

Why Customer Service Matters

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*Denny Morrison will be presenting at the Spring Conference session entitled, **Importance of Effective Customer Services and Its Impact on Clinical Care**. [Register Now.](#)*

People who seek out health care do so wearing two hats: one is that of a client/consumer and the other is that of a customer. Most providers believe that the main, perhaps only, thing consumers want is high quality care and everything else is either secondary or doesn't matter at all. It is true that consumers DO want high quality health care but that's not all they want. They also require, but rarely get, high quality customer service.

It is important to note that this isn't the same as "consumerism" which is more about having a say in your own health care decisions which is important and desirable, and is related to this. This is about plain old customer service that you would expect from any business including things like understanding and being responsive to people's service needs, being hospitable and flexible in scheduling and listening, responding and making amends when you or your organization has dropped the service ball.

Clinicians sometimes take offense at these comments. Responses typically land around some variation of, "You're comparing me to a used car salesman. I am a professional and I am here to help people, not to sell them something." Well, that is simply not true and furthermore, NOT treating consumers like customers is likely having a negative effect on the quality of their clinical care. You see, health care, including behavioral health care, is a service business and all of the research from other service industries applies to behavioral health. The people who seek out health care providers have a lot more experience being customers than they do being patients. They apply the same customer service standards to their health care provider as they do any other business with which they interact. The difference is those businesses pay attention to the service needs of these people and health care providers usually do not. Worse yet, when asked by a third party for an opinion about your clinical quality, they will likely respond in terms related to the quality of your customer service. Gauging the quality of health care is difficult. Gauging the quality of services is not. Think of your own experience with health care. Can you tell if your physical exam was well done or if your surgery was performed correctly? Now think about whether you had to wait a long time in the waiting room for that physical or if your hospital room was comfortable and the food tasted good. Which is easier to judge? It's the same for the consumers accessing behavioral health services.

The good news is that not only can this be fixed, doing so will yield better clinical outcomes and better word of mouth referrals for your services. All of this is becoming more important with

changes in funding moving towards value-based reimbursements and as we move from a clinician-centric health care system to a consumer-centric health care system.