

Delight Your Customer—or Someone Else Will

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Customer service will always be an ongoing goal in healthcare. But with the most recent release of satisfaction data by HCAHPS, it's obvious there's room to improve *right now*. With only 69.9 percent of patients indicating they would recommend their hospital to friends and family (*Health Affairs*, "Hospital Survey Shows Improvements in Patient Satisfaction," November 2010), it's time to get serious about the customer experience.

Is customer satisfaction enough?

Given the increased focus on service throughout all industries today, simply satisfying customers isn't enough. With increased competition, whether from traditional facilities or nontraditional healthcare delivery models, the risk of someone else doing it better and outcompeting on areas beyond quality is very real.

The emphasis needs to shift to delighting the customer. Delight is often called engagement and loyalty, but the key message is that your customer must feel that they would never go elsewhere.

How much does satisfaction matter?

According to Zimoski (2004), dissatisfaction most certainly does carry a cost. These behaviors and ratios hold true today.

- *For every one customer who complains, 20 dissatisfied customers don't.* The other 19 go away; you don't even know that you've lost them or why—until your numbers start to fall.
- *Of those dissatisfied customers who don't complain, 10 percent will return, but 90 percent won't.* The latter leave and tell eight to 10 others about their bad experience.
- *Changing a poor customer service image takes 10 years, on average.* Imagine the cost and time lost once a poor customer service image is in place.
- *About 10 percent of revenue is lost to poor customer service.* Add 10 percent to your own bottom line to get a sense of the magnitude of this number. Now, that makes it real!

The value of taking the time not only to satisfy but also delight the customer has never been more apparent. This doesn't have to be a difficult or expensive step. Indeed, this isn't about spending capital resources. Rather, it's about understanding your customer base and being consistent in doing the things that make a difference to that customer.

Who are your customers?

Let's put the definition of customer into context. We're really in the business of taking care of our patients, but there's more that goes into the equation. The customer experience is the direct result of a culture that is practiced and articulated. More than acknowledgement, it must focus attention to detail regarding the customer.

The culture is supported by having the right people, in the right processes and in the right environment, both physically and emotionally. When those three elements come together in balance, it's evident in the culture.

For example, the right person can overcome a bad process, but only for so long. The wrong person can pull down a great process through their behavior. The right person in the right process can create magic and delight for the customer.

The customer is really the patient, the physician, the employee and the community. There are strong correlations that satisfaction of the employee and the physician is pivotal to overall patient satisfaction.

Therefore, if an employee or physician is unhappy with their experience with the organization, it's likely the patient will be unhappy, too. Creating delight among these various customers is what produces the results desired by organizations in the way of loyalty, engagement, quality and financial results.

Customer Characteristics

Patient Customers

According to the 2010 Press Ganey Hospital Pulse Report, overall satisfaction for both in- and outpatients has increased over the past four years. While the increases aren't large in number, they show an upward trend—something encouraging in light of the issues facing healthcare today, including staff shortages and capacity challenges.

This trend is also a testimony to the time and attention being spent on this issue by many in the industry. The elements most highly correlated with overall patient satisfaction include:

- Responsiveness to their needs
- Staff sensitivity to the inconvenience of healthcare
- Inclusion in decisions regarding their care
- Caring for their emotional needs

- Providing information

The Press Ganey 2010 Medical Practice Pulse Report shows that satisfaction has plateaued since 2009 due in large part to the economic downturn. As a result, practices are paying more attention to staff interaction with patients and internal processes.

Physician Customers

Physicians are customers in two ways:

- 1) When they seek results that will allow them to make decisions regarding treatment for their patients; and
- 2) When they need to use your facility to perform a procedure or conduct the practice of medicine.

According to Press Ganey's 2009 Physician Pulse Report, we know that physicians are interested in the following factors: ease in providing care, communication and respect. Some of the things that impact satisfaction levels in each of these areas include efficient and timely scheduling, adequate staffing (both in numbers and skill level) and continued care and follow-up programs.

Physicians today are less satisfied than in the past due largely to the increased need to carry increasingly larger workloads to compensate for reductions in reimbursement. There's also a demographic shift going on within the medical community. Younger physicians are demanding more balance between their work and professional lives, therefore shifting the past model of physician availability.

Employee Customers

Employees are critical customers because they make or break your service on the front lines. The extent to which they feel that they're an extension of the organization figures largely into how satisfied your patient or physician customer will be. Do your employees feel they have the ability to do whatever it takes to make it right for the customer? Do they feel so well respected and cared for by your organization that they want to?

The 2010 Press Ganey Employee Report says that the things that most drive employee satisfaction are: "leadership listens...and takes action," "the level of fairness witnessed in the treatment of employees," "how involved they are invited to be," and "the ability to provide input that is acted upon."

These factors all combine to determine how much the employee will trust Leadership, a very important trait. So, what are the common traits across all three customer types?

- Responsiveness
- Listening
- Coaching
- Participation

- Feedback

If you could do just one thing in each of these categories for each customer, you could be well on your way toward creating the kind of experience that will keep them choosing you and no one else.

How do you create delight?

There are six things that you can do every day to move your environment to customer satisfaction:

1. **Focus on the individual experience**—Each customer should feel as if their experience is the most important one for you and that they are the highest priority at that moment in time. Healthcare is an anxiety-producing experience. The customer wants the time to know that you care and will take care of their need.

2. **Ask the right questions**—Too often, we're so busy trying to anticipate what we think the customer wants, we forget to just ask them. Ask what they most want out of their experience with you. Ask how you compare to other healthcare experiences they have had. Ask what it would take to create delight for them. When you have the information, you can begin building the processes to deliver each and every time.

3. **Mystery shop your organization, every day.** Make sure the promises you have made to customers are indeed being delivered. Do you promise 30-minute ER visits? Do you promise 24-hour turnaround? Do you promise to respect privacy? Whatever your organization pledges, verify it. Make calls to scheduling to see how quickly you are helped and how helpful and friendly the operators are. Check your statistics but also ask your physicians if you are meeting the turnaround promise. Sit in your waiting rooms and listen.

4. **Clearly define targets and measures**—We often are victims of not defining where we want to go, or of defining so many targets and measures that we lose focus. Pick a few measures, communicate them widely, and focus on moving them in the desired direction. Constantly assess progress, celebrate the positive movement, tweak the negative movement and keep focused.

5. **Deliver a consistent experience**—Consider Starbucks. Do you expect your espresso to taste the same when you are traveling as you do at your favorite hometown store? Of course you do, and our patients expect the same kind of consistency. So, make certain in your mystery shopping not to forget crossing organizational lines.

6. **Throw in a surprise or two**—Think about a time when you were surprised. Perhaps it was when you were brought a blanket from the warmer when you were waiting for a procedure. Maybe a co-worker noticed that you were having a difficult day and brought you a cup of coffee. It's the element of these unexpected surprises that lead to delight for all of our customers.

What's next?

As you consider where to go next, start by remembering that you have more than one customer. Commit to understanding their needs and wants, and bring consistency to your environment by constantly testing yourselves. With this attention to detail, you'll soon have every other facility wanting to be just like you!

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