

Customer service in Healthcare: the past, present and future

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Studies show people hold on to negative experiences and not likely to change their mind after suffering one. The best way is to prevent one from happening. Customers of healthcare have been many throughout the past decades- insurance companies, governmental regulation agencies, large employers with self-insurance are some of the big ones. Thanks to Affordable Care Act (ACA), now, the real customer, an individual patient is getting more voice and attention for their own health.

Educated patients are taking more control over their healthcare dollars. People are now focusing on their coverage, cost and quality of doctors and hospitals. An unhappy patient will move on to a different facility different physician. Healthcare is complex machinery with different transitions and patients have always found it confusing and over-whelming to navigate through this maze. Like customers in any other industry, each step is evaluated and reported from scheduling, waiting area, courtesy of staff from entering to leaving the facility, interactions with physicians and nurses etc. A big difference always will always be that customers of healthcare do not want to be there. Hence in this stressful period, a small misstep can be perceived as a big issue.

Surveys from CMS like HCAHPS, which evaluate in-hospital experiences, also carry more weightage and reimbursement and quality is directly linked to it. Internet is also patient's best friend and an important resource for a lot of patients who are trying to compare different facilities. Another important aspect of customer service is Patient-Centered Care that goes beyond good demeanor. Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines Patient Centered Care as: " Providing care that is respectful of and responsive to individual patient preferences, needs and values, and ensuring that patient values guide all clinical decisions." This is very important since patient-centered care

results in higher patient engagement and high patient-perceived health outcomes.

While understanding importance of customer service is important, educating the actual caregivers should be a big focus from hospital administrators. To begin with, our leaders should be good role models. The best way to learn bedside manners is by example. At Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago, employee's performance appraisal evaluates soft skills and hospital also offer soft-skill building opportunities for nurses and other employees. Studies show that physicians with good bedside manners have fewer chances to be involved in malpractice lawsuits. Also if patient perceives higher personal attention, a physician's practice is likely to grow with word-of-mouth referrals. Educating physicians and staff and above can drive motivation to perform better. Another important tool to improve service is 'Moment of Truth Analysis', which was developed by SAS airline CEO. He understood that every interaction between an employee and a customer had a potential to affect customer's loyalty, referrals and retention. Every interaction, even if it lasted for 15 seconds, was a moment of truth. It's not very complicated or time consuming exercise. It started by identifying every moment of truth- interaction between staff and patients and defining what kinds of experience would be negative, positive or memorable from customer point of view. Changing behaviors of staff towards memorable experiences and avoiding negative behaviors at each step will bring you more customer loyalty. Another important tool to improve patient satisfaction is forming a database for frequently asked questions- it will make new employee feel comfortable, give out consistent answers to patients and saves staff time. The key to success will be reinforcement. Once service standards are defined, success lies in willingness to model the desired behaviors.

Patients will have more trust when staff is competent and a combination of compassion and competence will create a culture that is second to none for the patients.

One of main pushbacks from physicians is expected to be loss of autonomy, increased appointment times and a resistance to change in behavior. From a healthcare administrator point of view, their customers are physicians who bring patients to the hospitals. Administrators are unlikely to succeed if there is no active physician engagement in this new health revolution. Engagement does not merely imply providing physician with leadership positions in a hospital or giving financial incentive. Active engagement with primary focus on improved patient care and experience should be sought. Leaders should take a position that achieving high-value care for every patient is more important than individual physicians needs. Some health systems have redesigned physician incentive packages based on customer surveys and initiatives like these may help only in short term. Healthcare leaders should engage physicians by promoting shared purpose and putting focus on patients and their sufferings trumping all other concerns.

Nurses are also humans and may not appreciate the customer-oriented approach to healthcare. Long hours, burnouts, social/family issues affect their morale and an expectation to treat all patients 'nicely' may not be accepted by all. However patient stories are very powerful even for an individual patient. Many physicians and nurses have grown up in the same community as their hospital and their loved ones use the same resources in the area. Being able to see how someone else's family was treated (good and bad) will send out a strong message about need for compassion and competence. Nurses also need more empowerment to report adverse

events and concerns about patient safety. They should be able to practice to the full extent of their scope of practice to improve morale.

Non-financial rewards and penalties also play a big role for improving patient satisfaction. Everyone, doctors and nurses alike, appreciate positive feedbacks. An award like DAISY recognizes individual extraordinary nurses and local physician awards like 'Top Doc' just reinforces positive behavior and creates a positive competitive nature in an organization.

Leaders should recognize that providers always embrace tradition and it is their responsibility to maintain it. When physicians and nurses value membership in an organization, for any reason, they are motivated to adhere to that organization's standards and tradition. The best example is of Mayo Clinic where providers still adhere to Mayo Clinic dress code from 19th century. Also it has standards how physicians communicate with each other, staff and patients.

The key to great customer service is simply ensuring we treat customers appropriately. Not every customer is expected to have a stellar experience every time. But in those moments when things perhaps don't go as planned that truly world-class organization shine.

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