

on connecting with consumers

VIEWpoint

Customer Connectivity at Every Touch Point

As consumers increasingly seek out information on hospital and physician quality and pricing prior to seeking care, the challenge for hospitals is to become the first choice provider. Engaging consumers at each touch point along the experience continuum is key to doing so.

First choice providers build personal relationships, collect more intelligence on their consumers, and look for ways to extend their brands beyond visits. First choice providers take a long-term view- not a transactional view of their customers. They systematically and consistently connect with consumers at multiple touch points to develop and maintain lasting relationships with targeted consumers. Customer connectivity is not based simply on the implementation of a customer relationship management (CRM) system but rather a strategic vision that extends to every customer touch point.

Three distinct types of connectivity should be considered: first contact connectivity, clinical encounter connectivity, and post-engagement connectivity. In each of these instances, a hospital has the

potential to build or destroy a relationship.

First Contact Connectivity

First contacts with customers can either be inbound (initiated by a potential customer) or outbound (originated by the hospital.)

First Contact Inbound

Frequently, the first contact with a hospital is through the switchboard- often seeking a physician referral. When studying the physician referral lines in hospitals, the Beryl Institute uncovered some astonishing results.

- More than 12 percent of switchboard attendance at hospitals with physician referral programs told prospective clients no referral program existed.
- More than 40 percent of callers were given another number to call rather than being directly transferred. Consumers often do not redial - making this a risky transaction.

This gap at the switchboard, the front line of customer connectivity, can have serious financial and market share consequences. Organizations that lose customers

during this initial connection never have the opportunity to develop an ongoing relationship- and the loss can be significant: nearly 20 million dollars in revenue "at risk" for a hospital that generates an average of 1,000 physician referral calls per month.

In most healthcare institutions, significant resources are allocated to customer acquisition. Unfortunately, switchboards and call centers are not often considered strategic assets in this customer connectivity and acquisition process. Organizations that do successfully manage inbound customer connectivity strive to ensure that customers are serviced at the initial contact. Switchboard operators know what to do with each and every phone call, without having to put callers on hold or call them back.

First Contact Outbound

Hospitals frequently initiate contact with consumers, often through "new to the area" or "new mover" programs. Sophisticated programs might include in their welcome packets both a standard business reply card (BRC) and an electronic business reply card (EBRC) so that new residents can easily inform the hospital of their preferences

for newsletters or information about physician referrals, affinity programs, or clinical service lines. This information can be stored in a knowledge base and leveraged to engage consumers in future encounters.

As hospitals expand first-contact connectivity, they are offering more options to connect with customers. Some are exploring appointment reminders via instant message and online calendars, which can not only improve patient care, but also limit expenses related to no-shows.

Clinical Engagement Connectivity

Facing increasing competition from a range of new venues, from retail clinics to outpatient surgery centers, hospitals must improve the value of every engagement. With quality and patient satisfaction data widely available, consumers are exploring more options when selecting care providers. According to a recent McKinsey survey, 41 percent of each consumer's choice is based on non-clinical experience while only 20 percent is based on clinical experience. Given these statistics,

it follows that hospitals that consistently connect with customers before and after engagement will be most successful.

Post-Engagement Connectivity

Healthcare executives know that it is far cheaper to retain an existing customer than to acquire a new one. In healthcare, doing so demands a complex mix of high-quality clinical care and excellent customer service before, during, and after the visit.

Post-engagement is a critical time when an extra caring step can mean more than it might at other times along the continuum of care. Savvy healthcare organizations are initiating post-engagement calls- proactive customer outreach after an inpatient or outpatient visit. Beryl research demonstrates that post-discharge contact by phone positively impacts patient satisfaction, clinical outcomes, and overall care. The first release of Hospital Compare data by the US Department of Health and Human Services shows that most patients are dissatisfied with some aspect of their hospital stay. Nationwide, in



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the average hospital, only 67 percent of patients would definitely recommend the institution where they had been treated to friends and relatives. Post-visit calls improve the likelihood of recommending a hospital by at least 33 percent on average and often nearly 50 percent. This rate of improvement remains steady over time.

Industry leaders and watchdog agencies are strongly recommending ongoing communication with a patient after discharge to increase patient safety, reduce unnecessary cost, and improve overall quality outcomes. The Beryl Institute research also shows that 20 percent of discharged patients experience an adverse event, with 25 percent of these patients being readmitted. Post-discharge calling can identify these at-risk patients and provide appropriate intervention.

Post-discharge care calls encourage a shift in how customers view their hospital relationship- and respect a key step in creating long-lasting relationships with consumers. Ultimately, it is the strength of those relationships that will determine a hospital's status as a first choice provider.

5 tips for Successful Customer Connectivity

1 Make it an organizational imperative. When everyone from the switchboard operator to the CEO is focused on engaging with customers, connectivity improves.

2 Connect across the continuum. Have a consistent, integrated customer connectivity plan in place for first contact, clinical engagements, and post engagements.

3 Provide communication options. Meet the customer where they are: on the phone, online, or in person.

4 Keep the human touch. Research has shown that consumers want the ease of the Internet, but when they have questions they want access to a person with the right knowledge and skills to help them on the spot.

5 Leverage technology. Technology can support streamlined communications and knowledge building.

Source: [The Beryl Institute](#)