

# COMMIT TO YOUR PATIENTS' EXPERIENCES

A dedication to service builds a connection.

BY JOEL GASLIN

*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

—Maya Angelou



Today's ophthalmology practice faces many challenges that did not exist 20 years ago. Social media, mobile devices, and a changing patient base have combined to create a new landscape.

It used to be that patients arrived at the office, waited around for a few hours, had cataract surgery, achieved a postoperative result between 0.25 and 0.75 D of the target refraction, and accepted a limited range of vision after surgery. Everyone was happy.

Those days are gone. Patients now expect state-of-the-art technology, a spa-like office environment with free Wi-Fi, online access to their records, and immediate responses to their questions. They want to be educated about their options and why you are the best one to help them achieve the youthful vision that they seek.

## CONSUMER ELEMENT

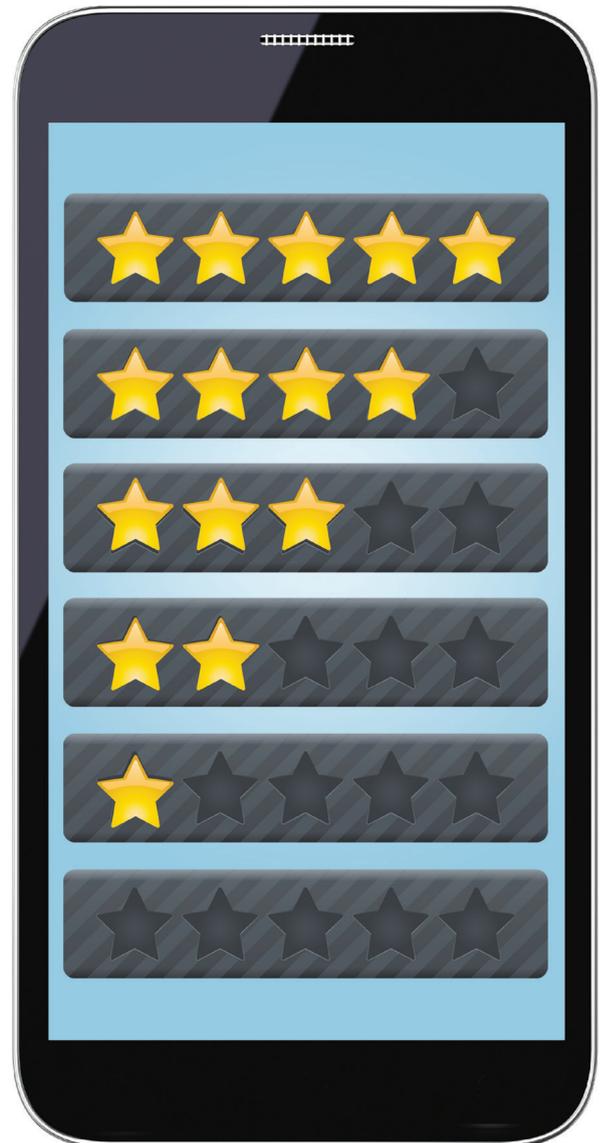
Today, there is a significant consumer element in the practice of ophthalmology. Whether attributable to the success of LASIK, advertising in general, or the rise of the baby boomer generation, this element is here to stay. Patients are becoming accustomed to supplementing their care with an out-of-pocket contribution.

I believe that, one day soon, everyone will view a Medicare or insurance payment as more of a subsidy than an entitlement. What I mean is that people will expect to have options, understand that they are in charge of determining the outcome that they seek, and recognize that freedom requires a personal investment. This is good for our industry.

## LESSONS IN SERVICE

World-class service is the result of a culture. Service is not a department or an event. A short story will illustrate my point.

Not long ago, I attended a technology conference here in Minneapolis, and one of the featured speakers was Robert Stephens,



# SURVEYING YOUR PATIENTS

Patient satisfaction surveys can be an effective tool for creating a positive experience for patients and encouraging future referrals. In order to promote participation, keep in mind the who, what, how, when, and why of patient surveys.

## WHO

Creating customized surveys is an easy way for you to increase participation and gain in-depth information on a particular patient's experience. Vary the survey questions according to the type of patient and his or her journey through the practice. It is OK to duplicate questions relating to global concerns, but avoid asking ones that are not applicable to the individual completing the survey (eg, surveys of LASIK patients would not include questions about the optical shop selection but would include questions about educational materials and ease of scheduling).

## WHAT

A patient's perception of your practice begins to form well in advance of the first office visit and extends beyond the day of the procedure. You can use your survey to source patients and monitor the interactions that occur outside your practice's walls. Order your questions to correspond with patient flow, and use the results to fine-tune operational processes.

## HOW

A survey is only useful if the information provided is thorough, accurate, and representative of your patient population. In order to ensure your results meet these requirements, consider how you present the questionnaire. Some patients are tech savvy and would be highly likely to complete an online survey, but others may not have access to a computer and would prefer to complete a survey through the mail or on the phone. Look at your intake form; does it ask patients how they would prefer to be contacted? If so, use this as a guide for delivering your survey.

Also, eliminate errors and confusion by using one scale consistently throughout the survey. Avoid using technical terms or office jargon that will confuse the patient, and limit the survey's length to no more than 10 questions. A survey that is easy to complete will increase the likelihood that patients will provide accurate information and participate.

## WHEN

The accuracy of survey results can be affected by a patient's state of mind. Immediately following an appointment, when the patient is in a hurry to get back to work or has dilated pupils, may not be the best time to solicit feedback. Provide multiple opportunities for your patients to share their perceptions of your practice. A time that is convenient for them will be more conducive to thoughtful reflection.

## WHY

The purpose of any survey is to identify what is working and what is not. In order to truly effect change, you must track results, report them to the appropriate parties, and be prepared to act accordingly. Whether the feedback is positive or negative, patients will feel more valued if they know their comments were addressed. Likewise, staff will appreciate the opportunity to improve procedures or receive compliments.

Surveys can help you improve your patients' experiences, ultimately translating into better care, happier patients, and increased referrals.



the founder of The Geek Squad. During his talk, Mr. Stephens described a day, shortly after he had sold The Geek Squad to Best Buy, when he was out touring several stores with a team of Best Buy executives, including the CEO Brian Dunn. Being an inquisitive sort of person, Mr. Stephens listened patiently as the team described to him the various duties and departments within the Best Buy stores. What struck him was the giant sign that hung in each store near the back that said, “customer service.”

Mr. Stephens wryly asked, “Is that the only place where people may go to get customer service?” After confused looks were exchanged amongst the team, the response was, “That’s where we want them to go.” He then asked an interesting question, “What effect do you think that it would have on the stores if each one of these people walking around the store with a blue shirt on were trained and expected to deliver customer service?”

The rest of the story is history. Best Buy has gone on to successfully integrate The Geek Squad and its culture of ubiquitous service and emerge as the largest electronics retailer in the United States. I believe that ophthalmologists with a commitment to service can make the same transition and that, to survive, they must do so quickly.

### COMMIT TO YOUR PATIENTS’ EXPERIENCES

A commitment to service builds a connection. Such a connection comes from an experience coupled with emotion (how did what you experienced make you feel). Making people feel good about every interaction with your practice is an important element of the successful service-oriented practice. The people to whom I refer are not limited to patients; caregivers and family members are equal factors in the experience equation, because they hold influence and may actually be the decision makers.

In my role as the vice president of sales and marketing for Sightpath Medical, I travel the United States and visit practices of all sizes and locations. I have found attitude to be the trait that most influences a practice. Positive or negative, attitude is almost always obvious from the minute I walk through the front door. It is also evident in how a website looks, the updates on a Facebook page, and how the phones are answered (or not).

Physicians who do not want to adopt new technology or change how they practice consistently say something along the lines of the following:

No. 1. The technology/new method is not quite ready, and I am waiting for it to get a little better.

No. 2. It slows me down.

No. 3. It is too expensive, and my patients will not pay for it.

Two thoughts come to my mind. First, if any of those remarks are true, how are so many thriving practices exceptions to each of those statements regardless of

location? Second, how would you feel if you heard your surgeon saying any of those statements about your care—especially number two or three?

A perfect blueprint for a service culture does not exist. The implementation of a new, service-based attitude and practice plan is a bit like buying a membership to a local health club. Getting results requires going there and doing the work (see *Surveying Your Patients*). Simply paying the monthly bill does nothing to improve health. In my experience, delivering exceptional service and a world-class experience comes down to three things: people’s attitudes, the execution of plans, and attention to simple little things.

### PEARL

If you are looking for a place to start preparing your practice for the service-based experience economy, use the PEARL method as a way to establish your baseline commitment to service in your practice and position it for the future.

**Perform an assessment.** Objectively evaluate all aspects of service in your practice. Thoroughly evaluate the leadership, staff, facilities, and plans.

**Establish whom you want to serve and how you will define success.** Do you want to be a general, nonreferral-based practice, or do you want to build an OD network? This step will help you to identify the various types of customers that you intend to serve.

**Adapt to what you have learned and the goals you have established.** In my experience, the ability to adapt is central to the practices that successfully implement change at any level. A commitment to consistent and gradual adaptation based on chosen metrics is an effective way to enact positive change.

**Refine.** Keep your eye on what is happening as you begin to make changes. Study the metrics that you have chosen to pay attention to, and think about how you will make adjustments based on what you learn with these data.

**Lead and execute.** Always be on the lookout for new ways to be of service, whether it is the latest way to perform a surgical procedure or a new tool to help your staff stay connected. Your practice should use the opportunity to be of service today as an opportunity to better serve others tomorrow. ■

#### Joel Gaslin

- vice president of sales and marketing, Sightpath Medical, Bloomington, Minnesota
- (952) 345-5511 or (612) 802-9090;  
joel.gaslin@sightpathmedical.com; Twitter @JoelGaslin;  
www.facebook.com/joel.gaslin