

Opinion

Patient Satisfaction: What Makes It Easy to Achieve?

Like most frequent fliers, I'd rather not fly as much as I do. Nor do I enjoy observing the various inconveniences that airline companies regularly foist upon their customers. I have accumulated enough observations over the years that my conclusion has reached statistical significance: The airlines have finally succeeded in disappointing—if not enraging—every single customer, every single flight. Interestingly, the inconveniences for the traveler result from policies that are convenient for the airline, such as charging bag fees, canceling flights, boarding by row number, and assigning you a middle seat if you complain too much. It's easy to see the parallels with health care, as well as the dangers that await us in the patient (aka customer) service arena.

Start with the patients. They'd rather not need to see doctors as much as they do. Besides, according to an American Hospital Association study,¹ the public feels "a growing impact upon themselves and their families in terms of reduced access, higher cost, lower quality, the competence of caregivers, and a trend toward impersonal care." (Sounds like an airline passenger!) Then, the health care institutions themselves are becoming increasingly complex, and all of them are feeling the squeeze of lower reimbursement and increased accountability (e-paperwork and red tape). So they begin to institute policies for their convenience

in the name of cost savings, and guess who gets inconvenienced? Pretty soon we have the health care airline.

Fortunately, that's where the parallel stops.

We in medicine, and particularly in ophthalmology, have a secret weapon: We enjoy what we do. We are fortunate that our patients pay us to do what we love—and they even help us increase our enjoyment. Let me explain. When I see early postoperative glaucoma patients, they are often skeptical of their progress, since their vision and intraocular pressure may not be where they think it ought to be and where I said beforehand it should be. One day, I stumbled upon a wonderful rejoinder. I just say, "It takes time to get where we want to be, but you've made me happy with your progress so far." And the patient almost always says, "Well, if you're happy, then I'm happy." Happily, I move on to the next patient appointment. Even the occasional complicated patient or surgical complication isn't enough to rain on this parade. But it goes beyond just enjoying what we do; in fact, most of us ophthalmologists have a passion for our work.

Organizations renowned for their excellence in customer service spend a lot of money trying to instill passion for the work in their employees. They know that customers sense that passion and respond positively to it, especially when they have been treated

individually and with respect. And so it is important that this passion is displayed with every customer, every day. Once again, we ophthalmologists are lucky—we don't have to manufacture our passion for our work. All we have to do is to make sure that our own passion is contagious to those who work on our team. So like Ritz-Carlton and the Mayo Clinic, hire people who can share your passion. They will do what comes naturally, with every patient, every day. Patient satisfaction can't help but follow.

¹ Reality Check: Public Perceptions of Health Care and Hospitals. Chicago: American Hospital Association; 1996.



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