

From Patient to Satisfied Customer: Three Fundamentals to Improving the Patient Experience



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Patients are demanding more now than simply world-class medicine. They expect hospitals to offer the kinds of customer experiences provided by other industries. With such a high bar set, hospitals must quickly figure out how to satisfy patients and earn their long-term loyalty. And to do so, they will have to venture far beyond the traditional realms of clinical care, customer service and hospitality.

The key is to approach patients as customers. That moves the focus from purely clinical procedures to customer experiences and service as well. Hospitals can then offer customer and patient relevant services that bring a more unique, differentiating and holistic experience, fostering a longer term relationship and enhancing overall brand value.

Developing an enhanced patient experience

A prominent U.S. academic medical center has been working on addressing patient satisfaction. So far, this effort has had mixed results. Clinical procedures, while the bedrock of hospital care, are not enough to satisfy patients. The hospital wanted to explore additional ways to enhance its value proposition to its patients and sought to design and deliver a more customer-centric experience, in addition to the world-class clinical care offered.

The medical center identified a new facilities expansion initiative as an opportunity to work with regional corporations to offer a new service experience to their employees which would make it easier for these employees to access the hospital. The initiative would give the corporations an opportunity to contribute philanthropically as well as to work closely with the hospital in developing a new approach to customer-centric healthcare. Furthermore, deepening and lengthening customer relationships would help the medical center

develop collaborations with local corporations eager to share in the mission of improving care.

The first step on this journey was to develop a blueprint for the new service experience and to pilot it with employees of these local corporations. At the end of the pilot, the academic medical center will apply what it has learned to improve the service experience of its entire patient population.

Addressing the fundamental needs of patients—access, communication, consistency

The corporate employees included in the pilot were mostly in their 30s or 50s. Early on, the medical center discovered that these two age groups had different needs and preferences along with different attitudes and expectations. The younger demographic, for example, prefers to access, or “pull in,” information when, where, and how they wanted it. They are not interested in having information pushed out to them.

The pilot, which has been very successful so far, highlights the importance of meeting the basic requirements of a customer-centric experience—access to information, relevant and clear communication, and consistency. Everything else, it turns out, is a “nice to have,” or window dressing.

To meet these requirements, the medical center offered the following:

- On-going streams of valuable health and program information (e.g., podcasts and webcasts from hospital or university professors; education on wellness programs)
- Dedicated service lines for making appointments
- Hyperlinks from a variety of websites to the hospital's portal of available services
- Pre- and post-appointment assistance; coordination across parts of the hospital
- Hospitality services at the hospital, including a concierge team to ensure patients received on-site assistance
- Automated follow-up after hospital visits
- Healthcare at times of need, locally and internationally

In the area of consistency, the pilot project team has absorbed lessons from the logistics industry, which sets expectations and so reliably meets those expectations that customers trust the system. To that end, the team has worked hard to ensure that information available through the self-service portal matched the information provided to the patients through every other point of contact. This approach reduces stress by reassuring patients concerning the consistency of the information they receive.

Doing more with less

Meeting the basic needs of patients/customers required the medical center to break established modes of working. To create a customer-centric service experience, departments have begun collaborating and sharing information in ways they had not done before. Processes have been put in place to protect confidential information but also make it easier for patients to get the care and support they need.

Another important component is figuring out how to provide consistent, timely information to customers (patients). Some of this information, such as test results, is specific to them. Other information, such as online visibility into physician schedules, has been provided inconsistently (e.g., one clinic provides access to physician calendars while another does not).

Initial observations are that customer satisfaction will trend upwards. As we know from other industries, satisfied customers can cost less to serve. They consume resources more efficiently—for example, by calling less and using self-service web portals more frequently. That means organizations can put their financial resources to better use.

In a healthcare setting, there is an added benefit to satisfied customers. They are more likely to develop good health habits, such as following wellness regimens. They are more tuned in to messaging from healthcare providers and, therefore, more likely to make follow-up appointments, take prescribed drugs, and keep up with recommended screenings. They work with their healthcare providers, in other words, to prevent illness rather than to simply treat it. And such preventative care dramatically reduces the costs associated with their care.

From patient to satisfied customer

The academic medical center pilot demonstrated that hospitals must deliver a service experience that meets the basic needs and expectations of patients/customers in order to satisfy them and earn their loyalty. The medical center is working on enabling these new service experiences using CRM systems and customer analytics. These systems will help support the consistency, access and communication objectives of the service experience and help deliver these to a larger

patient/customer population.

Up until now, hospitals have been focused on efficiency—but to be effective in the delivery of care, hospitals need to design customer experiences that draw people in through memorable service experiences in addition to world-class clinical care. To provide these unique customer experiences to entire patient populations, hospitals need to build core delivery capabilities for managing program risk, driving adoption, and continually innovating.

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