

Medical News

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It Starts with Customer Service

By ERIN SOMERS

Recently I met with a physician who was experiencing some challenges within her practice. I was not sure initially what the issues were, but they became evident as soon as I walked in. The customer service nightmare was about to begin.

As I stood at the closed, dark tinted reception window, two things were happening; through the tint, I could see I was clearly being ignored by the staff, and I could hear the patients complaining in the lobby.

Once I checked in, I had a *quiet* talk with the patients telling them I was meeting with the doctor regarding improving her office. They were eager to share their experiences, as the nightmare lobby encounter was only the beginning. Their complaints were overwhelmingly about poor customer service issues (i.e. rude staff, calls going unanswered during regular business hours, the inability to get lab results, plus the doctor was always running late.)

When I finally met the doctor, I saw a lovely woman who looked stressed and exhausted. However, I also saw a talented and kind soul who was in desperate need of help. I revealed to the doctor that her patients genuinely love her, but her unprofessional staff was driving them away. Her disappointment and concern were evident as I shared my experience in the lobby and the discontentment of her patients.

She asked me to help her with this dire situation, and I told her that I would *but* the current staff would most likely have to be fired, ALL of them. We would keep her loyal and talented MA, but she would have to trust me in flipping the rest of the staff to hire a team that more accurately reflected the care her patients deserved.



You may be wondering if there was management overseeing this train wreck and the answer is *yes*. Frightening isn't it? Let me remind you, your management affects *every* aspect of your business, including your customer service.

Even though you went to medical school in order to heal others, this does not let you off the hook for not knowing how strong (or weak) your customer service is. You *must* retain your current patients in order to have a thriving practice and *excellent customer service is the key*.

Your front desk team is the first interaction patients have with your office. They set the tone for a patient's experience at your practice and ultimately reflect you as a physician. If you have a dynamite personality at the front, keep them as they are worth their weight in gold!

Your receptionist *must* be friendly, efficient and attentive to your patients. Patients from all walks of life walk come through your door, including some with very serious medical issues (and life issues). *Your patients should be treated the way you would want your loved one treated.*

If you have a sliding glass window at your reception desk, I strongly encourage you to keep that window open. It will make your patients feel welcomed and important.

I suggest having a lobby sign inviting patients to ask for an update if more than 15 minutes have passed since the scheduled appointment time. Do not ever forget your patient's time is *just as valuable* as your time and many have left work or are utilizing childcare in order to attend their appointment. If you run late with patients on a regular basis, take a good look at your scheduling.

If you are running late on a particular day, have your team call and inform the patients scheduled for later in the day. Your patients will appreciate this.

Incoming calls should always be picked up *before* the end of the third ring by a receptionist with a *smile* in her voice. It is important she speaks clearly and identifies herself. If the phones are busy, they still need to be picked up by the third ring. The receptionist needs to greet them and ask if they can hold and *not* automatically

put them on hold. When picking up a call that has been on hold, your patient should *always* be thanked for holding and then be helped promptly.

Due to the economy, patients may not have a choice in bringing their children along so have crayons and coloring books on hand. The kids tend to be calmer and it makes a more enjoyable visit for all.

The customer service *must* continue when the MA takes the patient back. Your MA needs to introduce herself/himself and let patients know that if they have any questions she/he would be happy to answer them.

Most importantly, you as the physician must uphold this excellent customer service as well. I know you are giving great patient care, but a smile and a willingness to answer their questions can educate your patients as well as calm them. Your patient will appreciate your time, kindness and excellent bedside manner and you will *keep* this patient.

With this high level of customer service, your patients *will* want to refer their friends to you so have your business cards conveniently located in your office. The highest compliment is when a happy patient refers you new business.

On a final note, the doctor I mentioned earlier now has a well run and *financially thriving* business. Everyone is happy and the patients are thrilled as they feel valued and respected. By the way, the closed black tinted reception window was never seen again.



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