

Create a “WOW” Experience for Your Patients

Medical practices historically have been slow to embrace the “customer first” mentality that defines corporate America. Despite the fact that patients who are treated with kindness and respect are more loyal and much more likely to refer their friends, far too many patients experience a “cranky receptionist” or “poor bedside manner” when they visit their doctor’s office.

Now, more than ever, customer service and patient satisfaction need to be top priorities for your practice. Under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), one of five key measures that will be directly tied to Medicare reimbursement is the “patient/caregiver experience of care.” With greater transparency and use of social media, online customer service ratings and comments can either drive patients to the practice or drive them away. But perhaps one of the most significant benefits of a positive patient experience is the legal buffer it provides. Statistics show that the single biggest source of malpractice suits is the lack of a positive relationship between patient and provider.

Exceptional customer service means *exceeding* your patients’ expectations any time they make contact with your practice. According to Dr. Neil Baum, a urologist and leading expert on medical marketing, “if you create and maintain a ‘WOW’ experience for your patients, you will build an army of loyal supporters who will continually tell others about your practice.” Every person that comes into contact with your practice forms an impression that they will share with others, not just your patients. High-level customer service must extend to your referral sources, hospital staff and representatives and the community. How can you create a “WOW” experience for your patients?

Step 1 – Create a positive and dynamic work environment

Your staff’s attitude is the single most important factor influencing your patients’ experience. Employees who are happy and feel valued will convey that positive feeling to your patients. Create an environment that encourages employees to share their suggestions, make sure they are well trained, and focus on their positive contributions rather than their mistakes.

Step 2 – Treat each patient as you would like to be treated

Ask yourself and your staff, “Would you like to be a patient in this practice?” Show each patient that you are thankful they chose your practice, that you are compassionate and that you and your staff are eager to please them. Remind everyone to smile, make good eye contact, and say “thank you” to every patient – so simple yet so often forgotten.

Step 3 – Continually strive to see your patients on time.

Carefully monitor your schedule and make efficient scheduling a high priority. If you are running late, have your staff explain to patients truthfully why you are not on time and give them the option to wait or reschedule. If you habitually run late, it is time to re-evaluate your scheduling process and parameters.

Step 4 – Under promise and over deliver

Too often, practices tell patients that their test results will be back in a week when it actually will take 10 days, creating patient calls and frustration. If, however, you tell your patients that their results will be back in two weeks, and they have them in 10 days, they are thrilled! Solicit staff suggestions about ways to reduce patient frustration simply by changing expectations.

Step 5 – Differentiate your practice

Brainstorm with your staff about ways to make your patients feel special, such as making follow-up calls to new patients to welcome them to your practice, sending a small gift to patients following hospitalization or surgery, recording information about family members or vacations that you can ask about during the visit, and writing thank you notes when patients refer others.

Creating a culture of service excellence and high customer service in any organization takes a team effort. It needs to begin at the top with leadership, and be continually monitored and re-enforced throughout the organization. As you begin this New Year, make time to meet with your staff and discuss the importance and value of customer service to your practice. Rally your team to make “Kindness, Respect and Gratitude” the hallmarks of your practice. It is truly the best insurance you can “buy” for your practice and the only cost is the time spent with your staff.

A little extra effort goes a long way toward helping clients feel recognized and welcomed. The five steps that follow will help you offer the highest quality service—and help clients feel at home in your practice.

1 Play the name game

Calling the client "ma'am" or "hey, you" just doesn't have the personal touch that lets clients know you care. Clients might not expect you to know their names, but imagine how good they'll feel if you do. And, it only takes a minute to look ahead in your appointment book so you know who's visiting today.

2 Pamper your clients a bit

No one likes to wait. And if you don't know why you're waiting, it's easy to feel irritated and forgotten. That's why it's always better to explain delays to clients.

If the delay will be longer than 15 minutes, offer to make another appointment or switch the appointment to another.

Take a "can-do" approach

When a client asks you for something you can't provide, respond by telling clients what you can do for them, not what you can't, say experts at businessknowhow.com. For example, instead of saying, "Dr. Smith can't see your child this morning," say, "I can schedule an appointment for your child with Dr. Smith at 5 p.m. today."

5 Ways to Make your Patient Smile

Amid the stresses of running a medical practice, it's sometimes hard to remember the reasons you went into medicine, let alone expend the extra energy to keep your patients happy. But keeping your patients smiling is good for your wallet and your psyche. Happy patients keep coming back and will recommend you to friends and family, and don't underestimate the power that cheerful patients have to make your day and the atmosphere of your office more pleasant.

The good news is that you don't have to don a clown suit to make them smile. Mostly it comes down to respecting your patients as people with names and schedules and worries. Here are seven small but mighty ways you can make your patients happy they chose your practice:

1. Be on time.

Nothing makes patients feel more frustrated than still being in your waiting room 30 minutes after their appointment time or spending 15 extra minutes waiting in a thin gown in an exam room. Feeling like you respect their time by keeping on schedule is sure to please your patients. Plus, for you and your staff, it relieves the stress of constantly apologizing to irritated patients for your lateness.

2. Enter the exam room prepared.

It is comforting for patients to feel like they are not a number, that they will be heard and cared for. That comfort is lost when you come into the exam room and have to look in the chart or laptop for the patient's name and reason for the visit. Take that extra minute before you walk into the exam room to review the chart so you can greet the patient by name and show awareness of his symptoms.

3. Follow-up and communicate.

If your patient has had lab work or testing, was referred to a specialist, or presented with significant symptoms, make time to call her to follow up. See how she's doing and report on any lab or test results. This helps patients feel secure that your practice is concerned about their health and didn't forget them as soon as they left the office. Your staff can help with follow-up calls as well.

4. Offer a little reassurance.

Perhaps your patient has just received her diagnosis and is armed with a slew of questions and confusions about her condition. It can feel lonely and overwhelming. Take a minute to acknowledge that and reassure her that she's not alone. Remind her that you and she are a team, and together you can work to find the right treatment options.

5. Don't forget the small talk.

If you're running behind schedule, you may be tempted to rush through a visit, but don't telegraph that desire to your patients. Take a few minutes to chat with each patient. Try breaking the ice with chitchat about the weather, the holidays, his family — something other than the information in the chart. The exchange will put your patient at ease, and he will surely appreciate the friendly — and human — approach.