



The Kitten in the Room: Turning Kitten Season Into Lifelong Feline Care

Sixty-two percent of cats are acquired without a veterinary connection. Kitten season is the opportunity to change that and gain a patient for life.

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Kitten Season Is Bigger Than You Think

Spring and early summer usher in what shelter workers have long called kitten season; the period when cats born in late winter begin flooding rescues, back yards, and living rooms across the country. For veterinary practices, kitten season has traditionally meant a predictable surge of first-visit appointments: vaccines, deworming, a microchip, and a conversation about spay or neuter. Then, for many of those kittens, the veterinary relationship quietly disappears before lifelong care habits are ever established.

The scale of that quiet ending is now quantifiable; and it is larger than most practices realize. According to the 2026 CATalyst Council State of the Cat Report, the largest cat household survey ever conducted (screening more than 60,000 U.S. households), there are 77.6 million cats in American homes. They represent 45.7% of all cats and dogs combined. Yet feline visits account for only about 23% of total practice visits and roughly 21% of practice revenue. The gap between how many cats exist and how often they receive veterinary care is not a rounding error; it represents one of the largest untapped opportunities in companion animal health today.

Kitten season is the front door to that opportunity. How a practice manages the first months of a cat's life, and how it communicates with the person who brought that kitten in, determines whether that cat becomes a patient for one year or for fifteen.

How Cats Actually Enter Homes

Unlike dogs, which frequently are acquired through channels that include an automatic veterinary handoff such as breeders who require a first vet-visit clause, or shelters that send adopters home with a voucher, cats follow a fundamentally different path into U.S. households. According to the CATalyst 2026 State of the Cat data, 62% of cats enter through entirely informal channels: someone found a stray, a litter was born in the garage, a neighbor's cat had kittens, or a coworker needed to rehome a cat. Another 25% come through shelters or rescues and about 12% arrive through pet stores or breeders combined.

This matters enormously for veterinary engagement. Unlike many dog acquisition pathways, informal feline acquisition often occurs without structured onboarding, veterinary guidance, or even a clear understanding of what ongoing feline healthcare should look like. In many cases, the veterinary relationship is not intentionally avoided, it simply never gets established in the first place. CATalyst Council data shows that acquisition source is the single strongest predictor of whether a cat will ever see a veterinarian. For example, cats acquired through breeders visit at an 80% rate, whereas informally acquired cats visit at only 57.7%; a 22-percentage-point gap. The survey also found 8.4% of cats have never visited a veterinarian at all.

What this means practically is that when a new kitten patient walks through your door, it is likely the cat's first and possibly only introduction to the veterinary system. The person holding the carrier may have found this kitten under a bush three weeks ago and only brought it in because a friend suggested it. They may have no relationship with any veterinarian. They may believe that once the kitten shots are done, the cat is set. This first visit is not just a medical appointment. It is the beginning of a long-term trust relationship, and potentially the only window a practice has to help normalize lifelong feline healthcare before barriers begin to build.

First Year Vaccines Are Done; Now What?

The adherence data from the 2026 CATalyst survey illuminates a dynamic that many veterinary professionals have sensed but perhaps not fully measured. 93% of cat parents agree that regular wellness care is important, and 89% agree all cats need annual wellness exams. Yet only 51% report actually complying with annual wellness visits; a stunning 38-point gap between belief and behavior.

When cat parents in the survey were asked what was holding them back from more veterinary visits, cost topped the list at 55%, followed by carrier difficulty (29%) and stress on the cat (25%). But embedded in the open-ended responses was a revealing pattern: many parents view kitten vaccines as the primary and perhaps only veterinary need. Once the series is complete, some cat caregivers (17%) often believe the cat is protected and there is no particular reason to return until something goes wrong.

This is not a lack of love or attachment. In fact, the data suggests the opposite. The same survey found that 91% report a strong emotional bond with their cat, 90% say their cat is vital to their well-being, and 82% consider themselves a cat person. The issue is not attachment; it is a specific misunderstanding about the necessity of veterinary care once the kitten phase has passed. They do not understand that the annual exam is not primarily a vaccine delivery mechanism, but rather it is a very important health assessment that catches problems their cat is genetically inclined to hide. Many cat parents are also making decisions based on what they can visibly observe at home, and cats are biologically designed to mask pain and illness exceptionally well. That disconnect creates a dangerous gap between perceived health and actual health status.

The Case for Reframing the Annual Visit

The standard reminder message most practices send is “Your cat is due for vaccines”. This transactional message inadvertently reinforces the exact misunderstanding that causes drop-off. If vaccines are the frame, and the parent knows the cat got its kitten series, the reminder is easy to deprioritize. Why go in if the cat seems healthy and doesn't need shots this year?

The CATalyst data offers a better way to frame the annual wellness examination. When cat parents were asked what would motivate them to visit the vet more often, 69% said they would visit more if convinced it would help their cat live longer. 62% said they would visit more if they knew they could prevent expensive problems. The longevity message is, by a significant margin, the highest-ranked motivator in the survey.

This is a messaging realignment, not a medical one. Instead of “Your cat's annual vaccines are due”, the message becomes “Your cat is due for their annual whole health exam, one of the most important tools we have for helping cats live longer, healthier lives.” Educating parents that cats are masters at hiding illness is critical. By the time symptoms are visible, a condition may have been progressing for months. Share with your cat clients the importance of the physical exam with “This visit is how we catch what you can't see.” This is especially important in cats, for several reasons. First, cats reach the equivalent of 15 human years in their first year of life and 24 human years by their second. After their second birthday, cats age roughly 4-5 years for every human year. Additionally, subtle changes in weight, behavior, mobility, appetite, hydration, grooming, or social interaction may be the earliest indicators of disease progression.

That framing connects directly to what cat parents tell us they actually care about. It elevates the annual exam from a transactional compliance item to a proactive partnership in their cat's longevity. Done consistently in reminder communications, in-office conversations, and discharge summaries, it begins to reshape how clients think about what veterinary care is for and the value it brings to the longevity of their cat's life.

The Kitten Visit as a Relationship Foundation

The kitten series may be the single most important relationship building period in veterinary medicine with feline clients. Each kitten visit should include an explicit conversation about what changes as the cat moves through life stages; not just medically, but in terms of what you as the practice will be looking for.

In the juvenile phase, you are establishing baselines: weight, dental health, body condition score, behavior patterns. In young adulthood (ages two through six), you are screening for the conditions cats are prone to but rarely show early signs of such as renal disease, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, hyperthyroidism, dental disease, and early-stage diabetes. By the time a cat reaches its senior years (seven and beyond), annual exams are the mechanism by which you catch the things that, if caught early, can be managed rather than just responded to. This is also a good time to remind clients that cats age significantly faster than humans, thus wellness exams are necessary at every stage in a cat's life.

Framing this arc at the first or second kitten visit. "Here is what we are going to be watching for as your cat grows up" creates a roadmap that clients can follow. This approach shifts the conversation from reactive medicine to proactive partnership, helping cat parents understand that feline healthcare is not episodic, but longitudinal. It gives each subsequent annual visit a purpose beyond vaccines. It positions your practice as a partner across the cat's entire life, not just its first year.

One Question That Changes the Math: Do You Have Another Pet at Home?

The CATalyst data contains a finding that deserves to be posted in every exam room in every practice in America: 45% of cats live in multi-pet households. A substantial portion of those households already have a dog which means a meaningful share of clients sitting in your waiting room with a dog also have a cat at home who has never been seen.

The multi-pet prompt is the single lowest-cost patient acquisition tool available to a practice. The mechanics are simple. At every dog appointment, at every existing cat appointment, at intake for any new patient ask "Do you have any other pets at home?" If the answer is yes and a cat is mentioned who is not an active patient, the follow-up can be simple and conversational: We'd love to see them. Would you like to schedule a new patient exam?

The client is already in the building. The relationship already exists. The barrier to care for that invisible cat is not cost or stress or logistics; it is simply that no one has ever asked. This question, asked consistently by every team member at every visit, is one of the simplest and low-friction ways to help more cats access care.

Consider building the multi-pet prompt into your intake paperwork and your EMR workflow so it is not dependent on individual staff memory. Make it a standard field. Ask what other pets are in the household with a space for species, name, and last known vet visit. If that field comes back with a cat and no record in your system, it triggers a simple outreach; a postcard, a text, or a phone call that invites the cat in for a complimentary new patient exam.

Building a Relationship for the Life of the Cat

Communicate in life stages, not just appointment types

Annual reminders are more compelling when they are tied to something specific about where the cat is in its life. For example, a reminder for a five-year-old cat might say “Fluffy is entering the age when we begin watching closely for early kidney changes and dental disease. This is exactly the age when early changes can begin to appear, often before cats show visible symptoms at home.” Focusing on the age of the cat is a different message than simply vaccines are due.

Offer wellness bundles or care plans

The CATalyst household survey found that 82% of cat parents expressed interest in good-client discounts for annual exams, and 78% expressed interest in loyalty programs. Wellness plan bundles; a flat annual fee covering the exam, core vaccines, parasite screening, and a basic blood panel address the single most cited barrier (cost) while helping establish more consistent preventive care patterns over the life of the cat. They also shift the client's mental model: instead of “Is this visit worth the cost today?” the client who is already enrolled simply comes in.

Reduce the friction of getting there

29% of cat parents cited carrier difficulty as a barrier, and 25% cited stress on the cat. These are not complaints about your practice, they are logistical problems you can help solve. They are often signs that the traditional veterinary experience was not designed around feline behavioral needs. Providing carrier training resources at discharge (even a simple handout on how to make the carrier a positive space), offering feline-only waiting areas, providing pre-visit medication protocols when appropriate, and scheduling cat appointments at quieter times of day are low-cost interventions that meaningfully reduce the friction of repeat visits. Even small environmental and communication changes can significantly influence whether a cat parent returns or delays care. When 41% of cat parents say a more cat-friendly clinic environment would bring them in more often, that is both a signal and an invitation.

Use the discharge conversation to set the next visit

The end of a kitten visit or any visit is the highest-engagement moment you have with a client. They are present, focused, and emotionally invested. This is the moment to say I'd like to see Luna again in about a year. We'll check in on how she's growing, do a quick dental assessment, and update anything she needs. Can I go ahead and get that on the calendar before you leave? Pre-scheduling the next appointment at checkout helps reduce the likelihood that good intentions turn into delayed care months later.

The Opportunity Is Not Theoretical

It is worth stepping back to appreciate the scale of what the CATalyst 2026 State of the Cat data presents. There are 77.6 million cats in U.S. households. Feline visits in practices have been growing for three consecutive years even as canine visits have declined over the same period. Cats under three years old represent 38% of the total feline population, and the population is growing. The parents are emotionally bonded and tell us, clearly and in large numbers, that they would bring their cats in more often if they understood why it mattered. Importantly, the data also suggests this is not primarily a motivation gap, it is an access, education, and experience-design gap. Cat parents are emotionally invested. The opportunity is to build systems, communication strategies, and care experiences that make acting on love easier.

Kitten season is the entry point to that opportunity. Every kitten that comes through your door this spring is a potential 15-year patient relationship or a one-time visitor. The difference between those two outcomes has less to do with

clinical quality than with the quality of the relationship your practice builds from that first visit forward.

PRACTICE TAKEAWAYS

Eight actions your practice can implement now:

1. **Reframe your annual reminders.** Replace “vaccines are due” with language about whole-health assessment and longevity. Connect the visit to the specific life stage the cat is in.
2. **Ask about the other pet at every visit,** “Do you have any other pets at home?” should be a standard intake question. If a cat in the household isn’t an active patient, invite them in.
3. **Set the next appointment before the client leaves.** Pre-scheduling at checkout is the most reliable way to maintain annual visit cadence.
4. **Use the kitten series to build a life-stage roadmap.** Explain what you will be watching for as the cat ages. Give each future visit a reason to happen.
5. **Consider wellness bundles.** Monthly payment plans or annual wellness packages reduce the per-visit cost anxiety that drives lapse and are welcomed by 71% of cat parents.
6. **Train teams to communicate feline health differently.** Help teams explain that cats often hide illness, that annual care is about early detection rather than “just vaccines,” and that reducing stress is part of medical quality.
7. **Provide carrier training resources** on-line or at discharge (even a simple handout on how to make the carrier a positive space)
8. **Build simple handoffs with rescues and shelters.** Partner with local rescues, shelters, foster networks, and community caregivers to make the first veterinary visit feel easy, expected, and connected to lifelong care. Simple resources, first-visit pathways, and post-adoption education can help more kittens stay connected to veterinary care beyond the vaccine series.

The Cat Is Telling You Something

Veterinarians know better than anyone that cats hide illness. As both predator and prey, cats evolved to protect themselves by masking vulnerabilities. That biology still shapes how illness and pain appear, or often to not appear, in the home. The cat curled up on your exam table who appears healthy may have been compensating for discomfort or disease for far longer than anyone realizes. This is not because the parent doesn’t care, but because the cat is very good at not telling them.

The same dynamic plays out at the practice level. Cat parents are not indifferent; 91% report a strong emotional bond, 90% say their cat is vital to their well-being. They are often navigating a care system that has historically communicated feline visits transactionally rather than relationally and proactively. They believe in care but have not been given a compelling reason to keep showing up after the kitten series ends.

Kitten season is the opportunity to change that. The cat is in the building. The parent is engaged. The relationship is forming. The love for the cat is real. What happens in the next few months, how your team communicates, what story it tells about veterinary care, whether it asks about the dog at home or the other cat under the bed, sets the trajectory for the next decade and a half.

The cats are waiting. The pipeline is full. The opportunity is not theoretical; it is in the waiting room right now.

The Industry Opportunity Beyond Kitten Season

Kitten season should not be viewed simply as a seasonal increase in appointment volume. It represents one of the most important intervention points in feline medicine.

The veterinary profession has spent decades building systems largely optimized around canine care patterns, while feline acquisition, behavior, stress response, and cat parent psychology evolved differently. The result is not a lack of love for cats, but a care model that often unintentionally creates friction for feline families.

The practices that will lead the next era of feline healthcare are not necessarily those doing radically different medicine. They are practices that reduce friction, improve communication, recognize the emotional dynamics of feline caregiving, and proactively build lifelong relationships before disengagement occurs.

Kitten season is where that transformation can begin.

Data in this article drawn from the 2026 CATalyst Council State of the Cat Report (n=60,521 households, conducted by Kynetec and Forward Group) and CATalyst Council Feline Market Insights Report, Volume V.

For more information, visit CATalystCouncil.org.

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