Pardon the Wait: Tips to Enhance the Patient Waiting Room Experience

By Brenna Carroll

Even the most smoothly running practice will occasionally encounter events that result in a patient waiting a length of time before being seen by the audiologist. Waiting area design and patient reactions have been examined by Wendy Leebov in her book, *Physician Entrepreneurs: The Quality Patient Experience: Improve Outcomes, Boost Quality Scores, and Increase Revenue* (2008) and by Abraham Wandersman and Robert Hess in their publication, *Beyond the Individual: Environmental Approaches and Prevention* (1985). For those occurrences when a patient spends a significant length of time in the waiting room, teaching audiology staff to respond to patient reactions and carefully considering the setup of your practice’s waiting area can enhance the patient experience.

Front desk staff plays an integral role in your patient’s hearing health-care experience. Training audiology support staff to both identify and diffuse patient frustration while waiting can be invaluable for patient satisfaction, retention, and referral growth (Leebov, 2008).

Waiting to be seen by the audiologist can sometimes feel like an interminable length of time for the patient who is feeling excited about obtaining the latest amplification technology or nervous about the potential results of an audiogram. Patients may begin to experience anxiety, irritation, frustration, and anger while waiting to be seen by the provider. Patient satisfaction research indicates that patients become frustrated not only by actual wait time but also by perceived wait time (Wandersman and Hess, 1985; Leebov, 2008). If your patient arrives early, the front desk can immediately diffuse potential anxiety about wait length by warmly greeting the patient with a friendly acknowledgment. An early arrival might be greeted with, “Good morning, Mr. Jones. I see that you are about 20 minutes early for your 10:30 appointment.”
appointment. Thanks for being so prompt! The audiologist is currently with another patient but will be with you at your scheduled appointment time.” Train your front desk staff to invite your patients to enjoy the magazines, use the restroom, or have a beverage upon being seated. Inviting language alleviates patient anxiety (Leebov, 2008).

Provide entertaining materials in the greeting area to occupy the patient’s attention while waiting (Leebov, 2008). Subscribe to a variety of current magazines appealing to a wide range of interests. Consider publications popular with your patient demographic. If your practice caters to pediatric patients and young families, include publications that appeal to both children and adults. Provide Sudoku and word search puzzle books, interesting facts and anecdotes about staff, brochures, and hearing and balance wellness tips in your waiting area. Consider providing wireless Internet access. Provide safe and easy-to-clean toys to occupy young children who may visit your practice. A television with an assistive listening device, tuned to a local news station, can be a great opportunity to market advances in technology while passing the time. Self-serve coffee and tea service is appreciated. A densely packed waiting area can lead to the illusion of a longer perceived wait length (Wandersman and Hess, 1985). Keep the waiting area free of clutter with large seating and space between seating when possible.

At times even the most punctual audiologist will encounter unforeseen events resulting in a clinic running behind schedule. Train your front desk staff to acknowledge the patient by name within five minutes of the scheduled appointment time, and inform him or her that the audiologist is aware that they are waiting. “Thank you for your patience, Mr. Jones. The audiologist is aware that you are here and will be with you as quickly as possible. I apologize for the delay.” Patients may have difficulty tolerating a wait of an undetermined length of time (Wandersman and Hess, 1985; Leebov, 2008). If the front desk is aware that the audiologist is running 15 or 20 minutes behind schedule, notifying the patient of the expected delay is appreciated. If the patient relies on others for transportation, invite the patient to borrow a phone to contact a driver for notification. When possible and not in violation of the privacy of your other patients, providing a reason for the delay is appreciated (Leebov, 2008). An explanation such as, “I apologize for the delay. The computer system has required some maintenance today,” can foster understanding and patience.

Patients often have more tolerance for waiting when they feel they are “in process” (Leebov, 2008). Provide patients scheduled for an audiogram with a hearing history form to be collected when finished. Hearing aid consultations can complete a questionnaire to assess areas of listening difficulty and amplification goals. Those scheduled for hearing aid checks can complete forms to indicate the problem with the device. If space permits, have the patient roomed in an appointment area rather than the lobby. If a patient is roomed, instruct support staff to periodically check on the patient to ensure that the patient does not feel “forgotten.”

Apologize! Regardless of fault for the wait, always apologize to patients for the delay and thank them for their patience. Patients are less distressed by the inconvenience when they feel you genuinely care and respect their time (Leebov, 2008). If possible, validate parking or provide coffee cards or hearing aid batteries as tokens of acknowledgement for the inconvenience. Looking the patient in the eye and providing a sincere apology is always appreciated.

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References
