

Mirror, Mirror: Six Ways to Take an Honest Look at Your Practice from Your Patients' Perspective

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Unsatisfied patients cost practices thousands of dollars every year in lost revenue through attrition, loss of referrals, and noncompliance, and yet the often unspoken needs and wants of patients are rarely analyzed in relation to the service delivered. This article explains the importance and value of taking an honest look at your healthcare organization from the other side of the check-in counter. It gives six practical steps any practice can take to begin to better understand the patient experience and perspective, including how to garner honest feedback and get your staff onboard with a patient-centric culture. Learn how to gain valuable insight to develop strategies that give your practice a competitive edge and a rock-solid future.

KEY WORDS: Survey; attrition; feedback; revenue; noncompliant; culture; patient-centric; customer service; patient advisory board, mystery patient; referrals.

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When a practice is very busy and seeing a lot of patients coming and going—and by that I mean joining and leaving the practice—it's easy to overlook the silent but real profitability-buster of unhappy patients. Few physicians and practice leaders truly understand the cost to a practice when an unhappy patient either moves on, and must be replaced to maintain the flow of revenue, or becomes non-compliant, contributing to duplicate work and a less-than-desirable environment for the staff. Noncompliant patients can be demanding. They tend to have a higher no-show rate and end up calling with urgent needs when they have not adhered to their treatment plans—all of which compromises health outcomes and is costly to your practice.

Attrition happens. It happens when people move, it happens with job and insurance changes, and it happens when patients are referred out, die, or no longer need your services. It's a natural part of a healthy practice that must be planned for; but a turnstile practice that incurs unnecessary attrition regularly is losing revenue and compromising quality on many fronts.

Consider the cost of replacing a patient. There are the marketing efforts, advertisements, and other activities to stimulate referrals and create visibility for your practice. Beyond that, there are even more up-front costs incurred

when adding new patients to your practice. These costs include the time and resources involved for your staff to set up a new patient in your system; field initial phone calls to answer questions and set up appointments; and process intake forms, insurance verification, and health questionnaires. These expenses are incurred before a patient adds financial value to your practice because initial patient visits are too costly to be considered profitable.

Happy patients make for a better work environment.

On the flip side, an unhappy patient may damage your reputation and hurt your marketing and referral-nurturing activities by leaving poor marks on review sites, complaining to the physician that referred the patient to you, and speaking badly of your practice in the community. The cost of acquiring a new customer is estimated to be five times (500%) greater than that of satisfying and retaining existing customers, or in this case patients.¹ If that doesn't cause you to pause and ask how you can turn unhappy patients into raving fans, nothing will!

Now think about the difference in the workplace for staffers who get to welcome impressed, appreciative

patients versus disappointed, frustrated ones. There is a very high cost to replacing employees when you consider advertising costs; time spent reviewing applications, conducting interviews, and checking references; and the training process. Happy patients make for a better work environment, and though it's not the only ingredient, it does go a long way toward attracting and maintaining an ideal team.

A practice that has a continuous feed of new patients replacing those lost to attrition may believe it is "successful," but in reality it is failing to maintain a high level of patient-centered service and missing out on an opportunity to go from "status quo" to being among the "best" practices, attracting the best patients and enjoying a deeply rewarding relationship and reputation with a loyal patient base and staff.

To truly achieve the potential of your practice—not just meet patient needs, but "wow" them—you must look at the practice from the other side of the check-in counter. Understanding your patients' perspective is imperative but can prove difficult when even the unhappiest of patients often quietly disappear, never telling you what you could have done to change their minds. More than 90%² of unhappy customers will not say anything; they simply go away and vow never to do business with you again. People who are dissatisfied with the service they receive will, however, tell an average of 12 *other* people about their experience, and 13% will tell more than 20 people.² This negative association with your practice works against all that you do to attract new patients and build your practice brand and reputation, making these efforts less effective while reducing your return on investment. In short, it's another expense of unhappy patients.

You'll never be your practice's patient.

How can physicians, managers, and staff ever truly understand how patients experience their practice? It's not easy, because you can't deny reality: you'll never be your practice's patient. Even when managers and staff obtain services at the practice where they work, it's impossible to view it objectively. For this reason, marketing and management consultants guide practices in ways to be better in touch with their patients in order to understand their needs and wants, which patients share more freely when not asked directly by their healthcare provider.

One way this is done is by surveying patients to obtain quantitative feedback from which patterns can be detected. These surveys may be implemented after a visit with a short questionnaire the patient fills out at the practice or when he or she gets home and returns via mail, or sent via e-mail to all or specific groups of patients. To encourage participation, it's recommended that surveys are anonymous, not

collected directly from the patient, visibly short, and to the point. Vague, open-ended questions or long surveys are discouraging and tedious to patients, which can reduce participation and be viewed as a nuisance.

To improve the usability of your results, providing four options on rating surveys is a good idea, eliminating a "middle" answer. In other words, provide two positives and two negatives. For example, for the question, "Does our staff greet and welcome you when you first arrive?," you might have these options: Always, Sometimes, Rarely, Never. For the question, "How do you rate your wait time at our practice?," options might be: Excellent, Good, Poor, Unacceptable. This forces the surveyed patient to choose a positive or negative and not pick "satisfactory" or another neutral remark. After all, you're either doing a great job or failing, because doing "okay" doesn't distinguish you from the competition, build a loyal patient base, or give staff anything to feel proud of.

Another option is to conduct third-party interviews with patients, which capture qualitative feedback that provides deeper insight by giving patients a platform to share openly and the interviewer the ability to probe further about specific issues. For instance, you may want to know if patients would follow you to a new location, use expanded hours, or value the addition of another type of provider. Asking deeper questions to determine specifics such as the kind of provider that would be appreciated most (perhaps a female provider for a family practice that currently has only male physicians, or a nutritionist for a bariatric surgeon or gastroenterology practice). These interviews can help determine how far and in what direction patients are willing to travel to stay with your practice should you relocate, or what hours and days would be most used by patients who find it difficult to visit the practice during your regular business hours. Getting to the truth on these issues before making decisions can divert you from making a costly, irreversible mistake that could take years to recover from.

Obtaining a mystery patient service is another way for a practice to gain insight into the patient experience it provides. An expert who is equipped to look at a myriad of factors that affect a patient's impression and experience when visiting your practice provides an analysis of the patient experience along with a report highlighting areas of opportunity for improvement as well as positive feedback on areas of excellence. A list of recommendations that is born out of the mystery patient service can be invaluable as a catalyst to practical changes, some very simple and easy to implement, that add up to a big impact for your patients and a boost to your practice image.

We all love to hear that we're doing a great job, but those practices that stand head and shoulders above the rest are the ones that are willing to take an honest look in the mirror and embrace a culture of constant improvement. This culture must start at the top, with providers and other practice or healthcare organization leaders displaying a no-blame

attitude and being brave enough to accept constructive feedback in regard to the service they provide. This will contribute to the overall success of the organization and a stellar patient experience.

Communicate to your patients that feedback is welcomed at your practice.

Here are some practical steps any practice can take to begin to better understand the patient experience and perspective:

1. **Embrace the culture.** Gather your staff together to communicate your goal of better understanding the needs and desires of patients and making changes to fulfill them. Let your staff members know that complaints can be viewed as opportunities, and that you want everyone to share what they are hearing from patients without fear that it will reflect poorly on their performance. Show them in word and deed that practice leaders and providers are looking to improve as well—feedback about them is just as important and will be heard. Lead by example, and keep repeating the message and making changes as necessary.
2. **Open the door for patients to share.** Communicate to your patients that feedback is welcomed at your practice. This can be done in regular communications such as at the bottom of an e-newsletter, on your practice pamphlet, via a suggestion box, or verbally during visits. When patients believe you care and that their feedback contributes to changes, not only will they participate more honestly and enthusiastically to give you the tips you need to make your practice irresistible, but it will build a relationship and trust with patients that is priceless!
3. **Provide an anonymous avenue.** Patients, just like customers, are more likely to quietly take their business elsewhere than to speak up and tell you why they weren't happy. Sometimes they fear their negative remarks will affect the service they receive or reflect poorly on them. Providing anonymous forms of surveying will give you more honest feedback. One way to do this is to send out a survey to your patient e-mail list. Make it short and simple, and leave room for comments. Anonymity is crucial if you want feedback that you can base important decisions on.
4. **Call the experts.** For professional recommendations and a critical eye that is accustomed to looking at your competition, call in a mystery patient expert who is qualified to look at certain criteria that the public may not

identify, like a missing introduction or welcome to the practice given to a new patient, or the need to change a misleading sign in the hallway that makes it difficult to find your front door. These seemingly small ways to “up” the patient experience can have a big impact on patients and boost your referrals, reputation, and repeat visits!

5. **Follow through.** It would be better to not even ask if you don't plan to consider feedback seriously, make needed changes, or explain the reason why you don't make a change. If staff and patients don't believe that their input, feedback, and ideas are going to have a positive impact, they will clam up and stop supplying you with the answers you need to be an ever-improving, top-notch best practice.
6. **Create and support a patient advisory board.** Recruit a small (six- to eight-person) cross-section of your patients to act as a think-tank and openly share their ideas and feedback on relevant issues and possibly changes to your practice. This board can meet quarterly to discuss items such as:
 - How to better meet the changing needs of patients (e.g., if you have a growing number of patients with a particular condition, the practice may consider group visits or adding educational programs); and
 - What marketplace shifts have emerged that may affect patients, such as health insurance mergers, major community employers making changes to health plans, or a hospital or other healthcare provider coming into or leaving the community.

Any business that wants to thrive and prosper in an increasingly competitive landscape must get better acquainted with the often-unspoken needs and wants of its customers; it's no different in healthcare. Get patients talking and your staff listening—and then sharing with practice leaders—and you will have the keys to success in your hands. Act on that valuable information, and your patients, staff, and community are sure to be wowed, resulting in a more profitable practice through reduced attrition and a boost to career fulfillment! ■■

Editor's note: Judy Capko and Cheryl Bisera's new book, The Patient-Centered Payoff: Driving Practice Growth Through Image, Culture, and Practice Experience, published on October 1, 2013, and is available at www.greenbranch.com or Amazon.

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