

White Paper: Patient Retention and Customer Satisfaction By Martha Hendrix

Medical care, and the way it is delivered today, is changing and with that change is the way clinics are run. Traditionally, American medicine has largely been an industry of small private practices or large hospital-based institutions. Most doctors cared for their patients in small, privately-owned clinics; however, with the reduced fee structures by insurance companies, increased overhead costs of operating a clinic and the general desire to have someone deal with the ever-changing healthcare landscape, many private practice physicians are moving to hospital or health system positions.

According to a March 2010 *New York Times* article⁽¹⁾, as recently as 2005 more than two-thirds of medical practices were physician-owned – a share that has been relatively constant for many years. But within three years, that share dropped below 50 percent, and analysts say the slide has continued.

Whether the physician is in a small private practice or they are a part of a larger corporate system, one constant remains the same and that is the need for patient retention. To this we can add the need for marketing within the clinic and externally of the clinic. By effectively and efficiently addressing these key factors a clinic can be more successful which in turn can benefit the clinic and those working within the clinic. Outlined below are standard keys to success with additional thoughts you might find helpful concerning patient retention which can turn to positive customer satisfaction.

Patients

- First, and foremost, focus on patient care
- Listen to the patient
- Collect patient email addresses and cell numbers for easy communication
- As a reminder for the patient, call/email/text patients the day before appointments
- Offer a payment plan, such as Care Credit, to assist patients with out-of-pocket expenses
- Educate patients on the importance of preventative care and yearly checkups (this can be done via a monthly/quarterly newsletter)
- Implement an aggressive and accurate recall system in which to remind patients to have regular checkups and follow-up visits
- Send birthday cards to patients
- Conduct surveys after patient appointments to determine satisfaction (Survey Monkey is an easy way to do this)

- Become a source for health-related information by sending out electronic newsletters about seasonal health topics, i.e. allergies, flu shots, nutrition information, etc. (Constant Contact has an easy interface)
- Work with companies/suppliers who understand your customer-value focus. (As an example, for those needing wound care supplies, Advanced Tissue has a patient-retention program which encourages patients to return to their clinic for follow-up visits.)

Staff and Office Organization

- Recognize the office staff is as critical, if not more critical, than the physician(s) in the success of the business
- Create a streamlined office system to minimize patients' waiting time
- Track no-show appointments to determine if they occur at a certain time or on a certain day and then make adjustments accordingly
- Make certain your office is easy to find and accessible
- Follow up on messages left by patients in a prompt manner
- Encourage team-building activities such as summer family picnics or participation in local charity fundraising activities (American Heart Association, Komen Foundation, etc.)
- Electronic medical records and electronic patient check-ins are critical; however, don't lose the personal front-line connection with the patient.
- Create incentives by allowing the office staff to benefit from increased profits generated by the office
- Have a clinic web page where key physicians and clinicians are featured so your patients can "get to know you." Inexpensive web sites can be developed easily on sites such as WIX and GoDaddy.
- Monitor electronic physician-rating sites to make certain you know what your patients are saying about your clinic.

Understand what your point of difference is and promote to that difference

Most successful businesses (and your clinic is a business) have a point of difference. Here are some examples of effective points of difference:

- Your clinic is open late one night a week
- You have a guarantee of wait times for patients
- You have a co-promotion with a local health club
- Your clinic staff is visible/active in the community

There are additional strategies for business growth in the clinic

The traditional business model for a clinic is strictly patient care, which should always be the first line of focus. However, today's clinic has opportunities to increase revenue by creating a retail experience connected to the clinic. Below are suggestions that you can use to see what might fit best with your clinic and patients:

- Use retail products to grow your practice. These products are not covered by insurance but rather are lifestyle, health, skin, apparel, or nutrition types of products sold at the clinic that your patients could benefit from

- Keep revenue records and determine what is profitable within your clinic and what is not – then focus to build the profit areas of your business
- Co-Market with other healthcare professionals to offer health screenings at quarterly Wellness Fairs. For some clinics this type of promotion has been an effective way to be involved in the community while gaining new patients

Don't lose sight of your mission. Of course, the first focus should be on patient outcomes and patient satisfaction, but running your practice as a business will benefit both patient and clinic.

(1) http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/26/health/policy/26docs.html?_r=0&pagewanted=print

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