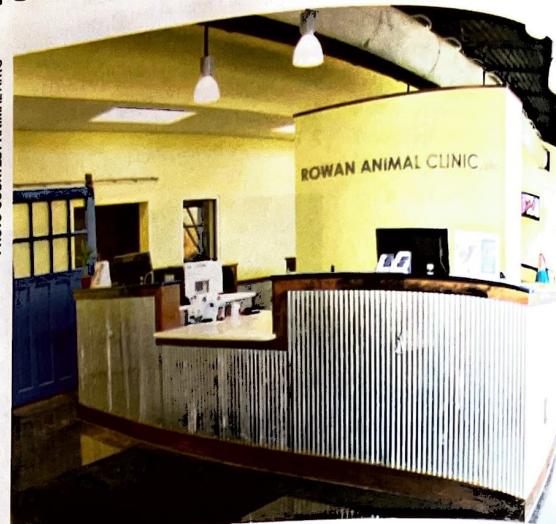
"It's the first thing that clients see when they walk in, and it needs to be visible from the entrance and the [waiting] chairs," McMurray says.

Ideally, the reception area should have a circular flow, with the check-in area separate from



At Raintree Animal Hospital, the dark wood floor, tile reception desk, and high ceiling evoke the feel of a mountain cabin.

PHOTO COURTESY ANIMAL ARTS



Removing clutter from the reception desk can enhance a feeling of calmness in the waiting area.

PHOTO COURTESY ROGER LAYMAN



Using soft colors in waiting rooms can help create a soothing atmosphere in your clinic.

the check-out area and different doors for entering and exiting the waiting room.

When Raintree Animal Hospital in Fort Collins, Colo., built a new facility, separate entrance and exit doors were incorporated into the clinic's design.

"The first location had the same entrance and exit, and that created some opportunities for conflict with the flow in and out," says John Arnold, DVM, owner of Raintree Animal Hospital.

If separate check-in and check-out areas are not feasible, there should still be plenty of space around the reception desk for people with dogs on leashes and animals in carriers to move around without bumping into each other.

Another option for improving the flow around the reception desk is to move the check-out process to the exam room.

"By allowing the actual check-in process to take place in the exam rooms, clients and animals



High ceilings and large windows that allow plenty of natural light can make a room appear bigger.

don't end up standing at the front desk area," says Layman.

Reducing the clutter on the reception counter and moving the phone and appointment scheduling to an easily accessible room just behind the reception desk will minimize noise and distractions at the front desk, creating a calmer, quieter atmosphere.

"Our clients are utilizing new callback rooms, phone rooms, and appointment rooms, which prevents from phones ringing

while the client is standing by," says Layman.

3) Provide separate waiting areas for dogs and cats

Even with a small waiting room, creating separate waiting areas for dogs and cats will make the calmer, less stressful routine's animals and humans.

"Even if it's one small room with a chair for a client and a cat in a carrier, it helps

the overall first impression and with the comfort level of the animals," says McMurray.

4) Strike a balance between durability and design in furniture

Durable, washable furniture and flooring is imperative between muddy paws, furry, and potty accidents, but it does not have to look sterile and drab. Chairs upholstered in colorful, durable fabric, instead of hard plastic chairs, can balance durability and appealing décor.

"We're creating more spa-like environments for our veterinary clinics. Small changes, such as indirect lighting and decorative light fixtures, can make a tremendous difference in how the office feels," says Layman.

Tile or wood laminate flooring provides a cozier, less clinical look than epoxy or cement but is still easy to clean and deodorize.

For his new facility, Dr. Arnold selected dark wood laminate flooring with a textured surface that is easy to mop and provides traction for dogs. The dark wood also contrasts with the white tile and steel reception desk.

Incorporating regional culture and geography into the design is another nice touch. For example, pastel colors and pictures of beaches can evoke a Caribbean feeling in a Florida practice. At the same time, nautical decors and shiplap paneling can suggest a saltbox house in a New England clinic.

"It's an opportunity to provide something that speaks to your style and culture and the region your practice is in," says McMurray.

Arnold wanted his practice's new location to feel cozy and mountain cabin-like, which was achieved with wood laminate flooring, a high ceiling, and plenty of windows to let in natural light.

Layman suggests reinforcing your brand by incorporating your practice logos and colors in the waiting room.

5) Incorporate calming elements

Layman is a Fear Free-certified architect, which means he has completed training in designing veterinary clinics to reduce animal stress. Even small changes in color and noise can ease the stress levels of nervous animals. For instance, pastel or muted colors are more soothing than bright red and orange. Sound-absorbing tiles, quiet printers, phones set to low ringer volumes, and plenty of natural light

McMurray says even swapping out harsh fluorescent lights for LED ones that provide a fuller spectrum of colors can have a positive impact.

Small changes can have a big impact

A complete overhaul of a waiting room can cost tens of thousands

of dollars, but if you do not have the budget for a large-scale remodeling project, minor, inexpensive fixes can go a long way to refresh a waiting room.

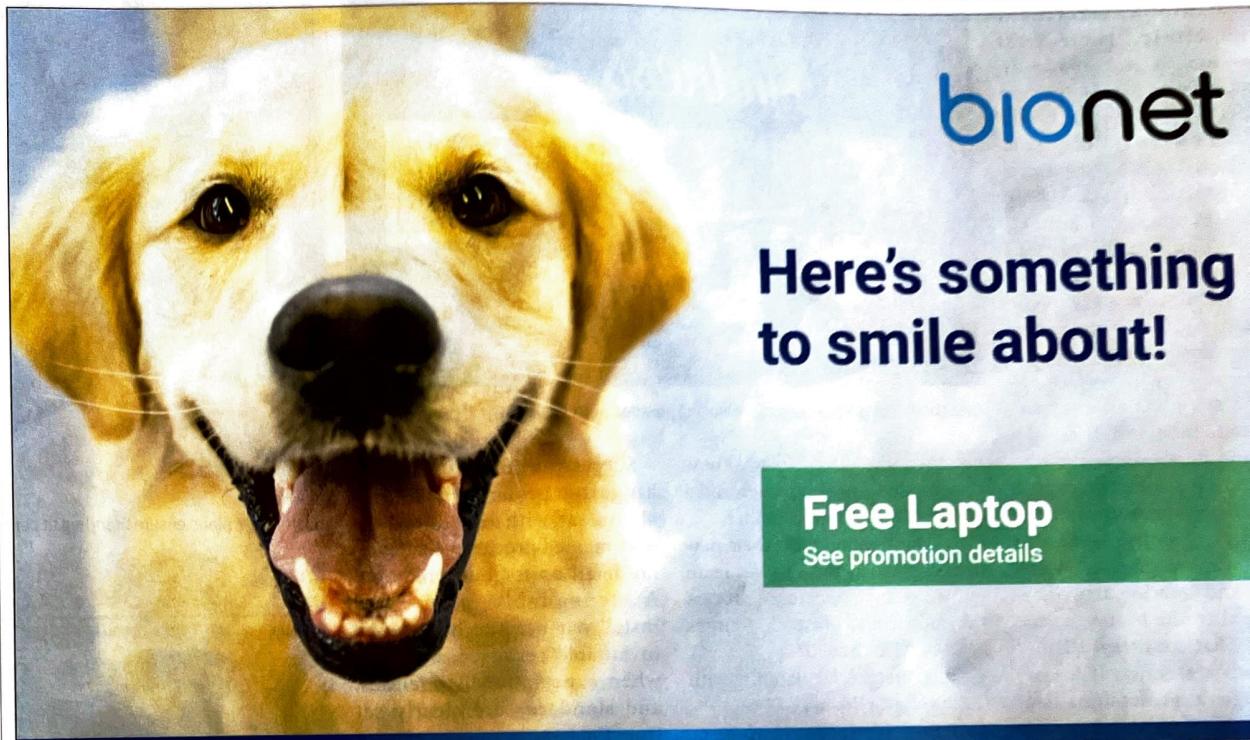
A fresh coat of paint, new artwork on the walls, or adding decorative pendant lighting above a reception desk can make a tired space look new.

"Are the ceiling tiles in good condition? Is the artwork hung straight? Those are things you become oblivious to. You don't see that the wall is marred or that it is time to change out the lights," says Layman.

McMurray says it is important to work with a professional with

experience designing animal care facilities, whether you are building a practice from ground up or remodeling an existing space. •

Julie A. Jacob is a communications professional and writer. She lives in Wisconsin with her poodle.



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