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Eight Experiments in Exceptional Customer Service

By Paul Spiegelman

Spread a meme of good service throughout your organization.

We all know people who can light up a room with their smile or, conversely, bring everyone down with their bad attitude. For better or worse, moods and actions are contagious. Foul moods—and the cranky behaviors that can accompany them—can infect everyone they touch and be as detrimental as a nasty flu.

The personal experience that patients encounter while having their health care needs met can be as powerful as clinical outcomes. And with more patients exercising their powers of choice—selecting doctors, hospitals and surgical centers—hospital leaders cannot afford to lose sight of the impact of good service.

A recent and striking example of the importance of customer service can be found in a Press Ganey study released in June. Focused on emergency departments nationwide, the study of 1.4 million patients reported that wait times were *not*

the public's No. 1 concern. Ranking ahead in customer satisfaction were how well patients were kept informed about delays and how well the staff cared about them as people.

Hospitals have implemented creative new protocols—from songs to humorous posters to screen savers—for ensuring that methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* and other hospital-borne infections aren't spread. But what about making sure that bad customer service doesn't spread or, more positively, making sure that best practices in good customer service do?

Spreading the Good Service Meme

Finding the best methodology is a matter of experimenting. I'd like to challenge hospitals to get their leadership teams to experiment some more...this time to see how their actions impact the experiences of others and contribute to a better customer experience overall.

Here are eight experiments to get you started:

See if you can make others smile by smiling yourself. Think about that person you know whose smile brightens a room and remember that it takes fewer muscles to smile than it does to frown. A smile can be one of the most contagious tools of nonverbal positive communication. Try to always enter a patient's room with a smile. In the elevator, the cafeteria, a waiting room, the laboratory or the bathroom, a genuine smile goes a long way toward helping others feel at ease and brightening their day.

Find out what happens when you listen attentively. Listening is the most important (and most often overlooked) part of communication. It's easy to start thinking about what you want to say next, which impedes your ability to truly listen to what others have to say. Others really appreciate the time and attention of good listeners.

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Listening well allows us to fully understand the needs and concerns of our patients and their families (as well as fellow employees).

Discover the impact of remembering (and referencing) information about others.

People really appreciate it (and are often quite impressed) when you remember their names and interests and the details of a past conversation. It may help to keep a notebook handy to record pertinent information, help you commit it to memory and bring it up in future interactions.

Look at what happens when you offer to help. It's amazing how reducing someone else's load can make you feel lighter, too. Whether it's a lost visitor, an overburdened co-worker or a patient request, there are many opportunities every day to execute this experiment.

Notice the influence you have when you recognize and acknowledge.

People love to feel noticed and appreciated. Make it a point to recognize the accomplishments or contributions—no matter how small—of others. A simple “nice job” can significantly improve another's performance or attitude.

Discern the difference by banishing the negative (at least for a day).

For one whole day, try to eliminate negative commentary from your discussions. No derogatory comments about your boss, co-workers, spouse or dog. No griping about being overworked. No complaining. Instead, look for improvements, solutions or recommendations to make better that which is not ideal (and try to overlook that which is really not important).

Discover the power of compassion.

Compassion is the reason that most of us got into health care, but sometimes our days seem too busy to let it show. Authentic displays of compassion likely will have a lasting impact on others, especially patients. Think about how you might define compassion and then find ways to practice it. And it's not a bad idea to look for compassion in job candidates the next time you have a position to fill.

Challenge yourself to back away from the BlackBerry.

Technology has usurped much of our face-to-face communication. Before you send that next text message or e-mail, think about talking face to face or placing a call. Remember, nothing replaces personal interaction.

Delivering great customer service comes more naturally to some than to others, but it is critical to a patient's overall experience at the hospital. And at a time when price and quality are beginning to level out among hospitals, customer service can be a key differentiating factor. Using small steps and daily experiments, health care leaders can create the kind of positive environment and experiences that patients will want to tell others about...and that's the kind of viral result we like.

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