



MARKETING SAVVY:

Leadership Secrets of Great Customer Service Efforts • Part 1 of 2

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Why do some customer service efforts deliver stellar results, while others start with equal enthusiasm and commitment, but fail? Is it luck, or something else?

By now, it's pretty clear that the healthcare industry understands that customer-oriented service can differentiate programs and influence customer choice. But just what makes a service program work or not work?

The difference is leadership. In this article, we'll explore just what's necessary for leaders to make that long-term impact on an organization's service effort. Whether the impetus begins with the opening of a new facility or the re-invigoration of a current service, there's a lot we can learn to benefit our organizations.

What's a Leader to Do?

The first thing leaders must do is to examine their own commitment to creating a service culture in their occupational health organizations. The service effort will endure or sputter, based solely upon the level of commitment from the leader. That commitment is more than just a verbal affirmation of commitment. It's a demonstration of the leader's understanding of the foundational and behavioral changes that need to be made and supported in an environment in order for the effort to have a lasting effect. It's hard work!

Create a Vision and Values Statement

Next, a leader must answer the following questions:

- Why does my program exist?
- What is the purpose of my program?
- What are the vision and values statements that have already been articulated for my program?

It's your vision and values statement that helps you focus on what service you provide and to whom. It clearly summarizes what makes you different from other providers of occupational health.

If you do have a vision and values statement, take a good hard look at it to determine its relevance. Is it still current? Talk to your patients, associates, and clients to determine what is really important to them, and realign your vision and values if necessary.

Cultivate Awareness

Clearly communicate your expectations as a leader. There's much to be learned from Disney's definition of the elements of a customer service culture: the people, process, and setting (or in their terms, "the cast, process and setting").

Great service comes together when the right people (with the right attitude, expectations, and tools), the right processes (ones that are built to meet the needs of the customer), and the right setting (appearance and feel of surroundings) all come together. Therefore, as a leader, it's important to be aware on all three fronts.

The Right People

It was once said, “a person is never more moldable than on their first day of work.” Therefore, take a critical look at your orientation for new employees:

- What does your orientation process look like?
- Do your associates learn about your program’s purpose?
- Do they understand your expectations regarding service?
- Do they gain a sense of how they are to look and act in order to help the program meet its customer service promise?

Orientation to your organization’s service philosophy is a key to getting a new associate off on the right foot. When introducing a service effort, it’s also important to re-orient all current associates so that they understand their roles and how this effort may impact those roles.

You can help better manage the service experience through scripting. It’s a tool that has its detractors—perhaps because they erroneously believe it’s all about putting words in employees’ mouths or because, without the right delivery, it can come across as wooden.

But, used selectively, there’s great value in scripting. It serves to set consistent standards in delivering a message and responding appropriately in a variety of situations.

Ultimately, recruiting and hiring the right associates for the right roles are very important to your service initiative. It’s no longer enough to hire just anyone to fill the position, or just anyone with the right credentials. Make behavior and attitude part of the hiring requirement. Does the candidate’s attitude toward service match yours? If not, keep looking.

The Right Processes

Create a customer service team to look at your processes through the eyes of the customer. This team can be a mix of internal staff and external ancillary associates, and should solicit feedback from current customers.

During this assessment, determine which processes are causing inefficiency or dissatisfaction and change them! When reviewing processes, consider the following:

- Assess your registration process. How long does it take? Is the information gathered once or does the patient have to repeat it?
- How frequently and in what format do you share information with your client companies? Do they regularly receive information at agreed upon intervals and in a format that is desired?
- Does your billing format and timing meet the needs of your clients?
- In your exam area, are services clustered so that the patient does minimal traveling, and does the flow ensure the patient moves smoothly through the process?
- What’s your patient waiting time from arrival to discharge? What are the waits between procedures?
- How closely does your actual experience mirror your schedule?

The Right Setting

A facility and its design can speak volumes. Even if you’re not in the position to build a new space, take a critical look at your current space:

- What kinds of signs do you have?
- Where are they located?
- Are they clear and easy to read?
- Is your facility easy to find and access, or do you often have people ending up in the wrong place?
- Have colleagues outside of your department take a walk through your area to see if they can find their way. Have them point out inconsistencies. Does the layout for your facility make sense?

- Are patients and your associates spending a lot of time traveling between services that could be effectively clustered?
 - Pay attention to the paths through your department and make changes that add service efficiencies for everyone!
 - What do people see as they walk through your facility?
 - Are spaces cluttered or are they neat and organized?
 - Are the leaky ceiling tiles fixed or are the stains spreading?
 - Does your waiting area have week-old newspapers, or is the reading material current and tailored to your audience?
 - Is waiting time minimal?
 - If someone calls the switchboard, where is the call directed? To occupational health?
- Once finished with your assessment, make a plan, and correct the deficiencies as promptly as possible.

What's Next?

Part 2 of this article will show how to take these foundation elements—vision, values, and awareness—and integrate them into your organization's work environment. We'll take an in-depth look at measurement and overall organizational alignment, and provide tips you can apply to starting or re-energizing your service culture! Look for Part 2 in the Summer 2005 Tracker.

It's All in the Definition

What is customer service? Each of us would probably describe it in a slightly different fashion. One may say, "It's getting what I want from the experience." Or, "Someone being nice to me." Yet another person might say, "It's about someone knowing what I want before I even express it." Clearly, we must first make the effort to understand how our customers define service.

What Customer Service Isn't

- Haphazard. Customer service doesn't just happen because you tell people to be nice.
- A program. Programs come and go. If your customer service program merely stays at this level, it won't last. Make it a daily part of all you do.
- Accidental. "Oh, I just happened to hire a nice person at the desk, so my service is bound to be good."
- Inconsistent or short term. Service might be great at the front desk, but lousy in the exam room.

What Customer Service Is

- Deliberate. It's truly understanding exactly what your customers want from you, and then delivering it consistently with each and every encounter.
- Measured. Great programs are always carefully measured and monitored.
- Managed. Using feedback methods, the customer experience is managed during all aspects of the encounter—from the moment they call your facility to the moment they complete their care with you.
- Focused. All actions are centered on how they impact your customer, from conversations at the front desk to the clinical interaction with the patient, to the field experience with your sales reps.
- Long term. Customer service isn't a short-term fix. It's a commitment to change how you lead and how your service functions.

The leader must pull together a team to take a critical look at what the occupational health program does and how to do it better. Tackling the customer service effort will endure or sputter, based solely upon the level of commitment from the leader.



INFO UPDATE

Wellness in the Workplace

A survey released in January 2005 reveals that 48% of workers feel that the greatest benefit they and their families derive from the wellness programs offered through their employers is financial. Harris Interactive, a worldwide market and consulting firm best known for the Harris Poll, released its first ever survey that examined wellness attitudes and behavior. It also found that of the employees who participated in health screening, 47% eat healthier, 45% exercise more, and 42% think more often about healthier options. The survey data were collected in December 2004 from 1,700 employees of companies ranging in size from 10 to 1,000 employees.

This survey found, as we reported in the Spring 2004 issue of the Tracker (“Wellness Programs Show Promise for Improving Employee Health, Reducing Costs”) that wellness benefits are more prevalent in mid-sized companies (501–1,000 employees). This article also noted that health screenings showed positive results in weight management, blood pressure, and cholesterol readings for participants at one employer after only a six-month period.

In the past, much of the industry’s literature has focused on how employers could save money by improving the health of their employees. It is interesting to note from the Harris survey that employees and families are receiving financial benefit from company wellness programs, too.

Another noteworthy finding is what motivates employees to participate in wellness programs. Younger employees (age 18–34) participate for a reward or incentive, while middle-aged (age 45–54) and older (age 55+) employees desire a longer, healthier life. With the graying of the workforce, the benefits of staying healthy is more widely accepted.

Resources:

From Sickcare to Healthcare: America’s Best Companies Focus on Keeping Employees Healthy—Health Screenings Play a Major Role, available at <http://www.principal.com/about/news/bestpracticegd012505.htm>.

Summers, Maureen, “Wellness Programs Show Promise for Improving Employee Health, Reducing Costs,” Occupational Health Tracker, Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 2004, p. 6. Available on-line at [HTTP://WWW.SYSTOC.COM/TRACKER/SPRING04/WELLNESS.PDF](http://www.systoc.com/tracker/spring04/wellness.pdf).



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