Treat Your Patients Like Customers, or Lose Them


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The other day I passed a sign that was posted on a doctor’s building wall. It said “Now Accepting New Patients.” I had an immediate reaction that was not positive and I asked 10 people their reaction. One said “That’s a normal sign that means we need more patients because a.) we have more time; or b.) we have more physicians and need to fill up the schedule.” Another said she didn’t notice it.

The other eight? Their reaction is the eye opener and what caused me to pause. “That’s pretty arrogant. That office is deigning to offer their medical care to me. Well, isn’t that nice they are making time for me to come in?” All similar responses were pretty sarcastic.

Why would they, and I, have negative reactions to a sign like that? Because we have been trained to.

The current patient population has been trained to be marketed to. We’ve been trained to have someone telling us why they are superior and will help us be healthier, etc. The large medical conglomerates figured out that medicine is no longer a privilege in people’s minds. Medicine is a service industry that needs to be sold to the populace.

Therefore, attitudes must change. If large medical hospitals are advertising to your patients and your neighborhood where more patients would come from and you are not, you are losing market share. Losing market share is equal to losing your practice.

If that doctor had put on his sign “Now Welcoming New Patients,” the reaction would be so much better. Medical practices must be treated like businesses that have customers (vs. patients). And the customer must be treated as valuable.

What are the rules for good customer service? The first one is “The customer is always right.” In the medical world that means that the customer should not be kept waiting forever. It means the customer should be told what is going on. It means the customer should be, to a degree, catered to. You do want the patient to return, correct?

Here are some rules to run your office by:

* If the doctor is running more than 15 minutes late (or pick some amount of time, but not more than 45 minutes) in seeing the patients, those patients should be called and told there is a delay. The patients should then be given the opportunity to either reschedule or come in later than they had planned, giving them the possibility to run an errand, etc. This gives the patients the idea that your office really does care about them.

* If you have a sign that says if the patient is 15 minutes late, they will be rescheduled. Then you had better treat them the same way.

* If the patient is confused by what they are told on either their medical condition or their bills, then the appropriate person should sit down with them and explain until the patient totally understands. Again, this gives the patient the idea your office cares.

* If you order diagnostic testing, be sure and tell the patient when they will get a call from your office or a letter advising them of the findings of those tests. Too many patients are left hanging and start to believe that either something is very wrong or their doctors just don’t care about them.

* When a patient calls to schedule an appointment, do not let your staff treat them as though they are bothering the staff and/or doctor. If you don’t have patients, you don’t have revenue and no one gets paid.

* If you don’t accept credit cards or HSA (health savings account cards), you are doing two things wrong: You are reducing the probability of being paid and you are making the patient go out of his/her way to reimburse you. Any business will tell you to make it easy for the customer to pay.

* Teach your staff to speak with a smile, whether on the phone or in person. People, customers, patients all respond to pleasant people much better than to grouchy ones. If your staff is cranky, the patients will know it and wonder why. Would you want to go to a place of business and have the salesperson treat you meanly? Your staff, while primarily there to assist you are also sales people.

* If you have policies for the patients to understand and abide by, in order to be sure that everyone
is treated well, post them. Have your staff ask the patients if they understand them or have any questions. Your staff needs to be trained to collect copays and balances before the patient sees the doctor. But, they also need to be trained to do it professionally. There are seminars as well as trainers who will come to the office and train your staff.

If you have other customer service ideas to share, please add them as a comment below or e-mail me for a project I’m working on to help new medical practice staff boost patient satisfaction.

Find out more about Sue Irwin and our other Practice Notes bloggers.

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