

The Patient Experience Post

Healthcare's Resource for
Service Excellence
February 2016



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.

Why You Shouldn't Be "Teaching to the Test" When Trying to Boost Patient Satisfaction Scores

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

"Teaching to the test" is a phrase used in education to refer to the common practice among many educators who tailor their instructions to focus on what students will find on the many standardized tests they're required to take. It's a practice that has been widely vilified and, recently, [education advocates have called for an end to test-based teaching](#).

Healthcare professionals should do the same. While teaching to the test is being vilified in education, healthcare organizations are adopting the practice more frequently.

Lately I've been coming across more and more examples of healthcare organizations attempting to "teach to the test" when it comes to the patient experience. The desire to improve patient care is one thing—and a good thing—but gaming the CAHPS system by exhorting staff to use specific words and phrases from the questions patients will later be asked is *not* a good thing. In fact, many patients question the attempts.

Here are some recent examples:

- During a recent mystery shopping project, we heard back from a number of the mystery shoppers about a hospital that had taken all of their whiteboards and written along the top: "Our goal is to provide very good care." The mystery shoppers, almost without exception, questioned why the hospital wouldn't strive to provide exceptional care. We knew that Very Good was the top box on their survey tool. They felt that if they kept repeating very good care and stressing very good care on the white boards, that patients would subliminally adopt their language and their thinking. They're teaching to the test, but leaving the patient wondering about marginal goals.
- In another hospital, hanging from the ceiling throughout their ambulatory center were little banners with the word "Always" on them; another thinly veiled attempt to game the system.

My question: why not focus on changing the culture rather than trying to change people's minds? What I'm finding is that, instead of doing the tough work around changing culture—which *is* tough work—they're teaching staff, instead, to try to change patients' minds about their care. To me, that borders on deception.

Ever since value based purchasing and HCAHPS emerged on the scene, healthcare professionals have been really stressing what to do to improve specific elements of survey responses; they're "teaching to the test" to improve their scores.

This started innocently enough, I think. For example, early on discharge instructions were a significant area of focus. Nursing staff would meet with patients and explicitly tell them something like, "I'm going to give you your discharge instructions now." It's important for patients to know that they're receiving instructions they will need to follow once discharged. It's also, of course, a dimension on the HCAHPS survey. When I hear leaders tell me that staff is expected to use the word "always" during every discussion with patients I feel we have reduced their behavior to the car salesman who blatantly asks for a score of 5 out of 5 so he can get his bonus.

Let's focus time and attention on promoting behaviors that will earn top box scores and then leave the grading up to the patients.

How about hiring for compassion and empathy traits and then teaching our staffs to be great communicators? If we focus on the right things, the scores will follow. Trust me on that.

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.

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

Copyright Use

Want to use this article in your e-zine, newsletter, or on your Web site? You may, as long as you include the following statement:

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.