“That Magic Moment When Your Patient Knows You Care”

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Picture a comedy on television. One of the characters is in a diner and asks the waiter for something that is a little different than what is on the menu. Will the TV waiter smile and say, “Of course sir, I’ll be happy to bring you exactly what you requested.” Or will the TV waiter stare at the customer, roll his eyes, walk away and leave the customer feeling a little foolish for having made the request?

Television has made an art form out of the concept of “attitude.” Being polite just isn’t funny. TV laughs come from “eye rolling” and snippy comments. So it’s not surprising to find that some of this “attitude” has transferred into real-life customer service situations.

There is a lot of emphasis placed in the eye care profession, as well as in other professions, on how to provide an exceptional customer/patient experience. Of course it has to start with staff members and doctors having the necessary technical training. But it can’t end there. Unfortunately very few offices make the effort to take staff and doctor training to the next level. That next level is learning how to make sure that patients feel comfortable, safe and valued.

Over time, staff members and doctors fall into patterns in terms of communication with patients and the delivery of our services. One of the breakdowns in customer service occurs when a staff member or doctor hears a question or request they don’t expect. There are three ways to respond to surprising information:

1. Ignore the request and steer the conversation back into what you always do. This may be done intentionally or unintentionally.
2. Tell the patient you cannot honor their request because of office procedure or policy.
3. Ask the patient additional questions in order to better understand what they are concerned about. Find a creative way to solve their problem.

Practices that stick to #1 and #2 are missing an enormous opportunity. That’s because there is almost no competition for practices who can deliver on #3. Most practices don’t take the time to really “hear” their patients, either because the practice is busy or because they don’t know how to do it. But if you deliver on #3, watch for that magic moment when your patients realize “This practice is really different!” Those are the patients who become patients for life.

So why doesn’t the type of service in #3 happen more often? It may be because the customer service breaks down when an employee hears a request that is a little unusual. Instead of

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asking questions to find out a little more about what the person may need, the assistant gives the patient the “TV look” that’s somewhere between “What now?” “What do they want this time?” and “Whatever.” Because the employee is uncomfortable, he or she may even walk away in order to get more information or find someone else to help that patient. But they often leave without explaining to the patient that they are still trying to help. All the customer knows is that the person they are depending on to solve their problem just walked away.

I was in a wireless telephone store recently with a phone problem. After a few minutes of working on my phone, the young man helping me was still stumped. Without saying anything to me, he took my phone into a back room. Was he asking someone for help? Was he taking my phone apart? Was he reaching for his phone as he was going into the back room so he could take a personal call or was he calling a superior for assistance about my phone? Was this going to take five minutes or half an hour?

**When you are helping a patient with a problem, it is important to keep the patient informed as to what you are doing to fix the problem.** If a patient walks into the office complaining about a bill, the receptionist should not just take the bill and walk into the business office. The receptionist needs to let the patient know that he or she is taking the bill to show it to the bookkeeper so that the bookkeeper can explain it to the patient. If the receptionist simply disappears into the back office without telling the patient what is going on, the patient may become angrier. Yet, it is not uncommon for staff members to walk away without telling the patient what they are doing simply because the staff member feels awkward around an angry patient.

A few days ago I was in a restaurant and ordered iced tea. I like my tea only slightly sweet so I asked the waitress to fill the glass three-quarters with unsweetened tea and one-quarter with sweetened tea. Now I should mention that the restaurant was almost empty and the waitress was not busy. The first thing she did after I gave her my request was just look at me. Then she sort of nodded and walked off. Was she getting my tea or did I totally confuse her?

In fact, my tea arrived exactly as I had requested. But the waitress had missed an opportunity for providing a top-shelf customer experience (and a bigger tip). She had made the mistake of making me feel as if I had imposed on her, when in reality my request was rather simple. She could have smiled and said, “Wow, we don’t get a lot of requests like that but I’ll be happy to make your tea up just like you asked.” Or, when she returned with the iced tea, she could have said, “I hope that this tastes just the way you like it.” I got my tea, but I didn’t get friendly service. The first rule of customer service is "make the customer feel that you value him or her." And the second is "don’t make the customer feel like he or she is imposing on you."

A weak link for many offices is the “hand-off” of the patient from the doctor to a staff member. The complication here is that there are three people involved in this interaction—the doctor, the patient and the doctor’s assistant. It’s vital that the doctor and the staff member are not only polite to the patient, but are also polite to each other! Patients can sense tension between doctors and staff members and it makes the practice look very, very bad. Maybe the staff member is annoyed because the doctor is interrupting them while they are trying to complete

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another important task. This is a case where the staff member must try to become an “actor.” The doctor and the practice will lose credibility if the staff member makes it obvious that he or she is being imposed upon. Show your best face to the patient and then work on this problem at an office meeting.

For a doctor, a proper “hand-off” means that the doctor first introduces the patient to the assistant (unless the patient has previously met that person). Next, the doctor informs the assistant, in front of the patient, as to how the assistant will help the patient. After the doctor is finished, it is important that the assistant acknowledges the doctor’s request to both the doctor and the patient. This type of statement might be “Dr. Mathis, I’ll be happy to help Mrs. Smith with the insertion of that new multifocal contact lens.” Hearing that type of communication makes Mrs. Smith feel well taken care of.

Every once in a while we run into staff members who don’t properly acknowledge a doctor’s request. Occasionally this may be due to hostility, but more often it occurs because a staff member does not realize they do this! For example, the doctor may walk a patient over to an assistant and ask her to perform fundus photography. The staff member doesn’t respond to the doctor, but takes the chart and mumbles to the patient “follow me.” The correct way to handle this is for the assistant to say to the doctor, “Sure, Dr. Martin, I’ll take those photos for Mrs. Jackson right away.” And then the assistant should turn to Mrs. Jackson, and say, “Mrs. Jackson, please follow me and we will get the pictures taken.”

Patients will feel they are getting great care in your office if you make them feel important. Listening to their questions and their needs makes them feel important. Acknowledging their requests makes them feel important. Letting them know what steps you are taking to follow through on what they want makes them feel important. Do everything you can to make your patients feel important and do anything you can to never belittle your patients. Don’t ever let them feel that they are imposing on you. That’s how you build a great experience for your patients, and that’s how a practice builds loyal patients.

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Select the option that best answers the question.

1. The exceptional customer/patient experience starts with ___________.
   a. a big smile
   b. having the necessary technical training
   c. lots of staff to provide services
   d. none of the above

2. When hearing information that surprises you, what is the best way to respond?
   a. ask more questions and find a creative way to solve the request
   b. ignore the request and act like you did not hear what they said
   c. explain why you can’t honor the request
   d. steer the conversation back into what you always do.

3. When helping a patient with a problem, you should ____________?
   a. find someone else to help the patient
   b. quietly walk away to not anger patient further
   c. tell the patient what you are doing to solve their problem before you walk away
   d. steer the patient back into what you always do
4. Which of the following is not part of the proper “handoff”?  
   a. doctor informs staff member as to how the assistant will help the patient  
   b. staff member acknowledges the doctor’s request to both the doctor and patient.  
   c. the staff member takes the chart and says “follow me.”  
   d. doctor introduces patient to staff member

5. Patients will feel they are getting great care in your office if you _______.  
   a. make them feel important  
   b. break procedures to provide a service not normally provided  
   c. explain why you can’t honor their request  
   d. provide refreshments while they are at the office

6. When does the “magic moment” with exceptional customer service happen?  
   a. when they pay for their services  
   b. when they make their next appointment  
   c. when they realize “this practice is really different”  
   d. when they realize “this practice is really busy, it must be good”

7. If the patient requests something unusual, what would be the best way to handle the request to provide exceptional patient service?  
   a. act like you did not hear the request  
   b. ask additional questions to gather more information  
   c. find someone else to help with the request  
   d. enforce the rules that the practice has established

8. What is considered the exceptional customer service “weak” link in many offices?  
   a. payment for services  
   b. pre-testing procedures  
   c. the “handoff”  
   d. not enough staff

9. The “next level” of the exceptional customer/patient experience is making patients feel ______________.  
   a. comfortable  
   b. safe  
   c. valued  
   d. all of the above

10. Patients feel important when you ___________________________.  
    a. listen to them  
    b. acknowledge their requests  
    c. let them know what steps you are taking  
    d. all of the above