

Superlative Customer Service = Successful Practice

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Many physicians believe that staff should inherently know customer service principles. They don't, unless they have had training from another organization such as hotel or call center employment. Just as a physician must keep up with continuing education, it is imperative to regularly train your staff in customer service techniques as well as making this an essential part of their job description. My advice is to set expectations that in order to obtain a raise or continued employment, the staff person must excel in three areas:

1. Perform position responsibilities according to their job description.
2. Exhibit a team player attitude with all staff, supervisors and physicians.
3. Demonstrate superlative customer service skills to all patients.

The staff members who answer the phone and greet the patient are the "Directors of First Impressions" for your practice. People make first impression decisions that are often lasting based on the initial telephone call to the practice or when they walk into the reception area. A warm, friendly, professional telephone and front desk greeting demeanor is essential. Particularly when patients have choices who to see for their medical care, you, the physician may never know you lost a potential patient based on the way the person who answers the telephone. Train staff to answer the phone with "Good morning, Pleasant Medical Clinic, Susan speaking, how may I help you?" First of all, patients know they have called the correct place and they are nicely greeted with the name of the staff person in case they want to remember which staff person they spoke to. Staff need to incorporate and say how "may I" not "can I" help you which sounds more professional *and* helpful.

In the webinar, I utilize skits to demonstrate the "wrong way" and then the "right way" to respond to patients particularly with angry or upset patients. Staff need to learn specific techniques to diffuse and ameliorate difficult situations.

Listening skills are our least developed skill and where most customer service problems start. Staff are giving a fun listening skills test which also demonstrates key points. The Ritz Carlton is famous for their customer service. One of their training principles is "The biggest communication problem is we don't listen to understand, we listen to reply." The ancient Greek philosopher, Epictetus said, "you have "2 ears, and 1 mouth and they should be used in that proportion."

Patients today want to know more about their physician. My homework assignment for staff taking the course is to find out the physician(s) credentials and have a list at the front desk or by the telephone and learn these. Patients are impressed with staff who are proud of their doctor(s) and can give this information to the patient. Patients are more consumer oriented than ever, and the internet is where they search for the doctor's credentials and ratings. Getting the correct information from the staff and the practice website is very important.

Patients also like to feel that they are not just a medical condition but a person. It is important to train staff to learn something about the patient, for example, hobbies or interests, and put it in the medical

record. Staff can use this as a conversational opener when greeting patients or taking them back to the exam room. This is also useful for the physician as well!

Particularly over the telephone when the patient cannot see the staff person, the tone of voice is also very important. “Customer Service for Dummies” is an excellent and recommended additional training tool when hiring new staff. Their research shows that tone of voice over the phone results in 86% of first impression feelings versus 38% tone of voice in person whereas body language is 55%. This means that staff should warmly greet patients when they enter, smile and personally check the patient in, rather than having them sign in with a sign in sheet.

Staff also need to understand that they took a vow of confidentiality when they work in a medical office. This exists both during work hours and outside the office. Actual case scenarios are related which have led to breaches of confidentiality by office staff that resulted in lawsuits.

The key to a successful practice is training each and every staff member to deliver superlative customer service with the motto “What does this customer (patient) need, and how can I provide it?”

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