Improving Customer Service in Your Medical Practice

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I wrote the original series of articles in Practice Notes nearly a year ago. After more than 1,300 inquiries, I believe it is time for a review. The economy of medicine is still progressing in a number of ways, and rather than spending time debating the good, bad, and the ugly, now is the time to improve in areas to ensure you are growing your ideal patient base. Potential patients (and current ones too) recognize that they have as much choice in healthcare providers as they do in choosing a place to dine.

Let’s delve into these issues, starting with the big question...

**What is the number one reason that patients leave a clinic to find care elsewhere?**
The answer: A lack of customer service, though they may call it "poor bedside manner" or a "cranky receptionist." Still, regardless of the specialty it all boils down to customer service. You may think of them only as patients, but they are also customers. And they have choices.

Medicine isn't what it used to be — the practice of medicine now includes authentic heart-centered customer service, or what I like to call "customer service from the H.E.A.R.T."

My clients report that when their patients leave, they often don’t realize it until they see it in their bottom lines. Most patients don’t make a big scene; they just quietly slip away to another provider.

Providing your patients with customer service from the H.E.A.R.T. is not a pile of complicated systems, policies, and over-management techniques. It is putting the heart (no pun intended, but I will take it) back into your clinic, keeping it simple, and allowing yourself to better and more authentically serve your patients.

Here are some quick applications of customer service from the H.E.A.R.T. for your clinic:

1. **Hospitality.** This can be pretty simple. Be inviting to your patients (they are your guests after all). Make your waiting room clean and comfortable. Would you want to sit in your own waiting room? Go sit there for an hour one day and see how inviting it is. Have coffee or tea available, and offer bottled water to your patients. Keep television volume, especially if you are advertising services, at a reasonable level. Make sure staff (including doctors) is smiling and warm. Hint: This starts on the phone before the patient ever gets to the office. You may even consider making a person the hospitality ambassador for your office. This person can hold weekly meetings to get the staff on board with hospitality.

2. **Empathy and Enthusiasm.** Empathy is very important in customer service because it allows you to put yourself in the patient’s shoes; being empathetic increases retention rates as well as increasing compliance (the number patients actually following up with your medical recommendations). Empathy can also instantly diffuse an irritated patient. You can show empathy by saying with sincerity (in your face and tone). For example:

"That is awful. Let me see how I can help."
"I understand your frustration."

"I would be upset if that happened to me."

It bears repeating: Be sincere; otherwise, your empathy will not be effective.

Enthusiasm is also very important. If the staff, including the physician, is enthusiastic in their work, patients will want to be there (and so will the staff!). Enthusiasm goes hand and hand with hospitality and must be shown sincerely in body language, tone, and facial expressions.

3. **Attitude.** This is a big one: Attitude is everything. Everyone who comes in contact with a patient must have a winning attitude and show it, even over the phone. Each patient should feel that you are thankful they chose you and your business. By no means does this mean a groveling attitude, just a general a thankful attitude. Thankfulness or gratitude is being glad they are there and confident they will continue to choose your practice. If you are afraid of losing your patients and unappreciative of them, you give off an aura of fear and stress, which isn't healthy for you, your patients, or your business. Gratitude is tangible and transformational.

4. **Respect.** The patient isn't always right but always deserves respect. The best way to show your patients respect is the same way your parents taught you, even though your parents probably didn’t break it down into steps. The steps are ask, listen, respond, and adapt. Ask patients how you can help them or improve your practice. One simple example: When a patient walks in, staff should ask "How can I help you?" How often have you seen staff in medicine or retail simply look up and says, "Yes?" We don’t like it as consumers; our patients don’t really like it either. Sincerely asking, “How can I help you?” starts the patient’s experience off on a positive note. Really listen to what your patients are telling you about ways you can improve and how you can help them. Respond or act on the ways you learn you need to change and improve, and adapt to this changing market where customer service rules.

5. **Timeliness.** Be on time. Explain your delay to patients truthfully if you are not on time. If you as an office or practitioner are habitually late, adapt the patient scheduling to make up for it. If you are limping through customer service, your customers/patients will find another provider.

Excellence in customer service will help your retention and referral rates. (It will also improve staff morale and staff retention, but that’s an article for another day!)

Give these tips a try from customer service from the H.E.A.R.T., and watch your practice transform into a place that patients choose intentionally to trust with their health.