

## The Patient Experience Post

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## Six Hair-raising Statements that Make Customers Run to the Competition

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Have you ever had that sinking feeling that comes over you after saying the wrong thing at the wrong time? Often referred to as sticking your foot in your mouth, the sensation is, unfortunately, part of the human experience. Filtering your statements before opening your mouth is a great cure for foot-in-mouth disease.

It's one thing to filter your own thoughts before speaking but quite another when you overhear a colleague say something that could easily shatter patient confidence in the organization. At that point, unfiltered or even inappropriate remarks go beyond socially embarrassing and become professionally damaging. This happens more often than you might think. When damaging remarks are made, customers are often so put off by the statements made by an employee that they choose not to say anything but rather take their business elsewhere.

In the business of healthcare, where our patients trust us with their lives, everything our employees say is being judged and filtered through the ears of the patient or family member who is often in a vulnerable state. One employee tossing out a seemingly harmless excuse or remark can cause a customer to take her business elsewhere and convince her friends and family to do the same.

As you read through the following statements that make senior leaders cringe (and customers run to the competition), reflect on whether or not they might be heard somewhere in your organization.

### 1. "That's not my job."

This hair-raising statement is sometimes a knee jerk response for busy healthcare workers. Pick up trash as they're passing through the lobby? Not my job. Escort a patient to the lab? Not my job. Ensure that the patient has a smooth, efficient experience from the time she walks in the door? Not my job. Another form of saying it's not my job, is telling a patient, "You're not my patient."

Employees who are stuck in the "not my job" rut may soon find themselves without any job. Senior leaders can help foster a sense of ownership among all employees so that they all feel a responsibility for the success of the organization. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to model it. Make sure your employees see you picking up trash, escorting patients, and working to ensure an optimal patient experience, and they may begin to see these things as being everyone's job.

### 2. "That's the policy."/"They' say I have to do it this way."

The employee says, "I know it's a hassle to answer all these questions, but they say I've got to ask you everything. It's the policy."

The patient either hears, "It's a hassle for me to ask you these questions too. There are many things I'd rather be doing than listening to your list of health concerns," OR "This organization is more rule centered than patient centered. They control everything, and the employee is powerless."

Us vs. Them (UVT) rears its ugly head in many of these situations. By removing themselves from situations and abdicating responsibility, employees convey that they are helpless against the administration ogre and, thus, helpless in serving the patients' needs. Even if this isn't their intention, it further erodes the patient's confidence in that particular employee and the organization as a whole. And if that employee is the patient's primary contact with the organization, that patient might ask himself if he wants to return to a hospital where it seems that employees care more about policy than they do about the patients.

### **3. "That was the other shift/department."**

Blaming another shift, department, or employee is just one more responsibility-dodging tactic that some employees use. These employees like to think that they single-handedly deliver the best care for the patient in spite of everyone else's incompetence. But they are only emphasizing that there is a lack of teamwork and respect for other staff. Again, the customer is left feeling uncertain about the care he will receive due to the lack of teamwork.

### **4. "Don't expect much from Dr. 'X.'"**

Sometimes employees go a step farther than blaming another shift or department. They let their frustration show and end up eroding the trust that patients have in their physicians and their healthcare organization. Imagine a patient or family member asking when they can expect to see the physician only to be told, "We never know when he'll show up. And when he does, he's in and out so fast we can rarely get him to focus on anything." Or how about a patient who is trying to make an appointment with a doctor, only to be told, "Don't expect to see him before 9:00 a.m.; he's always out surfing until then."

Among all of these hair-raising statements, this one has the most potential to frighten senior leaders and patients alike. Senior leaders hear their employees blatantly eroding trust in their teammates and providers. Patients, on the other hand, hear that their doctors are too busy or disinterested in them, which is an open invitation to check out the competition.

### **5. "We're short staffed."**

Think about the best dining experience you've had. Presumably, service ran smoothly, your server anticipated your needs, and your food was perfectly prepared. On the surface, the experience ran like a well-oiled machine. Odds are that behind the scenes, your server was covering for a co-worker who called in sick, the cook was missing an important ingredient, and the dishwasher was backed up. But you knew nothing of this. That's because the staff is totally focused on providing you with a great experience, regardless of their own turmoil. Their behavior remains customer centered.

So why do our employees sometimes feel that it's appropriate to spill behind-the-scenes details to their patients? The patient expects (and deserves) to receive quality care regardless of whether or not you're short staffed or short on supplies.

The service experience should run smoothly in all circumstances, with the patients knowing nothing of what's happening behind the scenes. Complaining to the patients about staffing is another effective way to erode their trust in your organization.

#### **6. "You should see what's wrong with this other guy!"**

A lab tech breezes into a patient's hospital room with a cheery smile. As she prepares her tray, she starts chatting, "I'm really glad to see you, Mrs. Smith! I've just spent half an hour in the room next door. That guy took forever to produce a urine sample!"

From that point on, Mrs. Smith isn't totally focused on her own needs. She's worried about what the tech will say about her in the next room.

Even when employees think they're speaking in general terms about patients, their other patients view it as a betrayal of trust. It doesn't have to be as blatant as this example either. Nurses chatting at the nurses' station can be heard by patients and their families. Patients can hear employees at a registration desk describing other patients.

It's natural for patients to think, "If that's what they're saying about the other guy, what are they saying about me?"

Patients don't necessarily express their concerns about these statements to the employees who make them. Think about it, if you were already in a vulnerable position, how likely would you be to confront the person who is making you uncomfortable?

What patients will do, however, is express their discomfort to others. If you're lucky, they'll start with your service recovery process, and you'll have an opportunity to reestablish your organization's relationship with them.

Most of the time, patients won't take that official route. They'll tell their hair-raising stories to their friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, and, thanks to the advent of social media, to the entire Internet. And then they'll ask for recommendations for another healthcare provider, all before you even know anything was wrong.

As you can see, it is what you don't know about your service experience that could be hurting you the most. Every minute of every encounter, your patients are judging the credibility of your brand, your commitment to confidentiality, and the quality of your patient care.

It's time to tune in to what your employees are saying and help them learn to filter their remarks through the customers' ears before all your patients are running to the competition.



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Phone communication is an essential part of the patient experience and is often the first part of the patient experience. In just seconds, your patients are deciding if you are friendly, knowledgeable, concerned, and willing to help. In fact, research shows that after just a 2-minute phone encounter, patients are clear about whether or not they would return to your organization or recommend it. Patients rely on phone encounters to make appointments and seek clinical advice. Other callers rely on phone encounters to gain vital information about a loved one. In both situations, it's important that you create a positive, trust-building experience. To engage your staff in essential phone skills, look toward the tips and tools in [You'll Have Them at "Hello": Phone skills that will WOW your callers every time](#). For only \$199, you'll receive the following: the video recording, presentation slides, a transcript of the recording, a participant guidebook, a moderator guidebook, a quality assurance tool, and additional handouts! This session is also available as a live training workshop.

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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.