

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.

Don't Lose Them at "Hello"!

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

It takes only about 8 seconds to make a first impression when talking with someone face-to-face, but data shows that it is anywhere between 1/40th of a second to 5 seconds when on the phone! Why the discrepancy? When communicating by phone, all a caller has to go on to form an impression is the voice of the person on the other end. Seemingly "little things" like tone of voice, how fast a person speaks, and enunciation are noticed immediately and form that vital first impression.

When a prospective patient calls your office or health system, you have an opportunity to either forge a strong bond that will lead to downstream revenue across your health system for well into the future—or lose the opportunity altogether. Unfortunately, for some health systems, it's the latter that is occurring, and they may not even know 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 often shocking to the health care 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 them around from one place to another are all common issues we come across.

Are these the types of experiences you want people to have when they contact *your* health care organization? Of course not. And yet, they are more common than you think.

For many health systems, the phone answering process is given far too little weight and attention when considering patient engagement and brand consistency. We often hear things like:

- "We did training!" (Okay, but *when* did you do the training—and how often? This should not be a "one and done" task.)
- "Everybody learns about this during orientation." (Okay, but Jane has worked with you for 15 years – does that mean that she's heard nothing about phone interaction expectations since she was initially onboarded?)

- “This is just really common sense!” (Really? You’d be surprised!)

What we consistently find is that training, if conducted at all, is rarely linked back to quality assurance methods and rarely utilizes a competency-based, skill-building approach with ongoing coaching and quality assurance.

That’s unfortunate, because the failure to engage prospective patients is costly. Our research has shown us that 35 percent of callers are not likely to call back again. The Beryl Institute’s whitepaper, *It’s Not a Call – it’s a Customer* (2007) reported that if somebody abandons a call that has gone unanswered, 75 percent of them will not call back. Capturing those prospects and turning them into patients represents an average of about \$14,000 in downstream revenue over 12 months, according to Beryl. Multiply that by the number of calls (aka *opportunities*) you may be missing, and you’ll find that your lost revenue can quickly grow rapidly. In an increasingly competitive environment, where patients have more choices for care than ever before, you don’t want to let those calls go unanswered—or risk creating a negative experience for those who get through to one of your employees. That first contact is your brand in action.

In our comprehensive phone training package, [You’ll Have Them at Hello](#), we provide content and materials to train the front line staff on the essentials while helping managers hone coaching skills to make the front line training stick. Our train-the-trainer approach helps you create a solid, self-sustaining training. The online learning platform is a resource for managers to access additional training materials and recordings to keep skills sharp.

Leaders need three essentials to make training stick including:

- Set the gold standard and make sure everyone is properly trained on those standards. That means more than a one-time effort, or even a once-a-year effort. It means ongoing training, education and access to resources that will help to ensure the interactions your staff are having with patients, and prospective patients, are based on a solid foundation.
- Coach for the gold standard behaviors. If you’re not out there monitoring how calls are being responded to, and how callers are treated, how do you know what’s happening? When you’re getting complaints from your doctors or prospective patients, it’s

almost too late. You want to make sure you can catch any issues yourself, as soon as possible, and correct behaviors.

- Form coaching habits that really shape success—having a good balance of constructive feedback as well as recognition. Daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly practices will keep everybody on their toes and provide an opportunity to reinforce great behavior, reinforce the standards and make sure that the training sticks.

If you missed our [September 12 webinar](#), “Phone Training that Sticks – 3 essentials every healthcare leader should know,” we [encourage you to listen to the recorded version of the presentation](#). It covers the most common flaws that we’ve seen across thousands of calls that we’ve analyzed.

The bottom line is that a single phone call may be the only opportunity you have to impress and engage a caller. Don’t let that opportunity pass you by!

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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.