Enhancing Patient Experience Through First Impressions

By Tracey Irene

Do you provide an exceptional customer service experience to your patients? Have you considered the impact of the front desk staff on your patients’ satisfaction? The front desk staff is providing your patients' first impressions of your practice. According to an article published in JAMA (Kenagy et al, 1999), “the initial direct interactions with patients tend to strongly shape the experiences and emotions that will follow. When this initial moment of truth goes well, a positive cycle begins between the customer and the organization; when it goes poorly, it may be difficult to recover.” A knowledgeable staff can grow the practice and should be an integral component to the patient journey.

Evaluate how a patient flows through your office. What is the first impression a patient will form when he or she calls your office to schedule an appointment? Is the phone interaction positive, courteous, and responsive to the patient’s needs? Is the patient greeted warmly when visiting your practice and acknowledged when leaving?

What is your protocol for answering the phone? If your office does not have a protocol, a phone script can be developed to provide the following: a universal greeting, a method for answering questions, and a standard of care that is expected of the staff. Use examples to demonstrate appropriate phone interactions. Consider how the following interaction could be changed to improve the patient’s first impression of the office:

Front desk: “ABC Audiology, please hold” (followed by a two-minute wait). “How can I help you?”

Ask your staff how they would feel if they were the caller? What could be changed about this interaction to improve the first impression? Small changes in the interaction lead to exemplary customer service.

Front desk: “Good morning, thank you for calling ABC Audiology. This is Jane. How can I help you?” After listening to the request, “I would be happy to help you with that, may I place you on hold for just a moment?”

Discuss potential challenges front desk staff may encounter when
answering the phone and working with patients. Train your staff to address patient questions and solve problems with knowledgeable and courteous answers. Be open to suggestions and change. Facilitating an environment of change requires the ability of staff to evaluate their performance and make changes to improve first impressions. Defining the expectations and working as a team to develop the necessary skills is important. You can facilitate this change by implementing some of the following:

- Maintain good communication through open, honest, and constructive discussions.
- Schedule monthly or quarterly meetings to review performance.
- Record phone calls for training purposes and discuss the interactions to promote continuous improvement.
- Evaluate the performance through the patient perspective using a patient survey.

Change does not happen overnight; it is a process that requires continuous evaluation and consistent communication with the staff. Regular meetings offer the opportunity to open the lines of communication to ensure all employees are happy and providing the best service possible.

In the ever-changing economy where medicine has progressed to a business model, we can no longer rely on our skills as health-care providers alone. The impressions that are formed by our patients go far beyond the tests we complete or services we provide. Patients are looking at the experience as a whole when deciding to allow us the opportunity to improve their lives. In the article, “Improving Service Quality in America: Lessons Learned” (Berry et al, 1994), the authors review the benefits of good service and note that excellent service is a profit strategy because it results in more new customers, fewer lost customers, more insulation from price competition, and fewer mistakes requiring the reperformance of services. Excellent service can also be energizing because it requires the building of an organizational culture in which people are challenged to perform to their potential and are recognized and rewarded when they do so.

Having a courteous staff is a reflection of you and the mission of the practice. It can create a positive work environment for both employees and patients. Your patients have a choice on where to receive and maintain their services. Patient loyalty is earned and not given. A life-long customer can grow your practice through word of mouth marketing. In contrast unhappy customers can lead to the demise of your practice. You may be amazing, but the overall service provided by all team members is what will set you apart from others. Strive for great first impressions, customer service and watch your practice grow through patient satisfaction.

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References


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