



photo by Collins Woerman

*Collins Woerman designed a resort-like entry to Swedish Medical Center's new Issaquah facility. Patients and family members enjoy a relaxing, welcoming environment offering "wayfinding" signage and symbols.*



# Customer Service in Health Care

## Optimizing Your Patient's Experience

by Karen A. Meek

One of the simplest, least complicated, yet often overlooked aspects of delivering health care is practicing good customer service skills. Patient satisfaction surveys repeatedly show that health care worker attitudes, manners and amenities encountered during patients' experiences at medical facilities weigh with similar importance to treatment processes. Health care leaders and researchers are recognizing that health care, from the patient's perspective, is as much a consumer-focused service as other service industries are. Hence, health care should be delivered with the same regard to optimizing patients' experiences as business operators do for consumers of education or vacations.

Providers and administrators are learning how good service, not just good outcomes, relates to patient satisfaction. Measurable data shows that optimizing the patients' visit plays a critical role in affecting bottom lines and retaining loyal patient populations. Health care facilities of all types and sizes are incorporating service policies. This is good news for patients and prospective ones who want to be loyal to the positive experiences they have, or will have, at your facility.

### What Your Brand Says About You

In response to the data on customer service in health care, marketers play a significant role in persuading customers (patients) to "buy in" to a "brand." A brand is a statement about a product or service that consumers experience when they use that product or service. Brands build reputation. How you represent your brand is another reflection of your reputation.

Your brand goes beyond attention-grabbing logos and poetic catch phrases that are part of medical facilities' artfully-produced print, web or broadcast ads. Marketers gather patient survey data to create and present—through emotion-stimulating messaging and images—a statement for a clinic's providers and services. The marketer's message entices patients to connect through personal preferences or experiences. Marketing proposes the kind of brand experience prospective patients may have at your practice. It also reinforces the choices your existing patients made to entrust their care to you.

This is why roughly 50 percent of new patients come to you from existing patient referrals. In a 2008 study of 17 million adults, nearly half relied on recommendations from relatives

and friends for a primary care doctor. Only one in four came from physician referrals.<sup>1</sup> The study points to providers fulfilling satisfied patients' expectations. It's incumbent upon your entire staff—from receptionists to specialists—to deliver the brand experience that lives up to the image you advertise.

### What is Your Brand Experience?

Michael Eisner, former CEO of The Walt Disney Company, once said, "A brand is a living entity and it is enriched or undermined cumulatively over time, the product of a thousand small gestures." What are the small gestures you convey that satisfy or fend off patients? When you increase the value of patients' experiences through the relationships they have with you, you will likely see patient satisfaction and loyalty rise. In health care, the value of patients' experiences revolves around some critical deliverables, including:

- ◆ Showing compassion, e.g., caring, not just care
- ◆ Providing a safe environment
- ◆ Building trust
- ◆ Engaging the patient in the treatment process
- ◆ Respecting the patient's time
- ◆ Providing value-added services



*The lobby at PacMed's Diagnostic and Wellness Center for Women has a very spa-like feel that puts women at ease and makes them more likely to want to have their mammogram test done each year.*

photo by Collins Woerman

### Make Customer Service a Priority Policy

Health care facility leaders are now infusing patient experience programs throughout their operations. A practice of any size can incorporate the basics of exemplary customer service policies once they identify what their brand experience entails.

Alan Mitchell is an internationally-recognized marketing expert who wrote, "An organization can only 'walk the talk' when its managers deliberately shape its internal reality to align with its brand promise. Hence, (the brand's) values must be internalized by the organization, shaping its instinctive attitudes, behaviors, priorities, etc."<sup>2</sup>

1 *Word of Mouth and Physician Referrals Still Drive Health Care Provider Choice*, Ha T. Tu and Johanna Lauer, Research Brief No. 9, The Center for Studying Health System Change, 2008

2 *Out of the Shadows*, Alan Mitchell, *Journal of Marketing Management* 15, No. 1-3, January-April 1999: 25-42

*Craig Pepin, MD reviews a patient's EHR with medical assistant Debby Tuitoelau at The Polyclinic. There are policies in place and recognition programs for employees who excel in customer service, but it's really more about the clinic's overall culture.*



Well-defined workplace expectations and performance guidelines for customer service help employees, including staff and physicians, understand how to deliver the brand experience that patients appreciate.

For example, Virginia Mason Medical Center's (VMMC) "Team Medicine" brand includes a series of principles that any staff member can perform as expected service behaviors. "Whether you're at the bedside or you work in finance, you understand how we treat each other and how we treat our patients," explains Keely Brzozowicz, RN, MSHA, administrative director of Patient Relations and Service at VMMC. "All of our service training is based on the premise that the patient is as much a team member as everyone else in the system. That requires our understanding that patients are more connected than ever to participating in their outcomes."

Some 5,000 employees at VMMC share common values that are published, promoted and supported throughout the organization. Because of VMMC's strengthened effort to foster accountability for employees' interactions with patients, they're now getting more patient compliments than complaints.

Paul E. Sherman, MD, MHA is the medical director for Strategy Deployment at Group Health Cooperative. He is instrumental in Group Health's implementing Kaiser Permanente's Four Habits Model<sup>3</sup> as a guideline for physician-patient relations in primary care clinics. "The model teaches providers to engage the patient from the beginning to the end of the treatment process," Sherman says. Harkening to Michael Eisner's small gestures reference, the Four Habits Model shows a correlation between sincere communications along with patient engagement in the treatment plan and increased patient satisfaction.

"This and other quality improvement programs at Group Health have led to surprising statistics on patient satisfaction," Sherman says. Recent satisfaction surveys showed that hospitalized patients' approval of their care rose from the 68th percentile to greater than the 95th percentile. Group Health hospitals and clinics are also seeing decreased readmissions, higher patient retention rates, and better outcomes as a result of establishing service-improvement programs.

### **Design Distinctive Value-added Service Programs**

To better understand Swedish's patient experience, David Miller, partner and director of brand strategy at Stoke Strategy, conducted quantitative consumer research and an ethnographic study of 28 procedures patients undergo while at Swedish's many facilities. What resulted was a shared method to inform the way Swedish presents its brand promise through facilities, staff and providers.

"The philosophy of designing patient experience is to concentrate value in the time that patients spend with you, satisfying them physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually," says Miller. "We're intentionally designing experiences that create deep satisfaction at every turn."

Using the high-tech Apple corporation to illustrate his point, Miller states, "Apple excels at creating simplicity. They've made it very pleasing to interact with them online, or in-store." Swedish is pursuing the same discipline, keeping a pulse on patients' perceptions of their experiences, to design health care experiences that engender trust and win loyalty. "Doctors' reputations were once built on discreet commentary and peer reputation. Through the web, patient reviews from experiences have become far more powerful," Miller adds.

"How we translate our 'putting patients first' promise is in providing value-added services, like helping to coordinate housing for families to who travel long distances for specialized care, or through simple actions like introducing ourselves to our patients, not just the adults," says Craig Munos, Seattle Children's director of corporate communications. "We listen to a family's feedback and know that acknowledging the child from the very start means a lot to them."

Patient Navigators at Children's build trust with families in their own language, assure that families understand care, and help providers understand families' unique needs that are sometimes otherwise overlooked during treatment. Welcome Call is a new program that places unit coordinators with families to acclimate them to the hospital environment.

3 "Getting the Most out of the Clinical Encounter: The Four Habits Model," Richard M. Frankel, Ph.D. and Terry Stein, MD, *The Permanente Journal*, Fall 1999, Vol. 3, No. 3

These patient envoys remain as go-to people for families throughout their stay, providing guidance to hospital services.

“With family feedback, we are able to deliver both quality care and service excellence,” Munos adds. “Patients and families will always come first at Children’s.”

At Pacific Medical Centers (PacMed), the brand promise is tailored to supporting patients’ health for optimal lifestyle experiences. “We understand that patients have busy lives outside of their doctor visit,” says Karyn Beckley, vice president of Marketing and Administrative Services, “so our service model focuses on how we can partner with our patients to discover what’s important to them to achieve their life goals.”

PacMed providers and staff include convenience in their distinctive service value. At the new Canyon Park clinic in Bothell, PacMed designed a concierge-style space where patients easily find treatment rooms by number, not department name. Patients are greeted by the check-in staff and can be in treatment rooms in less than five minutes. The physician is never more than 10 steps away. “Our goal is to cut the non-physician time in an outpatient visit in half,” Beckley says, “and, as it turns out, this new system is very satisfying for staff and physicians as well.”

## What Your Space Says About Your Brand

Building on patients’ brand experiences and provider facility requirement parameters, architects and interior designers are now incorporating the same principles of space planning for health care facilities as they do for hotels and mixed-use developments. They pay close attention to medical clients’ operational necessities and to how those clients seek to optimize patients’ experiences in medical facilities.

“As we look for opportunities to improve both existing and newly developed spaces, we rely on patient and employee focus groups, questionnaires, and workshops to understand how to create welcoming, practical, and sustainable facilities,” says Donna L. Smith, MD, medical director, Virginia Mason Hospital. “Because we are that concerned about adding value to a patient’s visit, we studied wait times, walking distances, work sequencing, and other issues that affect our ability to best treat patients.” That high level attention in both patient care policies and facilities design has contributed to VMMC’s placing in the 90th percentile in national quality surveys.

Lori Saleba is a principal at officewraps, a Kirkland-based interior design firm specializing in medical and dental office design. “Great design is achievable regardless of

continues

## Patient Comments to Learn From

**What would you have done to turn these patients’ experiences around before they escalate into exercises in reputation recovery? Remember—the Internet offers many social media communications tools that allow angry patients to virally sour your good reputation with negative comments.**

“The last thing I remember on the way to the O.R. was being blinded from the overhead lights while they wheeled me down long hallways, and then on the elevator! I was feeling woozy from the medication, but I won’t soon forget how anxious I was during that horribly endless ride on the gurney.”

“I was so humiliated. I couldn’t remember how much I’d earned in the past six months from my art sales and I didn’t have any kind of documents with me. But the receptionist was adamant they wouldn’t give me the sliding scale discount if I didn’t give them an accurate number. She shoved a clipboard and a calculator at me and curtly told me to figure it out, or go elsewhere.”

“I arrived a few minutes late for an appointment. Later, I got a bill from the doctor’s office charging me a \$25 late fee. The next time I went in, I sat in the exam room nearly a half-hour before the doctor saw me for a 10-minute follow-up. No one apologized for the inconvenience. Could I collect \$25 from him for being late? Doubt it. I got on Twitter to let my followers know about it.”

“I went in for a cataract treatment. There were several of us, all sitting in a cold, stale room with nothing to keep us warm while we waited and waited for our procedures. I had to track down a nurse to get a blanket. We didn’t have anything to drink or eat. I could tell others were very uncomfortable, too.”

*A pediatric patient turns the tables on Polyclinic pediatrician, Dr. Jessica Lindsay. Patient feedback shows that patients "love" their doctor, and they "love" The Polyclinic. It is possible for patients to have such a visceral connection to those who care for them at a time when they feel most vulnerable.*



in order to execute design plans that encourage employees' and patients' positive response to the environment," she says.

CollinsWoerman is a Seattle-based architecture, planning, and interior design firm with a strong background in medical facility design from the ground up. Douglas K. Grove, AIA, a senior medical planner at the firm, says, "We listen very carefully to our clients'

your office size and budget," she says, "you can make smart design choices that provide a warm and comfortable environment for patients and employees."

Saleba explained that good design addresses four elements: function, aesthetics, individuality and economy. She and her staff employ color, lighting, textures, furnishings and visual elements that speak to clients' brand promises. "We have to understand a medical office's every operational detail

leadership team to ensure that a patient's experience reflects the health care organization's mission of providing safe, quality care that's accessible and easy to navigate. Sometimes, that means situating related treatment spaces close by so that patients don't have to be inconvenienced by having to go from wing-to-wing to find imaging or labs."

Patient check-in areas are starting to resemble hotel reception spaces, says Carole Kassir-Garcia is a senior associate/senior interior designer at CollinsWoerman. "When a patient arrives in the reception area, we want them to feel well-received and comfortable, and to effortlessly find their destinations with distinctive visual directional elements." These spaces incorporate environmental elements, such as windows with views of outdoor landscapes for the purpose of orientation and to provide positive distraction. "The purpose is to blend hospitality with wellness."

## Protocols in Your Practice

**Make sure that everyone on staff is "walking the talk" of your brand promise. Here are some basic service essentials that will enhance your brand experience:**

- ✓ Know that you are in business to serve patients, not the other way around.
- ✓ Establish clear customer service guidelines for all staff members, and publicly recognize good customer service behaviors often.
- ✓ Treat patients with dignity and respect from the moment they enter your facility.
- ✓ Treat employees with dignity and respect; they are your greatest brand ambassadors.
- ✓ Listen intently so that you can deliver a brand experience that meets patients' expectations.
- ✓ Engage patients in the treatment plan and be open to feedback about their experience.
- ✓ Provide a safe and comfortable environment for patients and employees.
- ✓ Eliminate processes that don't add value to employees, patients or your workflow.

### If You Were the Patient. . .

Ask yourself what you would want to experience as a patient and make that part of your customer service program. Remember, patients' impressions of your brand are formed from organic relationship-building processes; they need cause for wanting to be loyal. Give them good reasons for drafting thumbs-up reviews on your patient comment cards and online physician review web sites. ■

*Karen Meek is a senior corporate communications strategist. She can be reached at kameek415@yahoo.com.*