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Viewing Your Practice— Your Business— Through Your Customers' Eyes

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Your medical practice is a business. Let me repeat, your medical practice is a business. Having worked in both an academic and private practice environment, I am convinced the one major thing missing from the medical field is the acceptance that healthcare is a business. Granted, most physicians still remember that they chose to go through medical school in order to help people in need, and granted, healthcare is not just a business but an actual industry unto itself, but for those of us responsible for managing the practice and paying the bills, it must still be run like a business.

Just like a business, our practices offer a product—the wisdom and expertise of our physicians. Just like a business, the practice is the medium in which to deliver the product and, just like a business, our practices have customers, otherwise known as patients.

A Real-World Analogy

Let's say you need to purchase a new commercial item, such as a briefcase. You've researched all the local stores carrying the briefcase you want and you've asked your friends to recommend which store they would choose if they needed a briefcase. You decide where to go, you call the store to pre-arrange a meeting with the sales clerk, and you arrive to

secure your purchase. Only when you arrive, you turn into the wrong building because the store is not properly marked. You park in the only parking spot available, even though it is too small for your car, and you go inside. Although frazzled, you are still excited for your purchase and looking forward to hearing the expertise of the sales clerk on what your best options might be. You walk in to find the front counter worker so busy talking on the phone and looking at her computer screen that she doesn't notice you are there. Now frustrated, you wait for the front counter worker to finally acknowledge your arrival. She finally hands you a stack of papers to complete about your most intimate personal details while telling you to have a seat in a crowded waiting area.

Although your appointment with the sales clerk was for 10:00 AM, it is now 10:15 and there is no progress in sight. You complete the required paperwork, place it on the front counter as the employee is now absorbed in a conversation with a co-worker, and return to the crowded waiting area. Forty-five minutes pass and now frustration turns to anger. Since when did the store's time become more valuable than yours? Don't they realize there are other stores that would love for you to purchase a briefcase from

them? After 10 more minutes in the crowded waiting area with three-year-old magazines and worn carpet, the sales clerk's assistant finally calls your name. You walk through the back and have a seat in a meeting room while the assistant continues asking you the same personal questions you already answered on the form when you checked in.

Ten minutes later your sales clerk arrives, shows you four briefcases over the course of two minutes and departs the room, the meeting complete. At this point do you purchase the briefcase? Possibly. Are you excited about the experience and ready to recommend this store to all your friends? No way.

Bringing the Message Home

At a time when patients are more confident in choosing providers that best meet their personal as well as medical needs, we need to be mindful of what we are conveying about our care for them as human beings. I frequently remind staff that our patients are why we are there and, quite frankly, how each of us receives a paycheck, so we need to treat them with the respect and care they deserve.

To effectively assess the patient's experience with your office, walk through the entire experience just as your patients might. In the example

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above, you first encountered issues with signage and parking. Is your building clearly and appropriately marked? Is the signage big enough for all of your patients to read, including the elderly ones whose vision is impaired? Is there adequate parking around your building, and is that parking immediately accessible to your facility? Is your staff providing clear directions to patients and mailing a map to new ones? Don't automatically assume that just because a patient has been to your location before the patient will remember how to get there. Finally, remember to repeat the appointment details. We have learned from experience to end each call by repeating the date, time, and location of every appointment.

Once the patient actually arrives at the clinic (sometimes the hardest part), how is s/he greeted? Is your front staff warm and welcoming or do they simply hand the patient a clipboard with paperwork and tell the patient to have a seat? Our office policy is to treat every patient as if s/he is a friend; give a smile and a welcome, then take care of the details. What about the waiting area? Is it an environment that you would want to wait in for 20 to 30 minutes? Are there updated magazines, appropriate lighting, and comfortable chairs?

In the sales clerk scenario above, we reviewed a plethora of issues (such as wait times and requests for information) that can surround a simple purchasing experience. If

these issues happen in your office, don't be afraid to communicate realistic expectations to patients. If the clinic is running behind, for example, tell patients when they arrive that there is a slight delay but everyone is working hard to get caught up. Our patients tend to arrive 30 to 45 minutes before their scheduled appointment times, so even a 15-minute delay feels like an hour to them. We have found across the board that a little communication on the front end saves a lot of grumpiness in the exam room.

The Importance of Empathy

Although many tools are available to assess and address the patient's experience with your practice, nothing is as important as the ability to empathize with the patient's experience in your office. As administrators, each of us should spend time inside the patient experience—sit in your waiting area, read a magazine, and listen to your surroundings. Watch as your staff interacts with patients and assess patients' moods after leaving the exam room. Look your patients in the eye and ask if they were treated as you'd hope your father or grandmother would be treated. Remember that the exam itself may only take two minutes, but the 1½ hours surrounding that two minutes can be the most important part of the patient's visit. Embrace that insight: Your patients are customers and they have a choice in their healthcare. Run your practice like a business—a world-class business with world-class customer service. **AE**

Technology Tools for Happy Patients

In today's increasingly connected world, your patients are looking for convenience as a key part of customer service. Two tools worth a second look are online patient portals and electronic patient communication.

"Ophthalmologists are definitely ahead of the curve from a customer service standpoint," said Paul C. Seel, MD, MBA, vice president and medical director of Sophrona Solutions. "Ophthalmologists understand that they've got to listen to what their patients want and need; they just haven't connected the dots with the [patient] portal as the easy way to do that."

Online portals turn traditional broadcast websites into an opportunity for dialogue. Patients can use portals to complete new registration paperwork, update their personal information, schedule appointments, and access answers to commonly asked questions. Portals can also help practices comply with the new "meaningful use" requirements for electronic health records by enabling patients to actually enter most of their information, which saves time and money for your office.

Appointment reminders are another area where technology can make things easier on both you and your patients, with bigger returns. "Customer service is all about doing things for people on their terms," said Mark Olson, vice president of sales and marketing at Smile Reminder. "The way things have been done in the past in the healthcare space is patients set their appointment and the practice would send something in the mail to remind patients [or] leave a message on their answering machine days beforehand. Fast forward to today: I can be reached on whatever mobile device I want with a text message or email at whatever interval I want." Allowing patients to customize their communication preferences increases patient loyalty while freeing staff from mundane tasks.

Ed.: For a case study on how one practice used patient portals to increase their capture rate for LASIK procedures, see "Implementing a Patient Portal Creates a Marketer's Trifecta" in the Summer 2010 issue of AE.



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