

The Patient Experience Post

Healthcare's Resource for

Service Excellence

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Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's

Are Your Phone Encounters Helping or Hurting Your Reputation?

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

What role does the telephone play in your organization's ability to live the mission and build its brand? Well, despite the proliferation of new telecommunication technology, the truth is the telephone remains the most important tool to connect with your patients, whether they're calling for an appointment, seeking follow-up information, or simply hoping to provide you with some feedback.

Think about it.

It takes around 8 seconds to make a first impression when talking with someone face-to-face, but data shows it is anywhere between 1/40th of a second to 5 seconds to develop an impression on the phone. That may be surprising, but, on the phone, all you have is your voice. It's seemingly little things like tone of voice, how fast a person speaks, and enunciation that are noticed immediately and form that vital first impression. When in person, factors such as how a person looks, how they make eye contact, or smile, as well as hand gestures, are added to the mix. In addition, when we are there in person, we can see what else is going on in the environment. In short, we tend to cut people just a bit more slack in person than over the phone.

The telephone still plays a big role in the patient experience. It's indisputable. Given the critical nature of phone interactions, you might expect a lot of attention would be paid to ensuring that those interactions are as effective and positive as possible. But consider for a moment how much time and effort is spent at your organization to ensure that people answering the phones are incredibly skilled in providing exceptional customer service, are perpetually pleasant, and are immediately effective at making a great first impression and helping the person on the other end of the line meet his or her needs.

A bit frightening, isn't it?

Baird Group does literally thousands of mystery shopping phone calls each year to hospitals and medical practices around the country to help our clients understand and improve the customer experience. Invariably, what we learn through these calls is shocking to the healthcare administrators we work with.

Mumbled, even unintelligible greetings; cold transfers; disinterested—sometimes even angry—tones of voice; inappropriate comments; putting callers on hold for an interminably long time; or bouncing callers around from one line to another are all common issues we come across. Are these the types of experiences you want people to have when they contact *your* healthcare organization? I think we know the answer to that.

culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences with your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Kristin Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

Want to use this article in your e-zine, newsletter, or Web site? You may, as long as you include the following statement:

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* (2008, Golden Lamp Press), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (2004, Golden Lamp Press), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (2000 Jossey Bass).

The problem lies, though, not only in assessing what is currently going on at your organization, but in taking steps to fix the issues that may be present.

It's important to understand the current reality of your patient experience. The following are just a few questions to consider as you review your organization's phone experiences:

- Where are calls coming in now? Is there just one central number or do callers have access to a list of published numbers? Published numbers are an open invitation, and once you give the number you must own the experience.
- How is staff trained to manage calls? Apply standards to all staff in all departments regardless of title, rank, or job description.
- What quality assurance measures have you put in place to make sure that all calls are answered and managed in a brand-consistent manner?
- What are some of the barriers your staff faces in delivering a positive phone encounter?

The bottom line....

A single phone call may be the only opportunity you have to impress and engage a caller. In fact, we ask our mystery shoppers to tell us how likely they would be to seek future care with the organizations they contact based on this one encounter. What we've found is that people will generalize the kind of encounter they have over the phone to their expectation of the treatment they'll get in person. Are you effectively managing the customer experience with every phone encounter, or are you turning people away?

Find out how you can align your organizational goals with a more positive customer encounter over the phone. My informational webinar, "You'll Have Them at 'Hello'—Healthcare's Gold Standards for Phone Encounters", is September 8th. Find out more [here](#).

Learn more about ways you can ensure that all of your customer interactions, including over-the-phone interactions, support your healthcare organization's brand, as in [Living Your Brand Promise](#), featuring Kent Seltman, co-author of Management Lessons From Mayo Clinic. As the former Director of Marketing at Mayo Clinic, Seltman was charged with managing the brand for this world-renowned organization. During this 90-minute presentation, you'll hear about crucial elements in aligning the brand promise with the patient experience in order to build trust and credibility with customers. For only \$89, you'll receive all this: pre-session worksheets, a session workbook, webinar slides, and an audio CD of the 90-minute webinar, complete with the Q&A session.

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