

Rethinking Service in Practice Management

By Joan Fox



Service matters. And for years the business community has realized the critical effect of customer service on profitability, growth and ultimately business success. Yet, recognition of the

important role of service in medical practice success has been scarcely present. Getting customer feedback is essential to knowing how customers perceive the quality of their experience. This knowledge is the key to improving service and ultimately is the path to practice success. The changing landscape of medical care and the increased pressure on practice profitability demands a rethinking of this historically indifferent attitude toward service.

Hospitals and out patient surgery clinics have surveyed patients for years to measure the quality of the patient's experience. The primary impetus for this feedback process was the relatively high number of empty hospital beds. In an effort to win a greater market share, they decided to listen to the customer and act on what they heard. However, the medical practice community has not readily accepted the importance of systematically listening to their customer. Consequently, the substantial benefits and competitive advantage that are gained from implementing a feedback system are not being enjoyed.

Patient Loyalty or Patient Inertia?

Where patient satisfaction is not measured, it is likely that patient inertia is mistaken for patient loyalty. It has traditionally been assumed that a patient is satisfied if they stay with the practice. Think

Part I of II: The Power in Knowing

again. Finding another physician, establishing rapport, repeating their story and in general the 'hassle factor' inherent in changing medical practices make it difficult to leave. For some, unless the situation is extremely distressing, they will simply take the path of least resistance and endure poor service. Unquestionably the soft costs associated with these dissatisfied patients must be considered. Complaint handling, administrative staff time, and extra minutes with the physician for non medical matters cannot be dismissed.

The Case for Getting Feedback

It is imperative to ask why the "best practice" of listening to the customer has not been adopted by the majority of practice managers. There are several seemingly logical yet outdated arguments to consider. The first is that a medical practice doesn't have customers, it has patients. Therefore many standard business practices do not apply. It is true that the nature of the interaction between a physician and a patient is a more need driven, personal and serious interaction than the average service provider to customer interaction. However, in the final analysis, a medical practice is a business whose business success is affected by many of the same customer service challenges with which other businesses contend. And arguably, the best reason to listen to the patient is that an adverse medical outcome has more significant consequences than another adverse business outcome. Additionally, at this time as the insurance industry pilots "pay for performance" criteria, any proactive measure to improve the efficiency of and patient satisfaction with the practice has

got to be a smart thing to do. It is time to fully acknowledge the fact that patient perceptions are as critical to a medical practice as customer perceptions are in other industries.

Another argument made by medical practices to not establish a patient feedback

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mechanism is that the practice receives few complaints. This is interpreted as evidence that patients are happy and therefore no problems exist. It is time to rethink this belief. Statistics tell us that only 4 percent of dissatisfied customers will complain about the product or service

directly to the service provider. However, 96 percent complain to family members, co-workers and friends. These detractors significantly multiply the negative impact on the business and the lack of feedback disallows the business to improve the situation. Even if complaints are rare, they are serious. They represent many more patients with the same thought. Hence the overtly dissatisfied few represent the tip of the disgruntled iceberg. In this case what you don't know is hurting your business.

It could also be argued that because business is booming there is no need to initiate a patient feedback process. Besides the obvious naiveté in this thinking, it is also severely shortsighted. When a feedback mechanism is in place, the patients in a practice serve the function of consultants. Feedback identifies problems, flawed or inefficient processes, or poorly performing personnel, allowing the practice to resolve these issues, ultimately improving the business. Acting on patient feedback affects more than the customer getting served. It can also improve efficiency, and



profitability while reducing medical liability exposure. Feedback short-circuits potential problems. It also pinpoints ways to proactively improve the patient experience by anticipating patient needs and ultimately giving the practice a window into the patient's mind.

Another particularly persuasive reason to invite patient feedback is the long understood fact that physicians with the ability to build relationships and rapport with their patients are sued

less often. Today we live in a litigious society. With rising malpractice premiums and the ever increasing number of lawsuits filed, it is especially important to communicate a considerate message to the patient. The very act of surveying the patient base sends a favorable message and casts the practice in an empathetic light. It places the practice in the "I care about what you think" category, offering a path for communication therefore improving the relationship. The feedback obtained gives the practice the data needed to make patient centered changes.

Systematically listening to the customer by installing a patient feedback process is the most fundamental and vital step that all organizations including medical practices can execute. Listening is at the core of knowing.

The Message to your Patients

We track what we value and what we

believe to be important. It's likely that you know how much money is in your checking and savings account right now. You probably measure your weight, track the performance of your IRA, and get upset if your children get poor grades. What we don't

track and measure, we simply don't know. Not knowing what patients think and feel jeopardizes the patient experience. The consequences of not knowing are erroneous assumptions, missed opportunities, loss of patients, loss of revenue and increased liability.

Inspection of Touchpoints

Touchpoints are the interfaces in every patient to practice interaction where the patient gains a perception of service. Multiple touchpoints connect the patient to the practice and the sum of the touchpoints is the entirety of the patient's experience. A touchpoint is an opportunity to create a positive or negative impression; each touchpoint being key. An effective feedback mechanism inspects these touchpoints. From the moment the patient schedules the appointment to the moment the visit is complete and the insurance claim accurately processed, there are dozens of opportunities to create a positive or negative experience for the patient. At each touchpoint an impression is formed. Even seemingly trivial encounters with the waiting room signage, the tone of voice of the receptionist, and the choices of reading material make an impression.

(Part II of this article will more fully examine the concept of touchpoints.)

Time for a Change

Historically, medical practices have assumed that the patient encounter was fine or simply did not care to know the quality of the patient's experience with them. When a practice puts a systematic process in place to listen to their patients and makes changes based on the feedback, it can bridge the gap from patient care to caring for patients. This transition cannot be made without evaluative feedback from the patient. How can you know what your patients think and feel unless you ask them and you listen to what they have to say? Knowing what patients think and feel about your practice allows you to make the changes that are specifically important to your patients. It affords you the opportunity to be proactive and it is an attainable goal. There is power in knowing what your patients think and feel. For the health of your practice, it just makes sense to do so.

Part II of this article will explore the art and science of surveying your patient base.

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