

The Patient Experience Post

Healthcare's Resource for
Service Excellence
August 2013



Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences within your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

Are You Overlooking the Impact Your Volunteers Have on the Patient Experience?

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Not that long ago, I walked into a hospital and approached the Information Desk. There were three people sitting behind the counter allegedly there to provide information and direct guests. I eyed them up quickly to determine which one to approach. It wasn't a tough decision:

- Info Desk Person #1 was sending clear "do not disturb" signals as she sent text messages.
- Info Desk Person #2 was also clearly signaling his disinterest as he focused on drinking coffee and eating a doughnut.
- Info Desk Person #3 made eye contact, smiled, and seemed ready for business. She's the one I approached.

So much for my first impression; I was clearly underwhelmed with their "commitment" to service. When I mentioned this experience to the Marketing Director, he said, "Oh, they're just volunteers!"

Just volunteers? No, they are keepers of the first impressions. First of all, how do your patients and visitors distinguish volunteers from your "real employees"? They don't. Second of all, do you really think it matters? It doesn't. If you are going to *own* the patient experience, that means taking charge of every encounter with every customer, every day.

Your customers do not distinguish between your volunteers and your employees. They see them as representatives of your business. Like your employees, they are the face of the organization. If you own the patient experience, you need to own the whole thing.

Chances are you're using volunteers in a number of places throughout your hospital. They play a vital role in hospitals around the country and, really, around the world. They contribute millions of hours of service that supplements what hospitals are able to provide to their patients and to the community. You likely have volunteers at your information desk, your gift shop, your coffee shop, probably in some waiting rooms, and maybe even helping to transport patients from place to place. Their countless hours provide invaluable services, and, yet, when their work puts them in the public eye, they must be held to the same service standards as staff. They represent your brand and are part of the patient experience.

The goal is to create a consistently positive patient experience. That means taking ownership of all touchpoints. Volunteers may be just as well suited to work at the Information Desk as a W-2 employee. The key point is that whoever is in the public must put their best foot forward at all times.

One best practice is to include volunteers in all customer service training. To ensure that you shape a consistent experience when engaging volunteers in

service positions, take heed of these pointers:

- Make sure when you select volunteers to work at, and represent, your organization to apply the same rigorous selection criteria as you use when selecting “real employees.”
- As you onboard volunteers, provide them with training and explicit expectations of how to interact with patients, family members, and visitors. And, importantly, are these the *same* expectations you have for employees?
- When you conduct service training, include your volunteers in these training sessions. Not only will this help hardwire the service standard, it helps reinforce that the volunteers are valuable members of the team.
- When you receive feedback from a patient, family, or community member about a less-than-stellar interaction with a volunteer, do you minimize it by saying, “Oh, that’s just a volunteer!”? I sure hope not!

Set the bar, define the standards, then select and train to preserve the brand experience in every encounter with every patient, every day. Your patients—and your reputation—depend on it.

Phone communication is an essential part of the patient experience and is often the first part of the patient experience. In just seconds, your patients are deciding if you are friendly, knowledgeable, concerned, and willing to help. In fact, research shows that after just a 2-minute phone encounter, patients are clear about whether or not they would return to your organization or recommend it. Patients rely on phone encounters to make appointments and seek clinical advice. Other callers rely on phone encounters to gain vital information about a loved one. In both situations, it’s important that you create a positive, trust-building experience. To engage your staff in essential phone skills, look toward the tips and tools in [You’ll Have Them at “Hello”: Phone skills that will WOW your callers every time](#). For only \$199, you’ll receive the following: the video recording, presentation slides, a transcript of the recording, a participant guidebook, a moderator guidebook, a quality assurance tool, and additional handouts! This session is also available as a live training workshop.

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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare’s Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader’s Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.