

BEYOND PATIENT CARE

Making a case for exceptional customer service

Patient-centric strategies have moved from patient satisfaction to brand awareness to patient "affinity" or "attachment." What drives patient attachment in today's marketplace? The key is in rising above the competition to create Exceptional Customer Experiences (ECE).

In today's marketplace, the competitive advantage goes to the organization or individual who understands that differentiation is the direct result of superior patient interactions, which leads to better, evidence-based patient care, enduring patient relationships and increased sales.

Organizations build brand affinity by developing a long-term strategy focused on captivating the visceral response ECE. This product/service relevancy, however, must be accompanied by value-added services. Healthcare organizations are struggling with the ever-shifting landscape of attracting and retaining patients. How can these organizations or physicians differentiate themselves from their competitors?

Brand awareness and satisfaction are first-surface determinants for attracting new patients to an organization and the subsequent desire to do business with that organization or group of providers. Research has shown that satisfaction leads to forgettable experiences. Attachment leads to loyalty. Physician leaders need to look beyond the traditional marketing methods used to attract and retain patients. Improving profitability rests on becoming a patient-centric organization.

ECE organizations understand that the keys to developing enduring relationships and improved profitability include a well-defined, differentiated service promise; clearly communicated marketing messages and consistently delivering exceptional customer experiences. Loyalty comes through attachment-giving the patient a compelling reason to return for more service.

Service is invisible and is always consumed

within context. The physical refers to sights, sounds, environmental cues; emotional deals with feelings, thoughts, unconscious responses to external cues and internal scripting; behavioral relates to actions, activities, process of care. Successful organizations understand the principles of ECE attachment:

- They design each experience in detail. Nothing is left to chance.
- Every transaction is an attachment point that impacts on the relationship.
- Communicating differentiation based on meaningful attributes
- Unwavering attention to exceptional customer experience must be embedded in value system of the organization. Linking the exceptional customer experience to one's brand creates a competitive advantage.
- Experience Ecology frames the delivery of the exceptional customer experience via the physical, behavioral and informational spheres of influence. Four key areas to consider:
 - What are the customer's perceptions? Value-added service equals awareness, trust, credibility and responsiveness.
 - How is business conducted? Take into account organizational practices, processes, policies and problem resolution.
 - How are patient interactions valued? Exceptional customer experience must be as an organizational value.
 - What is the marketing message? It must resonate with customer needs, quality and consistency.

Successful health care organizations understand that brand differentiation requires delivering the exceptional customer experience at all three levels of attachment-the individual provider, the service line/delivery site and the organization. A patient-centric philosophy must drive business decisions.

The leaders of the organization must have a

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by Margie Weiss and Steve Tyink

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passion as well as a long-term strategy for developing the exceptional customer experience. Patient-centric organizations readily embrace the increased intensity of patient expectations. Patients and referring physicians expect immediate responses to scheduling requests (getting a appointment, setting up further testing or surgery schedules) as well as timely, consistent and accurate communication (diagnostic reports, prescription refills, callbacks on information requests). Patients and referring physicians expect access to providers via electronic formats, such as e-mail, Web sites, downloading forms and electronic health records.

DEVELOPING BRAND AWARENESS

By definition, a brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. According to the American Marketing Association, a brand may identify one item, a family of items or all items of that seller. Branding is a combination of the message sent by the seller and the patient's perceptions and expectations of the products or service.

Brand awareness and attachment develop at multiple levels—with the system/organization, the site/service line and the provider level (individual physicians, associate practitioners, etc). Brand awareness measurements (such as estimates of ad exposures for print or billboards) and satisfaction surveys only provide limited information related to traditional marketing strategies and attention to the typical details of a patient encounter. And these traditional measurements reinforce ineffective marketing in today's competitive healthcare marketplace.

What needs to be measured at each level?

- **Brand awareness.** Does the patient know we exist?
- **Satisfaction.** Are we providing service/products that satisfy our patients' needs/wants/desires/expectations?
- **Attachment.** How tightly is the patient tied to the organization/service/provider/product?

The brand experience is driven by what happens at the point of contact between the customer and the company. If exceptional customer experience is the differentiating point, then the people, place and personality of the organization must align with the brand. The most critical factor in delivering the exceptional customer experience is the organization's internalization of the brand.

The whole organization must live the brand—all the time—at every attachment point. In most healthcare organizations, this requires pushing the boundaries for personal and pro-

fessional growth. In CECE organizations, what is behind the brand makes the brand. Only radical change is ever visible. Innovations in care delivery must be relevant and valued by the customer.

The decline of a brand begins with a slide in the level of perceived differentiation from the competition, especially with opinion leaders. Regardless of whether it is word of mouth referrals from friends and family or referrals between healthcare providers, if the service cannot be differentiated by quality or cost, then the exceptional customer experience must stand out.

Brands need to be managed as an instrument for growth and profitability. Branding is a long-term strategy and must be a driving value of the organization. Brand equity (the financial value of a brand) is built on consistent delivery of a differentiated promise for the exceptional customer experience.

Health care organizations sometimes struggle with allocation of marketing resources and determination of marketing strategies for each level of brand awareness/attachment. Providers seek recognition at a personal level for their expertise; delivery sites/service lines seek brand identity through facility upgrades and new service offerings; organizations seek brand identity for the organization as a whole. An ECE organization establishes clear expectations and marketing strategies for patient-centric attachment at each level.

The competitive advantage goes to the organization or individual who understands that differentiation is the direct result of superior patient interactions—the exceptional customer experience. That can equal better patient care outcomes, satisfied patients and enduring patient relationships. It also leads to increased brand awareness, increased brand attachment and increased brand equity. The latter then leads to increased sales and increased profitability.

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