

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.

5+ Secrets for Powerful Phone Connections with Patients (and prospective patients)

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Where do the vast majority of your patients and potential patients interact with you? Not in person. Not via email. By phone. That's right; the telephone remains one of the most significant contact points in healthcare. Unfortunately, while significant, it is often overlooked as a crucial part of the patient experience.

Secret #1: The telephone is also often the first touch point that patients have with you. Unless they're coming to you through your emergency department or urgent care, chances are that the vast majority of medical encounters will involve a phone call, whether to set up an appointment or to ask for information.

But, while many healthcare organizations focus training efforts for their switchboard employees, they often fail to realize that the switchboard isn't the only place where incoming calls end up. In fact, patients and potential patients may be calling multiple numbers across your organization. When they do, what kind of responses are they getting? Are those responses consistent both in terms of service level and information? Do all the phone encounters, regardless of the point of entry, live up to your brand promise?

Secret #2: If you are not controlling the standards for how phones are answered at every possible point of entry, you're leaving these experiences to chance. That can be a dangerous proposition.

When we conduct mystery shopping evaluations for our clients, we consider any published phone number to be fair game for a contact. That means any number that is published in the Yellow Pages, White Pages, on your website, etc. If you've listed a number, you've rolled out the welcome mat for consumers to call. They have the expectation that, if they call that number, they will get the service and answers they need. That's a very reasonable expectation. Unfortunately, all too often that expectation is not met.

We conduct thousands of mystery shopping phone calls each year. Our mystery shoppers evaluate each experience by indicating how likely they would be to recommend that healthcare organization and how likely they would be to want to get future care from that organization. How would they evaluate you?

Secret #3: Even if your surveys indicate that your patients are satisfied, callers may feel very differently! Unlike the typical patient satisfaction surveys that most healthcare organizations administer, input from mystery callers are particularly telling because they are coming from people who are not yet your patients. And remember: you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. How many of your potential patients are you losing because of

poor phone encounters? If callers are not happy with you the first time their fingers do the walking, they will keep walking—right to one of your competitors.

Here are some quotes from actual calls that we've done:

"I was left feeling like she was more interested in getting me off the phone than helping me. There is no way I would consider this hospital for my care."

"She was unfriendly, abrupt, and left me feeling unwelcome. Since I was calling the registration desk, I assumed this would be the person I would deal with if I made an appointment. I would not want to deal with this facility at all based on this encounter."

Who is answering the calls that come into your organization, and what impression are they leaving with your callers? If a potential patient calls any of the numbers published for your organization, will they get a consistently pleasant and positive response?

Secret #4: Your metrics tell an important story. Today's phone systems offer the ability to track multiple metrics. If you're not analyzing and using this information, you should be. You need to get a handle on where and when calls are coming into your organization. Most systems help you determine how long it takes before a call is answered and how often and for how long callers are placed on hold. But these systems are typically used for switchboards and don't tell you about the experiences callers have when calling directly to departments. You should also find out how many times callers are transferred before getting the information they need. In addition, you should be monitoring the types of calls and questions coming in to determine how you might better serve patient needs. Understanding this can help you determine when you need to provide staff with more information and training about services.

In the process, though, you need to be careful that you're not measuring and rewarding the wrong behaviors.

Secret #5: You may be setting the wrong goals. We once worked with a large, very reputable healthcare organization that handled thousands of calls a day that was concerned over loss of market share. Their market research indicated that consumers perceived them as very unfriendly. As we started to set up our mystery shopping program, I talked with the head of the switchboard about her department's goal. She said: 'It's simple—our goal is to get rid of people within 15 seconds.' When we talked with the switchboard staff, they used the same expression, "To get rid of callers within 15 seconds." From our observations, that goal was achieving the very results it was designed to achieve. Yes, the calls lasted 15 seconds or less, but the customers felt that the encounters were abrupt, rushed, and often unhelpful. Are your goals driving the wrong behaviors in your organization?

And one final, bonus, secret....

Secret #6: Your first interview for anybody who will be answering phones should be a phone interview. This seems like it should be obvious, but it's not. When I was the manager for an Ask-a-Nurse service, my staff managed 120,000 calls a year. I never interviewed anybody face to face until they had gone through at least three phone interviews. If they couldn't impress me with their tone, inflection, and sincere ability to engage me over the phone, there was no need to meet with them face to face. If you have staff members whose job duties include handling a significant amount of phone encounters, consider conducting the first interview by phone. During the call, you can assess their phone skills.

The bottom line is this: it's not rocket science, but there are so many subtleties that can make or break a phone experience for your patients and potential patients that you need to ensure you're not leaving anything to chance.

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.

Invite Baird to speak at your next leadership development event! To learn more about the [Baird Model for Service Excellence](#), employee engagement workshops, or to sign up for her FREE newsletter, write to info@baird-group.com.

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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).*