

Staffing for the Premium Patient Experience

Your employees are key to your strategy.

BY SHAREEF MAHDAVI

When developing a premium patient experience, surgeons need to pay attention to four critical variables: *price* (what you charge); *quality* (as defined by the patient); *experience* (of your patient while under your care); and your *staff* (those individuals responsible for staging the experience). I intentionally use the word *stage* as the action verb used to describe the staff's behavior, as do the authors of *The Experience Economy*,¹ which is a book I highly recommend to any surgeon who wants to thrive in the future. In my previous articles in *Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today*, I highlighted companies that established positions of market leadership via their superior customer experience, rather than the product itself, as their strategy for separating themselves from the competition. This demarcation is indeed a global phenomenon, as illustrated by a recent survey of 240 CEOs from around the world.² The key finding of the report indicated that "the quality of customer service was often the only differentiator" in a world where products and services are increasingly similar.

The concept works just as well in the practice of refractive surgery. Going forward, the patient's experience will become the key differentiator for a practice, especially when you consider that technology and surgical skills are not sustainable ways to make a surgeon and his practice stand out. That is, becoming "a great surgeon who uses the latest technology" is a position that can ultimately be matched by other providers.

How do you stage a great customer experience? Of the four variables listed earlier, the one that is perhaps most critical to your success is your staff, who interact with patients more than you do and thus must be given responsi-

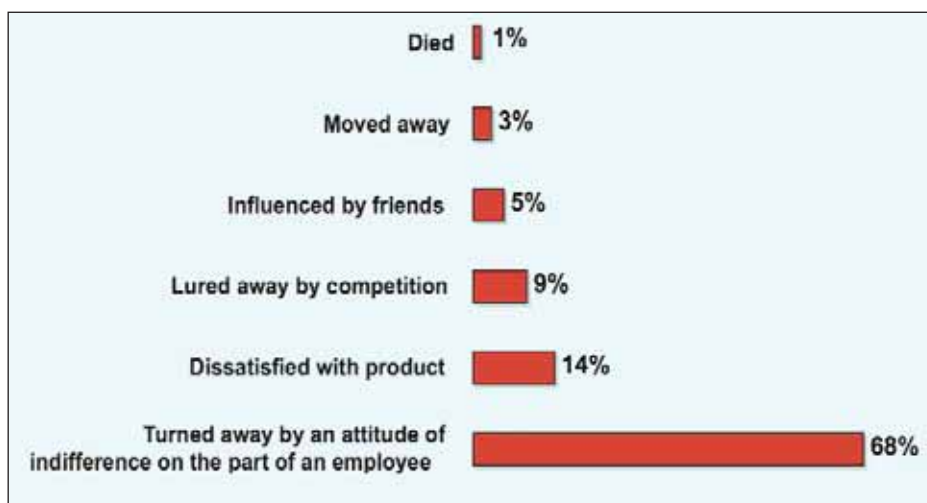


Figure 1. Why companies lose patients.

bility for staging the customer's experience in ways that are meaningful and personal.

KEEP YOUR CUSTOMERS

In the retail world, the number-one reason why companies lose customers has nothing to do with the product or its price. Customers choose to go elsewhere because employees conveyed an attitude of indifference (Figure 1).³ This longstanding truth about customer service often plays out in healthcare. A *USA Today* report on consumers' outlook on medicine showed that fewer than half (38%) of those surveyed acknowledged that their doctor's front office team was courteous.⁴ When taken together, the aforementioned data points are a cause for concern in refractive surgery. Poor staff behavior can undercut all of your efforts to satisfy patients' needs and leave you wondering why a patient either never returned or did not refer others after achieving a successful clinical outcome. Because you do not often witness staff encounters with

patients, you may have little awareness of any problems in your practice. Compounding matters is that, traditionally, only one out of every 25 unhappy customers actually complains; the other 24 go away angry.³

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

Why do refractive practices experience problems with staffing? One reason stems from the selection criteria used to fill positions. Many practices hire based on technical competence, sometimes promoting someone from within (eg, "Mary was good at doing new patient workups; let us move her over to the refractive team"). Alternatively, practices will hire someone because of the experience gained while working for another refractive practice. In a medical retail environment, one should seek to hire for both passion and talent, with more weight being given to the former than the latter. Passion, seen in a person's natural enthusiasm, is part of what we think of as a great attitude. Talent, the skills brought to the role,

EXCEPTIONAL SERVICE IS UNIVERSAL

The Boot Doctors offer marketing, customer service, and employee training techniques to enhance your practice.

By Shareef Mahdavi and Penelope Gleason

One day at the most recent Winter Refractive Invitational Summit in Telluride, Colorado, a colleague and I (Shareef) were touring the town in search of cross-country ski equipment. After visiting four different retail ski shops, we became frustrated that we could not find the gear we wanted.

The fifth shop, however, provided us with an unexpectedly memorable experience. As we entered the Boot Doctors (Telluride, CA), two energetic, happy, smiling people greeted us at the door. We knew immediately that this place was different than the other shops we had been in and out of during our search. There was a great atmosphere in the store that made you feel welcome. We received the equipment we sought and enjoyed a great day of cross-country skiing.

Later, we returned to the Boot Doctors and struck up a conversation with the store's Vice-President of Marketing, Penelope Gleason. I explained to her that I was so impressed with her employees' sales approach that I wanted to invite her to our meeting for a brief interview so that the ophthalmic audience could hear how a different industry handles customers in a positive, constructive manner. Here are some excerpts from that session; you may want to incorporate some of Penelope's customer service and training techniques into your ophthalmic practice.

Mahdavi: Penelope, thanks for taking some time out of your day to speak with us. It was a pleasure meeting you today. We wanted to ask you about your customer service strategy at the Boot Doctors, because my colleague and I got the impression that either everyone in that store was on some kind of happy pill, or else they were doing some things right. Maybe both. Tell us about the employees. How much training do you give your employees?

Gleason: We are a small, family-owned, mom-and-pop shop, and we have some children involved, too. In our case, we have 38 employees, which is quite a lot. We have a high ratio of employees to customer base. That is intentional. We insist, actually, that all employees arrive at the store for training at least 1 month before the winter ski season starts. We have in-house instructions covered over 16 hours; we spread out the teachings so that workers can take it all in. Many of our previous employees return the next year, and we use them to help educate the new staff, which I believe reinforces their knowledge and understanding of customer service as well as helps the new people understand our level of assisting customers and our methods. Furthermore, a representative from every large equipment supplier with which the Boot Doctors does business offers onsite direct training, not only for the new employees to gain knowledge about a specific product, but also to assist our sales staff with sales techniques and customer service.

can be taught and further refined. To find people with these invaluable attributes, one should look outside of ophthalmology or even medicine for skills and experience that can be applied to a practice. Retail sales, restaurants, and customer service centers are some examples of areas where one should seek refractive employees. Successful employees in those environments tend to have the right mindset to bring into your practice.

SINK OR SWIM

It is no accident when you experience superior service and a great customer experience from a business; these usually mean that employees have been formally trained, especially in terms of interaction (eg, greeting and educating customers as well as dealing with unhappy ones). Contrast this preparation with new refractive employees' typical training, which generally consists of pairing them with a current employee or sending them to an orientation within various parts of the clinic. These training tac-

tics are okay but not sufficient. If you want employees to stage positive and memorable experiences for your customers, they need to receive equally excellent training. The antidote to the "sink or swim" mentality is to get professional help from outside firms or individuals that specialize in customer service training. You need only look as far as the manager of a great local business or hotel that delivers to its customers the type of experience you want to stage in your practice.

Formal training does not end with the honeymoon period of new employment, however. All staff who interact with customers should receive regularly scheduled "booster shots" of training, which help bolster morale as much as they do skill (see *Exceptional Service Is Universal*).

DEFINE THE EXPECTATIONS

In many service industries, a checklist replaces a job description. Employers provide employees with an operational checklist for every responsibility that

Mahdavi: One thing I noticed right away was that your staff has a memorable "opening line" rather than the generic "may I help you?"

Gleason: Frequently we will say, "Are you here on a specific mission?" That usually makes people laugh.

Mahdavi: We were, and we thought you were psychic. My colleague and I responded, "Yeah, we are looking for cross-country equipment" and were immediately engaged in a conversation. We thought this experience was great. Tell us how you train your staff about how to deal with angry customers.

Gleason: We have several levels of customer service training. The deeper level is, *the customer is always right, but what to do when the customer is wrong?* I think the returning customers who may have had a negative experience with our equipment, or maybe their expectation was not met, those situations are typical in any business environment. We train our staff about how to communicate with customers with different levels of empathy, sympathy, and listening techniques. From there, the staff tries to translate the situation into a positive experience. For example, when a person returns a product, our goal is to turn that encounter into another sale, if possible. We do have high standards for our products and services, and if a person feels we ultimately did not meet his or her expectation, we try to roll them into an alternate expectation with a new product or service that will fulfill his or her vision.

Furthermore, at the Boot Doctors, we actually perform role

playing as part of our training. Then, throughout the season, when a situation comes up, we have a tag team approach for taking care of that upset customer. We also role-play our negative customer service moments. We mull them over for a long time, thinking of how we could have done better. We walk through the entire conversation and try different responses and methods to fix the situation.

Mahdavi: My experience with Penelope and the Boot Doctors' staff serves as a perfect role model for what I try to convey to refractive surgeons: Hire and train people who are passionate about serving customers, recognize that learning to do it better is a daily habit, and make the customers right—even when they are wrong. Dealing with new skiers just getting started, expert skiers looking for new gear, or angry skiers whose trips were delayed or luggage lost and helping them turnaround and enjoy their vacation is all in a day's work at the Boot Doctors. What they do in that ski shop holds great lessons for what we do in refractive surgery.

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defines a process for customer interaction, similar in concept to a surgical or examination protocol used daily in order to offer consistent levels of quality patient care. Customer service protocols are key in staging an excellent patient experience day in and day out.

“Your staff is the lifeblood of your practice. I firmly believe that the quality of your employees can make or break your success as a refractive surgeon.”

ONSTAGE VERSUS BACKSTAGE

The subtitle to *The Experience Economy*, “Work is Theater & Every Business a Stage,” is directly relevant to the staff’s behavior in your practice. Is it not annoying when you encounter a retail employee discussing personal matters in your presence? Do you not feel “less than” when a hotel desk clerk does not acknowledge you in favor of paying attention to something else? These are examples of backstage behavior that have no legitimate role in the presence of customers. Staff should act as if they are onstage whenever they are in the presence of patients. As when watching a Broadway performance, the audience is never exposed to the activities that are behind the curtain or backstage. That would ruin the show. It is the same way in your practice.

IN SUMMARY

Your staff is the lifeblood of your practice, and I firmly believe that the quality of your employees can make or break your success as a refractive surgeon. The staff’s performance requires leadership from the surgeon in the form of training, motivation, and a passion for taking care of customers. The end result is a customer experience that generates positive lasting memories that last long after the procedure. ■

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