

12 Ways to Supercharge Your Practice in 2012: #3 Create a Customer Service Culture

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When do you think about customer service in your practice?

When things start heading downhill? You overhear something that surprises you, complaints seem to be on the rise and you think, “time for another customer service seminar.”

The problem with this, of course, is that customer service is a day-to-day relationship. If you wait until you recognize the signs of things heading in the wrong direction, it could be too late. Just like other relationships, customer service in your practice needs consistent attention and creativity to keep things fresh and in the forefront of everyone’s mind. Just like other relationships, customer service is a living thing that needs care and feeding.

Here is what Customer Service isn’t:

- A script.
- Regional casual endearments like honey, darlin’ or sugar.
- Talking to another employee about something unrelated to the patient in front of the patient.
- Telling the patient the physician is delayed due to an

emergency when he's late because_____. (fill in your own answer)

- Having patients sign in, then shouting out to the waiting area for the patient to come back up to check in.
- Leaving patients in the examining room for longer than 15 minutes without checking in on them and giving them an update.
- Bad customer service means patients may not come back, they may tell 10 or more people about their experience and they'll probably give your practice a very bad review on Twitter, Facebook, Yelp, Angie's List, HealthGrades and 10 other rating sites.

Here is what Customer Service is:

- Seeing people as individuals and remembering something about each one of them (yes, you probably will have to write it down to remember it, but I'm sure your computer system has some place to write a note.)
- Setting the practice thermostats to a comfortable level for the patients, not the staff. If you can't get the thermostat to behave, tell every patient that the office is chilly and to bring a sweater or jacket. Buy a refurbished blanket warmer. Everyone loves a warm blanket!
- Inviting patients to roundtables to tell you what they like and don't like about a practice. Don't forget to invite the patients who are really, really mad at the practice – they give you the best information and can become your greatest advocates.
- Telling patients when they call for their first appointment that the doctor always runs late and that no matter what appointment time they get, they should always come 30 minutes later. (Yes, you could try to retrain the physician, but I've never been able to, have you?)

- Excellent customer service means patients will feel good about coming back, they may tell 3 or more people about their experience and they might even give your practice a very good review on Twitter, Facebook, Yelp, Angie's List, HealthGrades and 10 other rating sites.

Customer Service is WHATEVER MAKES PEOPLE FEEL BETTER.

It is anything from saying "I'm sorry we didn't do the best that we could have for you," to providing a drink or a place to have a private conversation. We don't have to be perfect, we just have to have the desire to provide the perfect experience for each patient. Compassion is having no preconceptions about the other person and being willing to serve the other person's needs regardless of your own feelings about the person. It is taking "you" out of the equation.

Try this exercise with your staff. Tell them that none of the patients coming through the door today will be paying, except for one person. That one person will be paying for all the patients in your practice today, and that one person will make it possible for the practice to stay open and for the staff to receive their paychecks. However, no one will know which person is the one that is paying for everyone. How will the staff treat the patients today?

How do you create a culture of service in your practice?

1. **Your physicians model it.** The manager can be the most service-oriented person in the universe, but if the physicians don't model it, it's all over. The physicians must be respectful. (Dear physicians, please don't stand outside exam rooms and tell jokes, or talk to drug reps or talk about other patients because I have never met

the exam room wall that you can't hear right through. You upset the patients and make the staff uncomfortable.)

2. **You model it.** You prioritize patient complaints by meeting with patients and speaking with patients when they call. [You apologize.](#) You investigate their concerns.
3. **You recruit for it.** You tell applicants that this practice exists to be of service to others, and if that is not a concept they are comfortable with, this is not the job for them. If they want to be of service to others, ask them for some examples of how they have been of service in previous jobs and what they would intend to do here.
4. **You acknowledge good customer service** when you see it or hear about it from others. You may have a reward program in your practice for excellent customer service. You publish compliments about customer service in your newsletter or on a staff bulletin board.
5. **You establish clear expectations.** Speak respectfully to all people in the practice. Keep voices down. Smile. Patients often remember the "hello" and the "good-bye" the most – make them count. Be confidential. LISTEN and do not think you already know what every patient is going to say. [Read this.](#)
6. **You talk about it** in staff meetings. Someone told me once that there are only two reasons why people get angry – they're either hurt or they're scared. That has stayed with me for a long time. Teach employees to diffuse situations, to apologize sincerely, and help them by role playing the right answers to patients who are angry or disappointed or sick. Make sure everyone knows that patients have lots of choices for healthcare.
7. **You measure patient satisfaction.** You can measure it in a BIG WAY or in a small way, but start to measure it. There are a number of very fine organizations who will develop custom patient satisfaction forms for you,

distribute them, collate them and interpret them for you and get you started on the road to improvement. You can also brainstorm with your team about a customer service focus each month of the year, and see what improvement gets the most comments from patients. Try a greeter in the reception area, calling every patient who had a sick visit the previous day to check on their progress, a nurse visiting your patients in the hospital (not cared for by you), a limited house call schedule – they can be little things or big things – recipes for patients to take home, patient voting on a big ballot for the magazines they'd like to see in your waiting area and exam rooms...the ideas are endless.

What will you do this year to change customer service at your practice?

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