

Customer Service Excellence: Do or Die

CARING Magazine October 1997

By Dr. Robert A. Fazzi

“Customer Service Excellence: Do or Die.” If ever a title sounded like an exaggeration, it has to be this one. But is it? Maybe not! Given the new realities of managed care and prospective pay, customer service programs may be the single most important factor in differentiating between agencies that struggle and agencies that survive.

Different Environments, Same Realities

First, consider this. If you are in a high penetration managed care environment, what is the one reality you are facing? You know that to compete and to get managed care contracts, your rates have to be competitive. Managed care organizations won't even talk to you unless your rates are competitive. And if all the agencies competing for managed care contracts have similar rates and meet similar expectations (accreditations, geographic area served, etc), what's going to differentiate you from other agencies to increase your chances of getting a contract?

On the other hand, what if you are in an environment where there is little or no managed care? What if you are simply competing with other agencies that are providing the same services in the same area? How are you going to differentiate yourself from them? And if you are in the private pay field competing against other private pay agencies, what can you do to look different, better, and more appealing than your competitors?

No matter what your environment, if the services, the costs, and other obvious comparative factors are the same, there is only one thing that can differentiate you—dramatically differentiate you—from the other agencies: service excellence, or providing customer services that go beyond what other agencies do to not only meet, but exceed patients' needs and expectations.

The Secret to Customer Service Excellence

In figure 1, the Service Excellence Chart, the “Needs and Expectations” block represents what patients (or any other customer group) normally need and expect from you and your staff. Meet those needs and expectations, and you have a satisfied customer. Don't meet them, and you have a dissatisfied customer. End of the Story? For most agencies, it is. And that is where they fail to see the secret to service excellence. When it comes to customer service, there are basically three types of agencies:

- 15% see their goal as avoiding problems with patients. “Don’t Make a Mistake” is their motto.
- 80% are less worried about avoiding problems and are more worried about meeting patients’ needs. Their battle cry: “Give patients what they need and expect.”
- 5% know the real secret. They realize that simply avoiding problems or trying to meet patients’ needs does not awe or impress patients, who got what they expected. Their goal? Impress patients by exceeding expectations. If you exceed expectations, you achieve something worth talking about.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION
5% Perceptions and Experiences that Exceed Needs and Expectations
Span Excess Appreciation
80% Needs and Expectations
Span of Dissatisfaction
15% Perceptions and Experiences that Fail to Meet Needs and Expectations

The Good, Better, and Best News of All

The good news is that research shows customers who are impressed with services tend to tell five friends, family members, and other about the services that pleasantly surprised them. Better news: word of mouth is twice as effective as advertising. If patients are impressed by your services and tell their physicians, family members, managed care companies, or others, it can’t help but to strengthen your position.

And here is the best news of all. It doesn’t take Herculean efforts to exceed patients’ expectations. In fact, the small things really make the big difference: the caregiver who calls to say when she will get there. Bringing an unexpected fact sheet on an illness. Providing a resource guide on community services. Calling during the first week of services to make sure everything is going well. Sending a thank you card after someone completes services. Training staff to actively listen and help patients feel the warmth that caregivers truly have. These are just little things-but they go beyond what other agencies do and exceed patients’ expectations.

The Answer that Works

If you are in a competitive environment and your survival depends on being seen as different and better than other agencies, then you have to create a customer service culture in which staff are trained and encouraged to be different and better.

Your goal? Don't just meet your patients' needs and expectations; exceed them. Service excellence and service differentiation—a competitive survival strategy that truly works.

Robert A. Fazzi, Ed.D., is President of Fazzi Associates, Inc., a national planning, training, and research firm that specializes in the unique needs of home care and other health and human service-related organizations. Call 800-379-0361.

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