

The Patient Experience Post

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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.

You Talkin' to Me?

4 keys to keeping customer service front and center

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

You know that customer service is a top priority for your organization. You probably have a group of dedicated employees—the customer service “warriors”—who also know that customer service is of utmost importance.

But what about the rest of your organization? What about those frontline employees who may not see themselves as directly involved in customer service initiatives or those support employees who may not even feel directly connected to your customers?

Losing touch with your employees can be one of the biggest obstacles to sustaining a vital customer service culture. And when employees aren't engaged, all the best customer service intentions can be inadvertently sabotaged.

The key to keeping customer service at the top of everyone's priority list is communication. Your customer service team should appoint a communication leader who will be responsible for orchestrating all communications related to customer service. All good communication starts with a plan. When you're communicating about customer service, it's crucial to build in the elements of timing and accountability. For those who have multiple priorities, sometimes customer service falls off the list.

In developing your communication plan, make sure to plan ahead at least three months into the future so that you're not scrambling at the last minute for something to talk about. Plan out what you're going to communicate, who's going to do it, when it's going to get done, how it's going to get done, how it is tied to the organizational mission, vision, and values, and why it's important to your overall customer service strategy.

Lack of planning for communication, coupled with an enthusiastic customer service team, can result in multiple disjointed tactics that can sometimes confuse the audience.

And when you're crafting your plan, remember these four keys to keeping customer service front and center:

1. Communicate everything
2. Communicate in context
3. Communicate often
4. Communicate distinctively

Communicate Everything

When it comes to feeding a thriving customer service culture, what should you communicate? The short answer is *everything!* The longer answer is *everything in context of your overall goals, mission, vision, and values.* There is an art and

a science to communication within complex organizations. You want to keep information front and center but don't want to overload the audience. This makes it all the more important that your messages are tied back to the mission, vision, and values.

Don't think of communication as an isolated task. Communication crosses over between virtually every aspect of your organization but is closely connected between all the elements of your customer service initiative. One message may cross over between the measurement team, the recognition team, and the standards team.

Build employee trust in the process by sharing patient satisfaction scores, no matter if you have reached your goals or not. If you have reached your goals, communication can take the form of celebration.

There aren't too many employees who will find themselves outside of the communication loop when there's a free pizza day on the calendar. And if their boss is the one in the hairnet serving up the treats, all the more reason to have seconds. However, it's important to use the opportunity of a celebration event to reinforce the customer service message. Sincerely thank employees for their efforts and use the moment of their engagement to teach them about how vital they are in the customer service equation.

It's especially important, if a little more difficult, to be completely upfront in your communications if you haven't reached your patient satisfaction goals. If you have SWAT teams working on action plans for specific patient satisfaction goals, now is the time to tap their resources. Recognize a SWAT team of the week by sharing their goals and progress with the rest of the organization. This keeps all employees in the loop and has the bonus effect of acknowledging the efforts of the team members. A message such as this is a prime example of communication touching more than one element of customer service. It touches on measurement, as well as recognition, while spotlighting internal best practices.

If there are specific employee groups who are falling short of goals, it might be time to remember that the most effective communication is a two-way street. Send the SWAT teams in for some informal information gathering with the affected groups.

There are many communication opportunities that you can use to keep the customer service message front and center. Can different departments mentor one another by passing on lessons learned from process changes or service recovery efforts? Is there an employee who has been mentioned by name on more than 25 (or whatever number you choose) positive surveys? Is the organization willing to give everyone an extra hour of vacation time if all patient satisfaction goals are met for a specified period? Opportunities abound for getting employees to talk about their customer service efforts.

The primary goal in communicating customer service initiatives within the organization is to ensure that no employee can say, "I didn't know anything

about that!” or, “What does all this customer service stuff have to do with my job?”

Communicate in Context

Remember to tie customer service back to the strategic plan, mission, vision, and values. Many organizations create department bulletin boards depicting goals and current progress toward those goals. It’s great to have a global view of the organization’s goals, but make sure that your bulletin boards offer a “local” (department) slant in order to keep your staff feeling connected. Use the boards to spotlight your department members who are actively serving on SWAT teams, and show how their efforts are moving scores. Feature your department associates who have been recognized for stellar performance. Post the most recent kudos from patients or other customers.

By keeping these boards relevant to the people in that particular department, you stand a better chance of getting your message absorbed and remembered. This would be a good time to mention that these department bulletin boards and other customer service communications don’t have to be worthy of a Pulitzer Prize. Many times, customer service communications can be held up because the organization is waiting for its communication professionals to formulate all of the messages and tactics. Communications in customer service are best managed by those in the trenches who can communicate most credibly with their co-workers. Have one person who is charged with coordinating all of the communications, but let the members of the SWAT teams and departmental action teams take charge of their specific messages.

Communicate Often

While it’s easy to pinpoint some optimal times to communicate about customer service (such as when patient satisfaction results are released or when an employee reaches a significant milestone), it’s the day-to-day communication that will keep your employees engaged with and interested in customer service.

“Out of sight, out of mind” can easily apply to busy workers in today’s healthcare organizations. While the majority of them entered their profession to help others, their daily task lists don’t usually contain a specific entry designed to advance your customer service initiatives. That’s why it’s important to make communicating customer service an integral part of daily life. Because the employees responsible for communicating the customer service message are usually busy communicating many other organizational messages at the same time, it’s essential that they have the resources necessary to make customer service a top priority.

This is a great time to utilize members of SWAT teams or other customer service action teams. Each week, assign a different action team to be responsible for sending out at least one communication to employees. These communications don’t have to be works of art; rather, focus on brief, informational “How Tos” or “Remember Tos” that employees can immediately apply to their jobs.

Communicate Distinctively

In order to keep customer service front and center in employees' minds, your communication efforts need to stand out from other organizational information. Customer service initiatives have a great opportunity to effectively take advantage of creative communication tactics. In other words, "hokey works."

- Print your thanks or specific patient satisfaction goals on the napkins you serve with treats at your celebration events.
- Serve fortune cookies with customer service "words to the wise" printed on the fortunes.
- Plaster the hallways with banners proclaiming your success or your goals.
- Send out "bonus checks" in payroll envelopes on a random Wednesday; instead of a cash bonus, they could contain "customer service bucks" good for a dollar off in the cafeteria.
- At shift change, nurses can pass on a key ring containing the "keys to good customer service" to remind each other of their goals.
- Hold a Publisher's Clearing House celebration for an employee who receives 25 positive survey mentions or patient compliments—surprise the employee with balloons, flashing cameras, and a giant check proclaiming "you may have already won the hearts of your patients!"

When it comes to customer service, your communication efforts are limited only by your imagination! Keeping customer service front and center in the minds of busy healthcare employees can be a daunting task. Working out a detailed communication plan can help get them all talking the same customer service language.

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).