

# Make your advice count

## Top tips for farriers

For many horse owners, farriers might be the only equine professional they come into contact with on a regular basis. Over time, farriers often foster long-term, trusting relationships with their customers, placing them in an influential position when it comes to providing advice and helping owners identify health and behavioural issues with their horses. However, it can be demotivating when well-meaning owners seem unable or unwilling to take on your advice.

*Below are techniques to help you communicate skillfully with your customers.*



### Listen actively

Ask questions that get a deeper answer than 'yes' or 'no'. Questions beginning with 'what' and 'how' help. 'Why' questions are open but can feel a bit judgemental. Try: "What made you switch feeds?", or "How are you getting on with his weight management?" which may be more fruitful than "Has he lost weight?".

Listening actively also means responding to the things you hear from the owner that you want to reinforce. For example, if you have an owner who has expressed struggles with leg handling, repeating "You're struggling with his leg control, right?" can keep them on topic and helps keep important conversations at the forefront of their mind. Even if the topic is a difficult problem, active listening with these responses can help a horse owner feel less alone with the issue and move them on to find a solution.

### Direct advice is rarely successful

Research suggests direct advice is only effective in around 10% of cases. It can be demoralising for you too, as you feel you've told them something over and over again. If you're desperate to give some direct advice, a useful way to open ears is to ask, "Would you like my advice on that?". This can open up space for you to refer them on to a vet, dentist, welfare officer or point out other examples of action they could take. In all, it's important not to be too directive. You never fully know the constraints on your client and, although solutions may seem obvious to you, they may not be so obvious to others.

### Be warm and accepting, even when the client may have strong views that differ from your own

Try to understand their point of view. Few owners are intentionally bad and they will usually have a logic behind what they do. Changing their mind often starts from understanding why they do what they do.

### Ignore excuses and use 'silence'

As best you can, try not to agree with any excuses, however jolly or sheepishly they are communicated. This is inadvertently excusing the behaviour and something that can lead to 'collusion' with the client which will not motivate them to solve the problem. It doesn't help them in the long run if we reassure them.

Although silences can be uncomfortable and unnatural, they are not intrusive or rude. If you let an excuse fall flat, this may prompt them to ask a question - "I've let the body condition scoring slip to be honest" - Pause/silence - "Do you think that's bad?". This allows you to ask an open question to help them think, such as, "What do you think got in the way?" or "How would it have been easier to keep it up?".

### Celebrate success

Just like in horse training, positive reinforcement works for people too. We want to ignore the behaviour we don't want to see and encourage the good. For example, you might want to say "I can see you've been trying to work on this - I appreciate that", if the client has sought help from someone else for another issue such as investigating back pain. Although it may feel obvious, recognising that you're pleased to see that they have taken action is appropriate and inherently rewarding. We all have busy lives and it's easy for people to find excuses so when someone has followed through with their leg handling training or research into a condition, hearing you acknowledge it is very motivating.

[www.redwings.org.uk](http://www.redwings.org.uk)

This advice is a summary of well-established principles in using communication to helping people through problems. For further advice on interpersonal skills that could enhance your influence, you may wish to read: Motivational Interviewing (Rollnick & Miller, 1995) - used widely by doctors and other experts in public health settings.

