

Exceeding Patient Expectations

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This January not only marks the beginning of a new year, but also the start of a brand new decade. This is also the time of year where many people make a list of everything that they personally resolve to change or improve upon in the upcoming year. However, New Year's resolutions should not be limited to individuals only. Healthcare practices and healthcare organizations should also be involved in the resolution process to ensure that they are constantly improving and striving towards being the best as well. And with the rising costs of healthcare coupled with our struggling economy, there truly isn't a better time than right now to give back to our patients by delivering an exemplary customer service experience every time they set foot in our practices.

The Future of Healthcare

Although nobody knows exactly how the current incarnation of healthcare reform will ultimately be constructed, there are two things that most pundits agree on. The first is that there will, in fact, be some reforms to our nation's healthcare system. The second is that more of the cost of care will be paid for by the patients directly. As patients begin to pay more for their healthcare, it stands to reason that they will also begin to expect more from the patient experience as a whole. This means that the most successful practices will be those that are best able to meet—and exceed—those expectations in 2010 and beyond.

Patients Are Consumers

The timing of this generation-long shift has coincided with the Information Age, and the resulting perfect storm of change has had a demonstrable effect on patient behavior. Patients today are more knowledgeable and sophisticated in their healthcare relationships and they now act much more like consumers than simply the sick people of days gone by.

Today's patients are influenced by, and responsive to, traditional consumer stimuli such as price, customer service, and convenience. They tend to be more demanding, more likely to compare their doctors the way they compare other professional resources in their lives, and not nearly as brand loyal as they used to be. In many ways, medical practices are confronted with many of the same challenges and opportunities as other types of retail businesses. Successful medical practices have taken a page out of the corporate world's book and have begun to design their practice processes in a way that creates exemplary patient experiences.

Benefits of Being Patient-Centric

Companies large and small have come to recognize the economic value of building "customer-centric" organizations—and the rewards for organizations that exceed customer expectations have been considerable. Those benefits include a much more positive work environment, greater job satisfaction for employees, enhanced practice profits and competitive advantages in the marketplace. Additionally, there have been studies that have demonstrated an inverse relationship between satisfying patient needs and their willingness or desire to bring a malpractice suit against their physician. In a study conducted by Stevens & Lee, a major legal and consulting firm, 73.7% of 239 malpractice claims they studied were linked to failures in service or communications—two critical factors in patient satisfaction.

Driven to Exceed

Simply meeting your patient's expectations represents the minimal level of acceptable service and rarely succeeds in creating high patient satisfaction scores. Exceeding them however, will actually create long-lasting buzz about the practice, which can have

immeasurable benefits. However, this is not as easy as it may sound. Every practice has deeply entrenched systems and cultures. In order to truly create a "patient first" practice, you need to begin with a clean slate and recognize that the patient has to be at the center of every practice process, from scheduling to collections. Building the structure, however, will require determination and uniformity of purpose.

For the organization to become fully engaged in this process, all team members need to understand the specific goals of creating a patient-centric environment and their roles in making it a reality. At minimum, all staff must embrace the following truths about our patients:

- They are part of your business, not outsiders
- They are human beings with real feelings and emotions
- They are always deserving of the most courteous attention you can give them
- They are people with wants and needs, which it is your job to satisfy
- They are the main source of income that pays all salaries in the practice

Like all practice processes, customer service is an ongoing and changing aspect of your business. In the end, if you routinely exceed the expectations of your patients, their loyalty and commitment will have made the effort well worth your time and energy and their appreciation will be manifested in return visits, prompt payments, and new patient referrals. Let's all make it our New Year's resolution to exceed our patients' expectations, and make 2010 the best year ever for our patients as well as for our organization. ▶

Tips to Exceed Patient Expectations

The 7/11 Rule

In the first 7 seconds, the patient forms an impression about you and your organization. Below are 11 questions that you can ask yourself to ensure that your first impression is your best impression.

Clean—Are staff and clinic areas clean and tidy?

A cluttered front desk could potentially create the impression that your practice is disorganized and unprofessional.

Attractive—Is the practice atmosphere attractive to the eye?

Take a moment to make sure that the reception area is clean and up-to-date with recent magazines, reading material, and current practice information.

Credible—Does the staff consistently keep their word?

Failing to do so can create an environment of distrust, which can have many negative consequences now and in the future.

Knowledgeable—Does staff give correct information?

Having a solid knowledge of the practice's processes helps to build patient confidence in the staff and in the practice as a whole.

Responsive—Are patients greeted immediately?

A warm welcome can go a long way in helping patients feel comfortable and at ease.

Friendly—Does the staff act friendly with patients and co-workers?

Do not underestimate the importance and power of a friendly gesture.

Helpful—Are staff being as helpful as they can?

Going to the doctor can be intimidating for many patients. Do not make it worse for them by failing to be helpful.

Understanding—Are staff being empathetic to patients?

Remember to put yourself in your patients' shoes!

Courteous—Are staff using the phrases "please" and "thank you"?

Good old fashioned common courtesy never goes out of style.

Confident—Are staff confident in their word and their work?

If you're confident in your work, then it is likely that your patients will feel confident in you too.

Professional—Are staff dressed and speaking in a professional manner?

Failing to do so could adversely affect your credibility.

15 Ways to Exceed Patient Expectations

- Admit Mistakes
- Ask for complaints and bad news
- Ask often: How are you doing? What can we do better?
- Cure complaints now
- Customize to their needs
- Find unmet needs by asking
- Know as much as possible about your organization
- Send a thank you
- Do what you say you are going to do
- Add a personal touch to your service
- Be proactive in retaining customers
- Act quickly
- Make it simple for the patients
- Keep your promises
- Make your customers feel important