

Reprinted from...

HEALTHCARE EXECUTIVE

The MAGAZINE FOR HEALTHCARE LEADERS

VOLUME 23, NUMBER 1 • JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2008

Satisfying Your Customers



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How to Make Clients Happy

The ways hospitals go beyond clinical services.

Recently, hospitals have begun focusing more on the business of customer service. The reason is that providing good customer service is essential to the patient's overall experience and the organization's ability to retain their loyalty. Today's consumers expect more from their healthcare providers. They expect care that goes beyond the clinical experience, by demanding it fast, convenient and of high-quality. We must continually seek ways to improve the customer experience along the entire patient continuum—from acquisition to service delivery to retention.

Hospital leaders are being forced by the economics of consumerism to go beyond the clinical experience. In response, some organizations have hired "chief experience officers" who focus specifically on the patients making sure their experiences are as pleasant as possible. Paying more attention to service

improves customer satisfaction, which can lead to increases in revenue.

Hospitals have many opportunities to interact with and make a positive impression on consumers. The first of these "touch points" is often by phone or Internet. Consumers should have consistently positive experiences whether they call for a physician referral, come to the hospital for a class or are a patient in the hospital.

"Consumers will be judging healthcare services as they would other retail transactions, expecting transparency in price and quality. And with those variables becoming easier to discern, customer service will become the key differentiator in healthcare choice," according to a white paper from *The Beryl Institute*.

As a first step toward meeting these expectations, patients are looking for

information and personalization. They need to be able to gauge whether to use a particular procedure or treatment. To increase transparency, some hospitals post actual out-of-pocket costs, rather than just the gross total. And patients know how to evaluate different hospitals because of ratings that appear online.

The way a patient is treated during a visit is very important to maintaining good customer service, from the greeting when one walks in the door to a follow-up call to make sure he/she is feeling better. In many cases, customer satisfaction improves when hospitals make small changes to the way they



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handle their time management such as answering phones quickly and courteously, installing a software program to schedule appointments more efficiently, or investing in an additional physician to decrease waiting times.

One Healthcare System's Strategy

Alegent Health Systems is a faith-based, nonprofit healthcare organization. Its priority is to care for each person's mind, body and spirit, not just the illness and on their terms. Several years ago, Alegent was looking for ways for the organization to be more innovative, and so they sent some leaders to Silicon Valley in California. They observed a methodology called "Accelerated Decision Making," which is used by technology companies who need to rapidly innovate to survive, and applied it toward healthcare. The process places 50 to 70 stakeholders—all with different perspectives, roles and responsibilities—through facilitated large group and small group conversations and creates a future vision and road map for new products, services or other ideas. Alegent has used this process to generate thousands of ideas on new services.

Alegent has spent a lot of time creating a more soothing environment, including fireplaces in the waiting rooms, healing gardens and meals on demand, helping to moderate too clinical of an atmosphere. Some of the available personal care options could include simply allowing a pet to make a quick visit to the patient or having staff pray with patients and their families. Alegent also opened a retail "sleep store" in one of their hospitals, which offers products such as, pillows, bedding, teas and home medical equipment to patients and their families that can help them have a quality night's rest or deal with a minor medical problem at home. And, its Image Recovery Systems, which is available in several hospitals, is a retail shop used by cancer patients who need wigs, specialized cosmetics

and massage therapy to deal with the effects of their illnesses.

Other new services enhance the quality of care Alegent provides to its patients. This includes eICU technology, which allows for continuous remote monitoring for the most seriously ill patients by board certified physicians and critical care nurses. eICU will soon be available in Alegent's rural hospitals as well.

Most patients prefer to spend as little time seeking service as possible. So there are now Alegent Health Quick Care Clinics in area grocery stores. These clinics provide treatments for less acute conditions such as strep throat and ear infections, as well as blood pressure checks and immunizations. Patients love them because they are fast and convenient with predictable fees. Quick Care Clinics even lower costs for both patients and Alegent Health by offering these services for noncritical health conditions in a more cost-effective setting.

Alegent Health is responding to the demand of price transparency—a notion that is offered in other purchasing decisions such as buying a new car. One of the system's greatest accomplishments is the My Cost online tool, which was launched January 2007. This cost-estimating device allows anyone to understand the actual cost and out-of-pocket expenses (based on their individual health insurance plans) of nearly 500 common tests and procedures. To date, My Cost has generated more than 25,000 cost estimates.

Alegent employees are completely on board with the idea of providing service beyond quality healthcare. Recognition programs such as the Spirit of Mission (Alegent's highest honor) credits those employees who have made progress on making a solid effort for providing world-class healthcare. For nonclinical services in which the

hospitals don't have expertise, Alegent outsources it. Partners must share Alegent's values of integrity, dignity and respect.

Alegent outsources its call center to provide physician referral and class/event registration. The partnership offers many customer service enhancements, including 24-hour availability, one-stop shopping for access to the hospitals' services, call advisors that provide a positive first impression. These interactions are critical as call center callers generate more downstream revenue for hospitals than those that never make the call.

Alegent also measures customer satisfaction for its hospitals. The feedback from patients has been positive. Customers describe how compassionate, patient-centered services have made such a difference in their lives.

What's Next?

In general, hospital systems are providing more "bricks and mortar" types of services such as valet parking, WiFi and business centers. Many of these services are helping hospitals reach out to patients, improving overall care. The key here is that bricks-and-mortar enhancements are nice, but the truly personal efforts are what are going to make the difference. People need to feel respected and "known" by their healthcare providers. As hospitals embrace high-tech improvements, they cannot lose sight of the value of high-touch. The goal for all hospitals should be to aim to be more service-oriented and provide even more value to their customers. ▲

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