

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 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.

Four Critical Steps to Picking Yourself Up When You Fall Short

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

"I wouldn't come back to this hospital again, even if they offered my family free healthcare for life!"

Imagine passing a young mother as she storms out of a busy emergency department. She's speaking loudly and angrily into her cell phone, with an obviously cranky, uncomfortable toddler in tow. The hospital staff members within earshot simply look at each other and shrug. After all, they're swamped with work; what can they do about this one woman's situation?

It turns out that there is a lot that healthcare workers can do in these circumstances to correct the situation and keep that patient coming back happily, along with her entire family.

Research shows that successful service recovery forges lasting, loyal relationships. Even though we strive for the optimal customer experience, things can go wrong, and we can fall short of our customers' expectations. Being prepared for such situations will put you at an advantage. Service recovery is your opportunity for a second chance—it is your chance to make things right.

Keep in mind that you have a limited amount of time to take advantage of this opportunity. In service recovery, timing is everything. Your greatest opportunity lies within the first 48 hours of the disappointing encounter; after 72 hours, your odds of reclaiming that customer fall dramatically.

Effective service recovery requires that you know and understand how to apply four critical steps within the optimal time frame and make sure that all staff are well versed in how to handle difficult situations.

Four Critical Steps to Service Recovery

1. *Anticipate*

This step takes place well before the customer even sets foot inside your doors. It means being prepared to serve the customer. Have processes and services in place that will serve the customer efficiently and courteously.

- Anticipating the wants and needs of customers will help you deliver excellent service. Remember that service must be focused on their expectations and needs.
- If resources will allow, consider doing focus groups to identify what is most important to your customers. Ask what meets their needs and also find out what would exceed their expectations. Find out what would be a disappointing experience. Use this information to help you establish systems and processes.

Many organizations know that they have service problems in specific areas, yet there is no clear plan that anticipates needs and addresses them.

For example, the young mother in the situation above may have been kept waiting an “excessive” amount of time with her sick toddler. From her perspective, the staff was ignoring her concerns, and she might as well have been invisible. From the staff’s perspective, they had more critical patients to see to. By finding ways to keep their patients informed about wait times, the staff could waylay the young mother’s fear that she is being ignored.

2. *Acknowledge*

Since customer service is all about people dealing with people, things are bound to go wrong once in awhile. However, it’s how you handle these situations that determine your customer’s likelihood of giving you another shot.

- When things go wrong, acknowledge the customer’s feelings and concerns. Do acknowledge their feelings, but don’t argue or get defensive. Do offer to take action, but don’t make excuses. Most of the time, the customer isn’t going to be interested in excuses or why something has gone wrong. They want to be heard and to know that something will be done.
- Listen to them and thank them for bringing the problem to your attention. Just one staff person could make a difference with that frustrated mother by acknowledging her irritation. “Ma’am, I know you’ve been waiting for a long time, and it seems like we’re never going to get to you. Let me check where we are, and I’ll get back to you within two minutes to let you know when you’ll be called.”

3. *Apologize*

It’s not only okay to say, “I’m sorry,” it is necessary. Listen, make eye contact and be sincere. There’s nothing worse than feeling like you have been let down only to be disregarded when you make your concerns known. Apologize with sincerity.

The mother in the emergency room knows that people get busy with their jobs. Hearing someone sincerely say, “I’m sorry you’re feeling this way. I know how frustrating it must be,” can go a long way toward making her feel like her concerns are important too.

4. *Amend*

The word “amend” means to alter, adjust, make changes, make improvements, or make corrections. In many organizations, staff members have the authority to offer a coupon, or small gift, as a token of apology. Too often, these tokens take the place of the first three steps. Do ask what you can do to correct the situation. Don’t make a perfunctory gesture of a gift or coupon to placate a customer.

Staff need to know what is within their authority in this step. Many organizations follow a 20/20 rule—any staff member can do whatever is needed for service recovery if it can be accomplished in 20 minutes

or for under \$20.

Offering the mother in our scenario anything from a \$5 coupon to the hospital gift shop to free healthcare for life isn't going to make her a lifetime customer unless she feels that the staff really understood her concerns and sincerely worked to turn her experience around. However, if she leaves feeling like her concerns were heard and that her experience was vastly improved, she'll most likely be having a very different conversation on her way out the door.

Building a culture of service excellence means that everyone should see service recovery as part of his or her job. All staff members should be on the lookout for these opportunities to make the amends necessary to gain a lifelong, loyal customer.

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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*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).*