

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.

Service Recovery: 5 steps for making things right

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

We've all had bad customer service experiences at hotels, restaurants, airports, and, yes, even healthcare organizations. But the real test of service excellence comes when a bad experience is swiftly and honestly addressed and turned around.

When a customer complains, you have a brief window of opportunity to make or break all chances for satisfactory resolution and, ultimately, loyalty. What does it take for true service recovery?

The fundamentals are fairly simple, yet the most common challenges are threefold:

1. Training
2. Empowerment
3. Consistent execution

I frequently see healthcare providers just skimming the surface of true service recovery by offering a gift or token to an angry customer. The intention may be a sincere desire to compensate the customer for their inconvenience or trouble but the effect is often perfunctory. Offering a gift or token is not service recovery. In fact, dropping the issue there is a missed opportunity.

Service recovery is an opportunity to create raving fans, but, at the same time, it offers the chance to evaluate what processes or systems led to the issue in the first place.

There are five logical steps in the service recovery process:

1. **Anticipating** customer needs
2. **Acknowledging** their feelings
3. **Apologizing** and owning the responsibility
4. **Offering alternatives**
5. **Making amends**

Anticipating means understanding customer expectations at key points along the experience pathway. If we have a clear idea about what the customer expects at each point along the experience pathway, we can anticipate and prepare for them. When we fail to understand and manage the expectations, dissatisfaction results. The key to success is being able to anticipate the customers' needs at each step and strive to ensure that processes are in place that will meet and exceed their expectations.

Service recovery begins the moment we recognize that expectations are not met. At that point, it is vital that we **acknowledge** the problem and the customer's feelings. Remember that perception is reality. This is not the time to argue and explain your position. It is the time to accept responsibility for

acting on the customer's complaint.

Most of us learned the importance of saying "I'm sorry" as young children. Those two words can often diffuse anger and bridge an emotional gap between two people in a wide range of situations. An **apology**, as simple as it may seem, is an important step in moving the situation away from the negative and into the positive, action-focused arena. An apology is not an admission of guilt. Many people in medical settings are hesitant to apologize for fear of looking like they have done something that could result in a law suit. Not so. You can safely apologize by saying, "I'm sorry that happened."

Offering alternatives whenever possible is a method for helping dissatisfied customers regain a sense of control. Rather than telling customers what they can't have, focus on options for what is possible. Put them back into the driver's seat.

Making amends is a means for righting a wrong. It can be as simple as making a sincere apology, sending a follow-up letter, or may include a small gift or token of appreciation. Unfortunately, I find that many healthcare organizations mistake these tokens for real service recovery. I have seen several hospitals create "service recovery kits" consisting of gift certificates and other "perks" prepared to appease disgruntled customers but miss the real opportunities to change systems and operations in order to prevent future occurrences.

Use the information to drive change.

Keeping service recovery logs can help to identify opportunities for improvement. Be sure to record date, time, department, nature of the complaint, and parties involved. Be sure to record contact information from customers who made the complaint. This will allow you to contact them and delve further into the situation if needed. Gather the data from service recovery logs from all the departments. Summarize and find the common denominators and use the information to set goals and make changes.

I frequently find organizations that keep logs of complaints but don't make effective use of the information to prevent further problems. The key is to mine the information for hidden opportunities. These opportunities are revealed by identifying patterns and trends revealed by the information. Ask questions about the trends. Are they most common at certain times of day, day of week, shifts, and units? What systems may be contributing to these trends? Use this information to drill down into the root causes.

Most organizations do not prepare staff adequately for these two steps, resulting in further customer and employee dissatisfaction. When staff do not feel confident about handling customer complaints, their job satisfaction suffers and customer satisfaction plummets.

Essentials of service recovery:

1. Examine the customer experience pathway and identify the expectations at each point along the pathway.

2. Anticipate the key issues and needs at each point along the pathway and create processes and systems that ensure that needs are met and exceeded.
3. Educate staff about expectations and engage them in anticipating customer needs at each point along the experience pathway.
4. Train staff in communication skills for handling dissatisfied customers, including acknowledging and apologizing when dissatisfaction occurs.
5. Provide staff with options and support for making amends to customers who have encountered disappointing experiences. Make sure they understand what options they can offer and who can assist them in dealing with dissatisfied customers.

Service recovery is important in creating a culture of excellence.

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).*