

Front office: Asset or liability?



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reader take-away

- Learn how “moments of truth” at the front office can make or break patients’ impressions of your practice
- Learn what does and doesn’t give a positive impression in your waiting room
- Learn what front-office employees should know to make patients feel welcome and respected
- Learn how to see the practice from the patient’s point of view

Sign in.

Be seated.

We’ll call you when we’re ready for you.

Have you ever been greeted by signs like these at a doctor’s office? Well, I have. And I’m not happy about it.

I am a patient. So are you, your friends and your family. And each day, in thousands of doctors’ offices across this country, that is how we are greeted.

“Doctor’s office, please hold.” Ever hear that on the phone? I have, and so have you.

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Your front-office staff and your reception area represent the first and last impressions that patients will have of your practice on any given visit. These impressions are lasting, and in many cases they shape the patients perception of the doctor. It's critical to your practice's success that these be good impressions.

Competition is tougher today than ever. Patients are better informed and better educated. They have become consumers of health care and are your customers. (Throughout this article I will refer to patients and customers interchangeably.) Nowadays patients often arrive at appointments with pages printed from the Internet describing their health conditions, listing tests they should have and recommending medications to have prescribed.

It used to be that being good was good enough. Not today. Being good is generally accepted as the price of admission. To separate your practice from the rest, you have to be the best — as defined by your customers.

Moments of truth

The front office of every practice overflows with “moments of truth” just waiting to happen. What is a moment of truth? It's a point in time on which much depends: when your receptionist answers the phone, when the patient checks in, when the patient checks out, when the patient looks

for something to read, when the patient needs help completing a form. These are just some of the moments — and just in the front office. Your practice is filled with these opportunities to make a difference. Your role is to ensure that each and every one is a positive experience.

As customers, we all have the same basic needs. We want to feel welcome when we enter an office and that relevant staff understands our needs. We want to feel important and comfortable. And we want to be kept informed.

None of that seems too difficult, but apparently it is. As I travel from office to office, I consistently see medical groups that fail to meet these basic desires.

Creature comforts

Let's talk about creature comforts. When your patient comes to your office, s/he is generally ill or injured. Have you sat in your reception room chairs lately? Are they comfortable? Are they clean? Do you have the seating arranged for conversational groups, with accent lighting and tables? What's the temperature in the waiting room? When was the last time you checked?

If I'm a patient, can I get a drink of water? Are the restrooms clean and accessible? Suppose I want a cup of coffee? And suppose the doctor is running late (unheard of, I know). Is there a courtesy phone for me to use?

Spend some time in your reception area. Look and listen. Speak with your patients. Listen to what they have to say. Do you have a television blaring or do you play gentle background music? What does your reception area *sound* like?

And what about those dead plants in the corner? Time to replace them. If you put in artificial plants, don't forget to clean them.

Make sure that your magazines are both current and relevant to your customers. Provide a variety of subjects and make sure they are neatly racked. Perhaps place a binder in the reception area with complimentary letters from patients (remember the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and its privacy rules) or offer free brochures about the practice, diseases treated by your

Reasons to give good service? Let's count the ways

There are many reasons to provide excellent customer service in a medical practice:

- People deserve to be treated with courtesy and respect.
- It feels good to treat people well.
- The office atmosphere will be more harmonious when patients receive excellent customer service.
- Satisfied patients are more likely to return and to refer others.
- Excellent customer service reflects on the person providing the service.
- It doesn't take any longer to treat a patient well than to treat him/her poorly.
- Studies have shown that organizations that treat customers well are more successful financially in meeting their vision and in employee job satisfaction.

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physicians or upcoming community events of importance to your customers.

Train staff to give top-quality service

How do you make a customer feel welcome? It's really not difficult. Train your receptionists to acknowledge patients when they come to the front desk. When I went to see one of my doctors recently, the receptionist not only greeted me with a smile but also knew my name. I felt welcome and important. I was a happy camper. That is the kind of moment of truth every practice hopes for. Ensure that it happens in your practice through ongoing staff training and recognition of positive events.

Staff training is key to ensure that your front office is an asset and not a liability. Train employees in phone techniques, fundamentals of customer service and how to deal with difficult personalities and situations. They should have complete knowledge of the practice management system's functions required for their position, such as scheduling, patient look-up and billing. An investment in staff training will provide a strong return. To many of your customers, your front-office staff represents the "face" of the practice.

Ensure that employees are informed about health plans in your area. Patients generally don't understand their health coverage. "How much is my co-pay?" "What is coinsurance?" "Why do I need a referral?" Set your practice apart by your staff's ability to assist customers as they navigate the insurance maze.

Have your staff learn to say "please," "thank you," "you're welcome" and "I'm sorry." Each of these phrases will go a long way toward ensuring positive moments of truth.

Watch how your patients exit the practice. Do the check-out personnel thank patients for selecting your practice? Do they ask if all a patient's questions have been answered and if s/he has all of his/her prescriptions and instructions? Remember, this is the last impression customers have of your office. Ensure that visits end on a high.

When working with a difficult patient, acknowledge the situation. Saying "I'm sorry" costs nothing and can quickly diffuse

a volatile state of affairs. Train employees to move these discussions into a private area immediately, working with the customer to solve any problems.

Did you ever watch fish in a fish tank? That's a bit like what the front desk looks like behind those sliding windows. Train employees to be sensitive to this situation. Nobody wants to come into a practice that feels like a morgue, but on the other hand, nobody wants to sit in a waiting room and watch the staff yucking it up. Moderation is the key.

Establish a policy to keep your patients informed. Train your staff to be honest. At times physicians will run late, and front-office employees need to deal tactfully with the situation. A group I worked with recently provided a card to each patient that said, "Your time is valuable. If you have not been called within 20 minutes, please notify the receptionist." If your doctor often runs late, allow staff to be honest with patients.

In another practice, staff informs patients at sign-in if the doctor is running late. Patients have the opportunity to wait or reschedule. I'm a more satisfied customer if you keep me informed and provide me with options.

Telephone, voice-mail techniques

Telephone procedures can set your practice apart. Does your staff answer the phone in three rings or fewer? Train employees to handle multiple lines and multiple calls. Teach them how to place customers on hold and how to assist customers calling in. If your practice uses an automated attendant, is it user-friendly, or do I have to be an electrical engineer to secure a prescription refill? Consider a rotating series of on-hold messages rather than bland "muzak" or silence. You can use on-hold messages to promote new physicians, new services, prescription refill policies, etc. Used wisely, the recordings can be an important piece of your practice development program.

What's your policy on returning voice-mail messages? Make sure calls directed to voice-mail are not emergent and that the caller knows when to expect a return call or when a prescription refill will be called in to

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the pharmacy. Front-office staff who communicate effectively with customers will reduce calls from patients inquiring when their needs will be met.

Get the patient’s point of view

Take the time to see your practice as your patients do. Consider implementing a patient survey at least twice a year. Spend time in the reception area asking patients about the level of service they receive. Ask referring physicians their impressions of your practice. Call into your office — the main number — while you’re out. Assess how employees handle your call.

Consider enlisting the services of a mystery shopper. Organizations provide these services for a fee, although you can probably enlist the aid of volunteers. Friends, family or even a local college marketing class may help. Have the mystery shopper go through the entire process, from call-in to registration to a follow-up visit. While this may take some time out of a physician’s schedule, the information will be invaluable for practice development.

Your front office is the first place moments of truth can occur. Make sure they are positively memorable. 

Make your staff part of continuous registration improvement

- Consider the registration process an integral function of your billing operation.
- Involve registration staff in billing meetings and written communications about billing practices.
- Base part of employee performance measurements on registration error rates because accurate registration information will positively affect your practice’s cash flow. Obtain this information from edit reports from your electronic claims transmission and/or the denial codes printed on the explanation of benefits.
- Make sure new staff training for registration personnel includes a two- to three-week rotation in the billing office so they can understand their integral role in the billing process.
- Create a registration “certification” process. All staff members who register patients must pass a proficiency test to ensure that they are qualified. Don’t limit this process to new employees; ensure proficiency annually for all staff who register patients.
- Count, over a 30-day period, the number of claims that come back and need reworking because some piece of patient information was not gathered or updated at registration. Share this information with staff.

Source: Woodcock E. 2003 *Mastering Patient Flow: MORE Ideas to Increase Efficiency and Earnings*, 2nd ed. Medical Group Management Association:168.