

**Customer Complaints Are Great -  
– Keep Them Coming!**

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Good customer service is the lifeblood of any healthcare system. Customers today expect to be instantly supplied and for healthcare managers on the ball, higher customer expectations can provide the motivation for new ideas, approaches, and performance.

It is estimated that for every customer complaint received, there are at least 26 complaints that are never expressed. Furthermore, a customer with a complaint is likely to tell 20-25 other people about his or her complaint (Wysocki 2005). Therefore, it is imperative that every healthcare leader implement an effective Managed Complaint System.

As healthcare leaders we tend to believe that if there are no complaints, then there are no problems. Or worse, if there are complaints, we are not ready to hear the feedback. There are typically two views of complaints. The most common is that complaints are to be avoided at all costs. Individuals holding this view may believe they could not do anything wrong and never make mistakes. If something goes wrong, it is not their fault; it is an accident, or someone else's responsibility. The other view is that a complaint is a golden opportunity to make things right. Viewing the complaint in this manner may provide insight that will help you improve healthcare management in the future.

## **Measuring Customer Satisfaction**

It is fundamental for any well-managed and responsible organization to have clear and well-publicized complaint handling procedures. In my research, I found that many healthcare organizations favor a “service recovery” approach. Service recovery is used for improving the patient's experience when his or her expectations were not met (Kirby 2003). Service recovery is an excellent tool, however, it is usually initiated after a customer has expressed dissatisfied service.

The best way I have found to measure customer satisfaction is by talking to customers on a one-to-one basis – I ask for their input, good or bad. I found that there is no such thing as a silent customer. The customer information I receive is more accurate than responses to customer satisfaction surveys. In my experience, customer satisfaction forms are extremely vague and do not express what the customer is really feeling. Customers verbalize their opinions more openly when you sit down next to them and ask what your organization can do to improve their quality of care. If you approach customers in the waiting room and ask them to comment on your service, you will receive an instant opportunity to act on their advice. This may be a challenge for some healthcare leaders because one must exhibit courage, patience, and humility. However, if done consistently, you will see a golden opportunity to improve your organization on a day-to-day basis.

The first step an organization must take when dealing with complaints is to fix them immediately. For instance, when a healthcare provider is running late I often walk into the waiting room, apologize profusely to each patient, and ask if I can accommodate him

or her in any way. How mad would you continue to be if you ran into a situation like this?

Yet most healthcare leaders detest complaints.

Often, customers will judge a healthcare facility by what they do, not by what they say.

All healthcare facilities should have an appointed Patient Contact Representative (PCR).

The PCR is responsible for reviewing and addressing patient complaints. Unfortunately, many PCR's have little or no experience in dealing with customer complaints. Often, the complaint is resolved, but no changes are made within the healthcare system.

The PCR and/or the healthcare manager can succeed at patient satisfaction with plenty of training and practice. By initiating patient complaints, the healthcare manager can gain an advantage because he or she is willing to make changes. Increasing the number of complaints you collect does not mean deliberately lowering quality but cleaning up customer problems that already exist.

### **Managed Complaint System**

By implementing a Managed Complaint System you could double or triple your complaints. This may shock some healthcare leaders, however, no one is perfect, and once we admit fallibility, we gain an advantage because then we are willing to make changes.

When customers complain they want six essential things: to be heard, understood and respected, given an explanation and apology, and action taken as soon as possible.

Even if you are unable to take the action they want, you can provide them with other resources. Referring dissatisfied customers to other resources such as the PCM and/or a healthcare leader usually satisfies the customer until immediate action can be taken.

Complaints may arise under a variety of circumstances in any clinical setting and may be handled more effectively if the concerned staff member adopts the correct attitude and skills. All customer service personnel need to be trained and empowered to respond in a positive manner.

Consider the following customer complaint procedures for handling customer complaints in your organization:

1. Give customers your full and undivided attention: Stop what you are doing and give your undivided attention to the customer. Lead the customer to a private location if necessary. Do not argue with the customer or give explanations. Most complainers feel that no one listens to them. Listen completely without attributing fault and take notes so the customer can see that you care. It is tempting to think that listening means waiting for your turn to talk. However, if you are just waiting for your turn, you may miss key information.
2. Empathize don't sympathize: Exhibit a real understating of what's needed, not a quick "sorry about that". Agree that a problem exists and repeat your understanding of the customer's viewpoint back to the customer. Make sure you can repeat the essential facts to the customer's satisfaction before proceeding further. By restating the situation, you demonstrate that you understand how important this event was to the customer and that you are concerned for his or her well-being.
3. Take full responsibility for your customer's problem: The patient needs to trust you. Do not place blame on another department or co-worker. Remember that you represent your organization and it only makes matters worse by implying another part of the organization is incompetent. Demonstrate your concern

further by stating your intentions to help by saying “I am glad you called this to my attention. I think I can help you.” Remember that you are on their side and working with them rather than against them.

4. Research and resolve customer problems, if you can't resolve them immediately:  
Speed is a critical factor in the customer complaint process and you and the customer should mutually agree on a solution. The resolution must be presented immediately. If this is not feasible and your customer does leave you to resolve matters, the customer needs to believe they are getting a personal service from YOU. Give them your full name, telephone number, and personal e-mail link.
5. Follow through and follow up: Do what you say you will do. It is your responsibility to make the customer relationship a success. Reliability is even more critical here than in the normal situation. Don't promise more than you can deliver, but deliver what you promise.
6. Give an action-based gesture: Mail the customer a handwritten thank you card. If applicable, be sure to tell them that their input was so valuable that it made a positive impact on the way your organization services customers. Call your customers back and ask how they feel about your organization now. Are they satisfied? Is there anything else you need to do to make them happy with their service? Do not mail the customer a reply feedback form. These types of forms are impersonal and the customer rarely sends them back.
7. Conclude and Document: Create a document that contains the customer's full name, address, telephone number, e-mail, date of complaint, the patient's statement of the problem, staff member's statement or response, a description of the action taken, and the staff member's signature and date.

## **Learning from Mistakes**

Carefully devised policies for addressing customer complaints and staff commitment to handling those complaints effectively are crucial. As with all breakthrough strategies, perseverance, monitored adherence, and due diligence to detail are the guidelines for success. An organization is much more likely to gain public confidence if it listens to complaints and moves quickly to resolve them. Don't just say to your team "What went wrong today?" Instead ask, "How did we make our customers feel?" After handling any complaint, always ask yourself two questions:

1. What would have prevented this problem?
2. What changes should I make in our operations to ensure that this does not happen to someone else?

It will not always be possible to satisfy customer complaints or agree to all the terms of settlement that they want. Common sense will dictate what is reasonable or achievable having regard to the organization's policy and resources. Further action may not always be necessary so long as your organization has properly listened to the complaints, understood them, respected them, and provided an appropriate explanation and apology.

## References

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**Bibliography**

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