

Finding a Balance with Customers: Growth, Retention and Service

The connection between sales representative and referral source must be relationship based, so that both parties are communicating effectively and benefiting from the outcomes of the relationship.

The current economic pressures provides a huge opportunity to establish a sales strategy built on the organization's reputation for delivering an outstanding customer experience. A face-to-face relationship—whether between the provider and the patient or the salesperson and the referral source—provides a personal and direct opportunity to build a trusted relationship.

When you view this opportunity as a three-legged stool supported by growth, retention and service, you'll see a way to use sales to educate your targets, position the value your organization and its offerings, and drive success.

Growth is Important

A growth-oriented business should be flexible and embrace change. Take the time to determine which service is best to grow and who the targets are to drive referrals to that service. Consider these growth-related questions:

1. Is a competitor offering a new program in the market?
2. Do you have a market strategy to fill a service-line capacity?
3. Are physicians in your market aligned and working with your facility or are they considering retirement, employment with a competitor or opening their own facility?
4. Are employers looking for ways to work directly with healthcare providers in an effort to slow the increases in their group and work health plans?
5. Are consumers informed and educated about the choices your organization offers?

It's not solely up to the sales representative to achieve growth. Your hospital operations team plays an important role in this success as the face of service delivery to the patient. Your team must be customer focused and responsive to the needs of each individual. Show your employees how the organization wants to treat customers and build ways to continually recognize and reward proactive customer service behaviors.

The operator must be supportive of the sales role and available to answer questions, visit new referral sources and provide ongoing support to existing referral sources.

Retention through Relationships

Growing new business is important, but don't lose sight of existing business that you can't afford to lose. Evaluate current business to determine which referral sources provide the most volume. Develop a specific retention strategy to maintain and enhance that critical relationship. Those referral sources expect to have the ear of a lead physician and senior leadership.

The focus with this audience moves from convincing them to use your services to servicing their needs, delivering on your promises and providing operational fixes to problems. Assign specific staff physicians to meet with the top referring primary care sources each quarter. Demonstrate to referral sources how your organization is listening to them and fixing operational issues.

In some cases, there is only room for a small amount of growth. In this situation, determine where you should focus your sales efforts for the most return. Focus on reinforcing top-of-mind awareness of your services and your customer-friendly approach.

Sometimes there's no room for growth, and a retention strategy is the single focus for sales. Strong relationships and customer responsiveness are your points of differentiation, coupled with a consultative selling approach. Think of three critical ways you can do this as a part of your retention strategy.

Sales is Service

Great organizations are known for their service. Look outside of healthcare for role models and examples of outstanding service and ways to apply that to your facility. Consider these basic internal steps for your program:

- Develop a baseline of service expectations specific to your market and your product offerings.
- Understand what your competition offers and delivers and how your services differ.
- Develop process improvement plans to manage complaints or issues.
- Assign operational accountability for tracking, fixing and reporting on issues. If your sales staff is fixing problems, they won't be able to grow the business.
- Train all staff on messaging and responsiveness to be sure they know how to handle complaints.
- Reward customer-focused solutions and service behaviors.

Deliver outstanding service to referring physicians and other referral staff by being responsive to their needs with prompt scheduling, results reporting and necessary follow-up. Use physician-to-physician selling to help communicate expertise and quality.

It's a must to create a relationship that's different from the competitor. Demonstrate this difference to the referral source and to consumers. When you clearly communicate (and

sell) who you are, what your business is and how you do business, you'll have the base for a successful sales program.

When you support that sales base by the three legs of growth, retention and service, you'll see even more success through customer retention and loyalty and referral volume and revenue growth.

SALES SUCCESS FACTORS

Impacting factors include:

- The clinical program's capacity and access for additional volume.
- Evaluation of market intelligence on all audiences including physicians, customers, competitors and employers.
- Leadership buy-in of the sales strategy and support through resources, training and budget.
- Newer, better, faster and more accurate equipment, technology and services than other providers in the market.
- The market's view of your organization as the preferred provider that delivers exceptional service and value.
- Your organization's commitment to build ongoing relationships with customers.

THE 3 A's OF GROWTH, RETENTION AND SERVICE

Consider the top three reasons a healthcare provider refers to a provider or facility:

- #1 Affability – "They treat me with respect and are nice, approachable and empathetic."
- #2 Availability – "They take my call or call me back, can accommodate me and my patient in a reasonable amount of time."
- #3 Ability – "They have all of the necessary technology and expertise for me and my patient."

Raise the bar on your 3 A's! Remember that ability can easily be matched by your competition. But affability and availability are what gets and keeps people as valued customers.

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