



How to Create a Patient-Satisfaction Survey

Do you know what your patients really think about your practice?

BY JOAN WAHLMAN, BS

Your patients' ability to communicate and share their personal experiences (positive and negative) during just one visit to your office reaches far beyond the following old adage: one happy patient tells four people, but one unhappy patient tells 10 people. Experts on social media believe that its effect on people's daily lives, and potentially on medical practices, is only just beginning.

As a whole, ophthalmologists pride themselves on providing quality, leading-edge care, yet patients' opinions are the true measurement of the quality of service. Today's patients are savvy consumers who will choose another practice if their treatment did not meet their expectations. Surveys are invaluable in demonstrating to patients your commitment to providing quality care and to understanding and meeting their expectations.

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS AT THE RIGHT TIME

When is it best to survey a patient? How often should you conduct these surveys? What do you really want to know? The goal of a well-planned patient-satisfaction survey is not to see how great your practice is doing but to identify areas for improvement. The "right" series of questions will celebrate the positives and identify areas of weakness. Even the smallest suggestions can have a meaningful impact on the daily care of your patients.

The right time to conduct a survey is now. With the advent of instantaneous communication, the traditional annual survey has lost its impact. Nor is it a useful tool for evaluating patients' experiences. If you are committed to quality service, understanding how your patient perceived his or her care during yesterday's visit is imperative. More important, e-mailing a survey within 48 hours of a patient's appointment sends the powerful message



Figure 1. Patient survey alert notice. Adapted with the permission of Smile Reminder.

that his or her opinion matters.

Many online survey programs are available that offer timely solutions for a reasonable monthly fee. Online surveys not only give patients a chance to respond in the privacy of their homes or offices, but responses can be submitted anonymously if they so choose. Typically, these programs allow daily access to survey results, tabulate responses to individual questions, and send alerts (Figure 1) when patients comment on a specific area of care.

It is advisable for your practice's managers to review all survey responses daily. Positive responses can be communicated to the doctors and staff to reinforce a job well done, and problems can be addressed to increase patients' level of satisfaction. As a bonus, gathering their e-mail addresses gives your practice an effective marketing tool with which to improve communication with patients.

LOVE THE CARE. HATE THE WAIT

Patient-satisfaction surveys are widely recognized as tools with which to measure and quantify the quality of



Figure 2. Sample electronic patient-satisfaction survey. Adapted with the permission of Smile Reminder.

HOW PATIENTS JUDGE THEIR APPOINTMENTS

- Accessibility
- Convenience
- Financial clarity
- Education
- Courtesy and respect
- Kindness
- Value

care and service in the health care sector. In order to ascertain how well service is being delivered in key areas of your practice, your survey questions must focus on the patients, not the practice (see *How Patients Judge Their Appointments*).

Limit your questions to those areas that truly affect your care of patients. Questions should be brief and clearly stated, and they should include a place for comments (Figure 2). It is in this section that patients most often express their true feelings about their experiences and make the most productive suggestions. The area for comments also gives patients an opportunity to vent their frustration about key portions of their experience that did not meet their expectations. In other words, a problem exists for this individual. Was his or her wait time too long? Were all of his or her questions answered? Did he or she understand his or her financial obligations?

The survey shown in Figure 2 follows a patient through the entire process of communication prior to, during, and after his or her visit. Negative or identified problems are a golden opportunity for every practice. With instant communication, researching and responding to patients' concerns can transform their impressions of the quality of care they received from negative or neutral to positive. Resolving problems gives your practice a second chance to have a now-happy patient tell the world how great your practice really is.

CONCLUSION

Quality service does not happen by accident. The information gathered from your patient-satisfaction surveys will allow you to structure change in your practice based on reliable market research. It will also enable you to improve your interaction with patients and make your practice or doctors appear more accessible. The result will be happier patients who return year after year and refer their friends and family, all of which will contribute to a strong, financially healthy practice. ■

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