



## Communicating Your Way to Good Customer Service

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Stanley Marcus, a founder of the upscale department store Neiman Marcus, is known for coining the phrase "The customer is always right." But in this day and age, this is not necessarily true. However, patients, like customers, can be incorrect yet satisfied that they received the best care and treatment possible. It has been said that a patient who has a positive experience is likely to tell 1 person but he or she will convey an unsatisfactory visit to 10 people. Word of mouth can slowly and quietly damage a practice, decreasing referrals and new patients and increasing the number of patients who cancel their appointments without rescheduling.

### A Team Effort

All is not lost, however. A practice can provide quality care and preserve its hard-earned good reputation by ensuring all staff members communicate clearly and respectfully with all patients. For example, it is good customer service when your technicians give precise instructions for every test. This includes something as simple as using an occluder. Secretaries and receptionists should be aware that their behavior and

communication skills form the patient's first impression of the practice. The manner in which they speak, the tone of their voice, and the information they relay will set the stage for a positive experience for the patient.

### The Telephone Challenge

Clear, specific communication is more difficult to achieve over the telephone. Like the low-vision patient, the caller cannot take cues from nonverbal communication such as facial expressions and body language. Following are some things to consider as you develop your telephone policies:

- *Are callers greeted by a human voice or a recording?* Many older patients, and some younger ones too, prefer hearing a live human voice answer the telephone, even if they are asked whether they can be put on hold. They like knowing they have reached a person and feel assured that their call will be addressed in turn. When faced with voicemail, they tend to not leave a message and are annoyed when they must call back or when the doctor or the appropriate staff person never calls them back. Some baby boomers do

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not have the time or patience to sort through the various options offered in a voicemail system, particularly when their reason for calling does not seem to fit any of the categories provided. They may hit "0" only to find they must start all over again. Those of younger generations seem to accept voicemail as a way of life and leave multiple contact numbers.

- *Do those who answer the telephone have a script to follow?* The script should begin with the preferred greeting, which should include the

name of the person answering the call. The caller should always be addressed by his or her surname; it should never be assumed that the caller will accept a more casual first-name basis.

- *Can your schedulers correctly manipulate a variety of provider schedules, triage calls, and refill prescriptions—often at the same time?* The best telephone staff members can do this with a smile on their face while remembering to say "Thank you for calling" before hanging up.
- *Do all your staff members first listen to what the patient has to say and then respond accordingly?* Do not anticipate what the patient is going to say by jumping in and finishing the end of the sentence. What if the assumption is incorrect? When this happens, the patient will likely perceive the action as disrespectful and rude. Without visual cues, callers are less likely to recognize humor or distraction.

### The Right Person for the Job

If respect is an inherently unfamiliar quality, it is nearly impossible to teach it to your staff. As in previous generations, most children have been raised to "respect their elders." However, some are unable to transfer this respect to people who are neither family members nor part of the older generation. People who cannot be respectful to everyone at all times should be given a position that requires minimal direct patient contact.

### Polite Negotiations

Who is right and who is wrong is inconsequential as long as the needs of both the patient and the practice are met. A

good balance can be achieved through conveying something in the proper way. Overscheduled patients often tell the practice when they are available, failing to recognize the office's hours of operation. High-level negotiations may be required to reach accord. One tactic is to offer alternative slots. Let's say a patient demands an appointment at 4:30 tomorrow afternoon. Rather than saying, "No, we can't do that," say that someone else is already scheduled at that time and then offer an appointment at the same time on a different day. This tactic will show the patient you are willing to compromise by offering options as well as an explanation.

What about a patient who says she was not told how much time to allow for the appointment, that her eyes would be dilated, or that she must wear her contact lenses for the evaluation. If you use a script, you know that the patient was likely told the information but did not really listen to what she was told. It is important not to become defensive when the patient denies being informed. Rather, explain the situation and what you can do to resolve it. The faster the action, the happier everyone will be. In these cases, your staff may have to explain and apologize for giving erroneous information or not giving clear instructions, even if this is not the case.

### Learning from Others

When a patient is unhappy, all staff members—from receptionist to technician to checkout person—should strive to provide an objective explanation of the facts and tell the patient what will be done from that point forward. They should be taught to turn a challenge

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into an opportunity and to not personalize the situation. This is a difficult skill to teach and even harder to acquire. Ask your employees to observe situations outside the office—to watch customer service providers in retail or restaurants. For a close-up view on how to hold one's ground, tune into the television program "Airline" on the Arts & Entertainment network. You can learn a lot from the airline employees about working with the public under pressure.

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