

Customer Satisfaction: Six Strategies for Continuous Improvement

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Approximately 75 percent of healthcare organizations in the late 1970s and early 1980s tried to implement guest relations or service excellence programs; many organizations even tried these initiatives more than once. Yet most outcomes were mediocre at best. Several reasons explain the failure of these earlier programs: (1) many leaders thought that employee attitude about service would improve if service standards were drafted and distributed for employees to follow or if front-line staff were sent to training programs; (2) some organizations did not provide their managers with the skills, tools, and support needed to improve services or processes; and (3) a general lack of understanding that in order for an organization to have a spirit for service, it needs a system for service, and that system does not happen by accident.

Now, more than a decade later, many organizations are initiating these programs again. A majority of healthcare managers are actively engaged in customer-service-improvement activities, hoping to have learned from past mistakes and to finally achieve their desired results.

This is the first in a series of articles that will explore ways to make that customer-service-excellence dream a reality. These articles will feature the methods employed by successful healthcare systems to create impressive customer service and achieve customer loyalty. We begin the series with the "six strategies for success"—the foundation for a systemwide service effort to create and sustain a culture of continuous improvement. We hope that all of you, regardless of your past efforts or current initiatives, find new tools and approaches to apply in your organization.

THE SIX STRATEGIES

1. *Raise awareness.* Make sure that everyone in the organization (i.e., employees, physicians, and managers) understands why the system is focused on improving service, how this focus is related to the strategic plan, and what the system is expecting to achieve specifically. This "state-of-the-union" message must be delivered in a variety of print materials and face-to-face forums; however, the message must not be delivered once and then forgotten. Each staff meeting and/or event is an opportunity to share the current initiatives you are pursuing and the results you are getting. In short, customer service needs to become an ongoing agenda item for every meeting and forum.

2. *Set service expectations and standards of behavior.* Everyone needs to know exactly what to do to achieve the system's customer-service goals; this means that managers must set clear service expectations and standards of behavior, beginning with defining "excellent service."

Earlier programs failed because either no service standards were established or the standards were not specific. Managers need to involve staff in identifying internal and external customers and discovering what matters most to these groups. Questions such as the following are appropriate to ask any customer:

- "What do you want and need most when you come into our department or call our service?"
- "What do we need to do to make that happen?"
- "What would it take to truly impress you?"

The next step is to turn the answers to these questions into service expectations.

Make sure that everyone understands that standards of behavior are important and that they relate to their jobs. Take one behavior at a time (e.g., first impressions, providing explanations, or responding to calls). Focus on this behavior for three to four months; create clear standards (e.g., nurses must respond to call bells within two minutes), scripts, and protocols; and make sure that everyone follows the guidelines all the time. This is the accountability portion that puts teeth in the promise. After all, talk is cheap.

3. *Identify and eliminate barriers and obstacles.* Policies that do not make sense; procedures that get in the way; and rules, norms, and protocols that make satisfying customers difficult all need to be eliminated to successfully improve service. Everyone needs to learn simple ways of using their energy and creativity to get rid of these barriers once and for all.

However, not everything is a systems or process problem. Teams and relationships also need to be developed and supported. Lack of teams and relationships is the biggest roadblock in many organizations, without which backbiting, fingerpointing, and blaming are common occurrences. Although many employees in these types of organizations accept this reality and believe that it cannot be changed, we disagree. Lack of teamwork is unhealthy and interferes with customer service. We need to have common goals and understand how the work we do fits with everyone else's work. We need managers to insist on great teamwork and eliminate the issues and barriers that create competition and fragmentation.

Eliminating barriers can feel overwhelming, however; so what can systems do to get started? You can narrow the field by focusing on one behavior at a time and asking "What's in the way?" Next, place the issues and problems into four categories:

1. Excuses: get over it.
2. Easy to fix: get on with it.
3. Hard to fix: prioritize and make a case for it.
4. Can't be fixed: learn to live with it.

This technique will not solve every problem, but it will send out a clear message that you and your team want to do what it takes to succeed.

4. *Learn and develop skills.* Clearly, employees at all levels have opportunities to learn new skills related to service excellence. Communication skills such as listening, interviewing, and providing information and problem-solving skills such as dealing with difficult people and managing conflict are examples; but these skills need to be developed in ways that will achieve results. The old-style approaches to training just will not work anymore. We need to learn how to facilitate new techniques that get learning out of the classroom and into the workplace. Self-directed learning and peer coaching can become the foundation for skill building, as managers discover ways to bring staff together for short, targeted, just-in-time learning sessions. Again, these learning needs should be tied into the specific behaviors that are being developed. Managers also need to develop their service-management skills specifically, as improving service is not business as usual for most managers.
5. *Listen to your customers.* Measurement of customer satisfaction can be a powerful way to improve service if the feedback is not focused on punishment. Managers need to help staff hear, first hand, how they are doing. For this feedback to be effective, however, it must be tied to specific targets and goals and needs to be frontline driven. Employees must identify whom to "talk" to; discover ways to collect and share the information; and, most important, determine how to use the feedback to celebrate and course correct.

Actually, this is an area of great controversy because some managers think that external customer-satisfaction surveys are enough; but this is not true. Micro improvement efforts need input that is targeted, specific, and in real time. We also need to find out what customers experience as they go through the system so we can respond appropriately to problems as they occur, rather than wait until after the fact when making amends may be too late. If mistakes are an opportunity to learn and grow, we should stop thinking of service recovery as damage control. Instead, we must view it as an opportunity to improve performance.

Ways to support this shift are (1) visiting all inpatients, (2) asking targeted exit questions, (3) getting customers to fill out simple comment cards, and (4) watching or shadowing customers as they go through the service cycle. These simple efforts provide valuable information. Employees must learn ways to respond to complaints and be trained and empowered to right a wrong. This is a departure from the traditional approach, which relies on service "experts" to handle problems. We believe having experts handle concerns is frustrating to

customers and wastes a wonderful opportunity to involve and engage staff in acting like owners.

6. *Reinforce and support continuous improvement.* The real challenge is keeping the energy, learning, and improving alive and going. Managers are finally understanding that each staff meeting and/or event is an opportunity to teach, learn about, and reinforce the importance of good customer service. Infuse all your forums with ways to celebrate successes, learn from experience, and build team spirit.

Asking everyone to think about someone whom they would like to thank for making their jobs easier, allowing them to share positive customer-service stories, and reading letters from customers are some ways to recognize everyone for their efforts. Thank you notes from bosses and peers also help them feel good about their contributions.

Developing a strong foundation for service takes time and dedication. It is not simple, and it is not about doing one thing but doing many things. Is it worth it? Will it produce results? We think so. We believe that paying attention to these six strategies will help you make a difference not just in the short term but over the long haul.

For information about these strategies, and to obtain a free service audit related to them, please contact Gail Scott at 215/887-1021.