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Before and After Hospitalization: Eight Ways to Ensure a Positive Patient Experience

Much has been written on how hospitals can strive to create a positive experience for patients when they are a captive audience in the hospital. But not much thought is given to what should happen before and after the start of a patient relationship. HealthLeaders online contributor Anthony Cirillo offers eight tips to help hospitals build loyalty and maintain strong relationships with patients before hospitalization and after.

Buyers often lament about how soon they are forgotten after a sale. Think about purchasing a car. So much up front energy goes into convincing people to buy, but little is done after the sale to assure that those customers become loyalists who buy again and tell others. Companies that cultivate loyalty cultivate lifetime customers. Think Harley-Davidson, Apple, Southwest--their customers feel as if they have a proprietary interest in the company and that their concerns and ideas will be acted upon. These companies communicate with customers before and after the sale. Communities of customers come together to share ideas, and loyalists get sneak previews of products and even share ideas on how to design those products. Of course, healthcare is a different beast to tame. One thing to bear in mind is that hospitals face the daunting task of marketing something that is unwanted. There is a clear disadvantage from the beginning; for this reason, it's even more critical that the hospital interaction experience be superior. As the saying goes, you only get one chance to make a good first impression. Think what you will about how people choose their hospital. Much is being made of shopping on quality, but statistics show that few consumers actually choose their hospital that way. Price shopping is coming, but is not here yet, and once it arrives people still are unlikely to shop on price alone. Fred Lee's book, "If Disney Ran Your Hospital" offers a different perspective. He says that when all is said and done, the perception of a hospital is determined not just by the clinical outcome, but by the whole experience with the healthcare institution. There has been much written on how to ensure a great experience when patients are a captive audience in the hospital. That is extremely important, since the expectations you set in your marketing campaigns certainly must be met and exceeded. But little is written about what should happen before and after the start of a patient relationship. What you do at those points in time can help you exceed the expectations you set. These eight tips can help hospitals build relationships and keep awareness strong before the person becomes a patient, and maintain the connection after they leave the facility. **Before admission**

1. **Assign an ombudsman to each patient** Hospitals can be confusing and scary. While it is great to have an advocate in the patient liaison office, hospitals would be well served to take it one step further. Assign someone to be a patient's ombudsman—essentially, someone to hold their hand--before they step in the door. The ombudsman can call before admission to go over logistics and facilitate any specific needs the patient has. Upon arrival at the hospital, the ombudsman can meet the patient and family, visit often during the stay, be there when the patient is escorted to the curb for discharge, then communicate with the patient afterwards and facilitates any needs. There is already an ombudsman model in place. National media coverage has given credibility to the trend of medical tourism, where U.S. patients actually shop for international care. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organization accredits international hospitals; U.S. and British-trained physicians work at these facilities. Besides offering care for a tenth of the price, these facilities offer unmatched customer service on a personal level. Ombudsmen are a routine part of that experience.
2. **Connect to communities** Support groups tend to come into play after hospitalization and during recovery and further treatment. Facilitate the connecting of people who have had particular procedures with other patients about to undergo the same procedures. Have people self-select to participate to avoid any privacy concerns. The patient can elect to contact someone if they desire.
3. **Connect to information** Develop a secure patient portal on your Web site that serves as an extension of the ombudsman. Hospitals are starting to develop these, particularly in terms of facilitating payment and viewing balances. Use it also as an opportunity to educate people, offering specific information that picks up where the general health information on your site leaves off. In other words, include information about specific procedures as well as information about recovery and rehabilitation.
4. **Tell them what it costs** St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, Mo., has taken price transparency to a

new level. Consumers can call to learn specific information about costs. Customer service representatives look at the primary procedure that is being performed and tie it to all ancillary procedures that will be done. They review the negotiated rate for the caller's insurer, then look at the caller's deductible and how much is left, arriving at a figure that is based in fact. This kind of service creates a lasting impression.

After discharge

1. **Give them appropriate discharge information** A recent study in Mayo Clinical Proceedings revealed that a significant number of patients discharged from hospitals were unaware of vital information about their diagnosis and follow-up care. Sixty-two percent could not explain the purpose of their medications; 58 percent did not know their diagnosis. Hospitals need to facilitate better communication with patients, recognizing and addressing language and cultural differences. Verbal and written communication need to be in terms patients understand. Treatment plans must be customized to fit the person's lifestyle. Give people what they need and connect them to the proper resources to assure a great recovery.
2. **Follow up by phone, not mail** While there are routine discharge phone calls placed by hospitals, few hospitals conduct customer satisfaction surveys over the phone. Statistics show that most hospitals mail out a survey and hope that it comes back. By having a third party call, you not only boost your participation rate, but you open a dialogue that is sure to glean more information more quickly—which means the hospital can act upon that information quickly. One of the hallmarks of companies that cultivate loyalists is their ability to turn on a dime to meet customer needs.
3. **Bring the ombudsman back into the picture** Have the ombudsman complete the cycle by checking in on the patient. Give the customer satisfaction results for that patient to the ombudsman so they can report on fixes and explore unresolved issues. Then follow with phone calls once a quarter. Keep the relationship alive.
4. **Train accounts-receivable personnel** As the consumer-directed healthcare phenomenon takes hold and consumers pay more out-of-pocket, accounts receivable will not just be talking to insurers, but consumers as well. The sometimes unpleasant exchanges that occur between insurers and hospitals cannot be repeated between accounts receivable and former patients. You need to make personnel aware of the public relations impact of what they do and provide customer training. Incorporate best practices from companies that routinely deal with consumer collections to assure a best possible experience.

Building before-and-after scenarios takes some work over time. You can start by selecting and training the right volunteers as ombudsmen. But to truly embrace this, hospitals need to rethink the whole notion of customer service and create first a position, and then a department, that helps create the best experience possible for the patient. It is more than concierge medicine; it is a cultural change in how care is approached. We live in an experience economy. Mass customization surrounds us. This philosophy has to be embraced and endorsed by senior management. If you accept and believe that creating the best experience fosters brand loyalty and further accept that word-of-mouth marketing is your best advertising, then finding the budget to support what is suggested should be easy. Not to sound too simplistic or cynical, but blow up your advertising budget and devote some of those resources where the rubber meets the road. Start with a philosophy that permeates the organization, build a culture, and the budget will come. Create one seamless positive experience for the patient--one that will be remembered and recounted to others. Word of mouth--buzz marketing--will quickly spread. The patient will be predisposed to use your services again. And those that were told of the great experience will have positive brand associations with your facility that can help tip them in your favor in times of medical need.

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