

Five-Star Service: The Simple Truth

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What happens when a consultant who teaches five-star service to healthcare practices becomes a patient? From the initial evaluation in a private practice, through surgery and rehabilitation, this article outlines the first-hand experience of the author and outlines the simple truth about how to stand out in your community as the premier provider of quality care and customer service.

Key words: Customer service; five-star attitude; excellence; case study; solo practice; group practice; hospital.

You've heard it over and over again: the healthcare environment has become highly competitive. Solo and group practices, as well as free-standing and cooperative clinics and hospitals, are all frantically searching for ways to distinguish themselves in this marketplace. Each entity wants to be the *premier* choice for its particular specialization.

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Because of that, we are seeing a growing trend in which healthcare providers are working hard to improve not only on the quality of their medical care, but the degree to which they provide "good" customer service. In response, dozens of consulting companies are popping up, advertising that they will come in and teach your staff how to give "five-star service." Yes ladies and gentlemen, after only a couple of one-hour "lunch-and-learns," you too could be the next Ritz Carlton of healthcare!

In the past three years, our firm has had an increasing number of requests for "customer service" training. We've had clients who wanted us to teach their staff how to provide warm blankets, serve water on trays with lace

doilies, walk a patient back to an exam room, offer magazines to waiting patients, and answer the phone after someone has been on hold for five minutes.

Let me save you some money; if you want to turn your practice into a pampering environment, you don't need a consultant. Send your practice manager to a spa for a day. For about \$300, your manager can learn and bring back all of the cool ideas that make an environment look and feel "pampering."

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But be forewarned: putting a lemon in your patient's water is not going to give your practice the edge in customer service. The truth is, five-star service is not only *what* you do. Five-star service is the *attitude that forms the foundation* of what you do. When the attitude is right, everything you do is outstanding.

HOW DO YOU GET THE FIVE-STAR ATTITUDE?

Before I tell you the answer, permit me to tell you a little story:

I've worked as a consultant, speaker, and trainer for healthcare practices, hospitals, and Fortune 500 companies since 1983. That means that this year marks my 25th anniversary in the profession. One might think that after a quarter of a century working with doctors, staff, and administrators, I'd have seen it all.

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Nope.

I had a total hip replacement in November 2007. Like most people, I felt the vulnerability that comes from being at the mercy of my healthcare providers. Unlike most patients, however, I teach this stuff. So my experience was colored by my constant need to assess my environment according to the standards I set for my clients. I learned a lot—and the most important lessons came from the least likely teachers.

The story begins at a group practice. I was impressed by the teamwork shown by the doctors. As I was referred through their group from pain management to neurology to orthopedics, each doctor did everything right. They all listened, didn't rush, answered all my questions, read each other's notes in the electronic medical records system, and left good notes for the next partner who would see me. They were a great team. Score: A+

The onsite radiology technician took films on site and had me laughing the whole time. Score: A+

The physician assistant was attentive and clearly cared, although he needed a bit of training in how to communicate consent forms without scaring the patient half to death. Score: B-

The administrative staff was the practice's Achilles heel. With the exception of two stars, the majority of staff members were poster children for the American Society of Miserable Workers. These people always said all of the right *words*, but their tone and facial expressions were often strained. The general message they sent was, "I'd rather go home and watch 'American Idol.'" Score: D-

I questioned whether I wanted to go with a practice that had such a poor administrative layer. After all, the administrative staff would be the ones who would shape my experience at the practice. Nevertheless, I was completely impressed with the surgeon (as a physician and as a person), and his scheduler was top notch. I could deal with the rest.

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My surgeon is associated with a hospital that is known for its customer service. In fact, it's won several nationwide awards. So my expectations were pretty high. I promised myself that I would watch carefully so that I could bring back some new ideas for my clients. It made the whole experience more of a research expedition and allowed me to remain in a comfortable place of denial.

I went for my preoperative testing. The lobby and reception area was nothing short of magnificent and sent a message loud and clear that the hospital took pride in the patient experience. Score: A+

The hospital provided a class for patients who were scheduled for joint replacement. There were three separate

speakers (nursing, administration, and physical therapy), and there was no doubt in my mind that two of the three were caring people who genuinely wanted to help the class attendees. While they were not effective speakers, they got the information out and answered all questions. Score: B+

The third speaker was a representative from physical therapy. She was patronizing, rude, rushed, and cold. She treated the people in the class (most of whom were 40–50 years older than she) as if they were errant children. Score: D-

I entered the hospital on the morning of my surgery and was escorted to a ready-room. The nurse was efficient and warm, but was no match for the anesthesiologist who was cold, unavailable for questions, argumentative, and belittling. When he left, she quickly reassured me that he was "a good doctor." Her Score: A; his Score: D-

Following the surgery, I was taken to my private room. Even through my drugged state, I could see that it was gorgeous: A flat screen television with access to the internet hung on the paneled walls at eye level, and there was a truly comfortable chair for visitors. The lighting was cozy and made the room feel safe and warm. I chose my meals from a restaurant-quality menu that had spaces for me to select additional meals for visitors. Meals were wheeled in on a clothed table with a presentation that was hotel quality. When I called the operator for assistance, I was greeted by an upbeat, caring voice. Score: A+

The nurses were top-notch professionals. For the most part, they were kind, and though no one stood out as a star, they kept me safe and were available for me whenever I needed help. Score: A-

The aids were outstanding. Warm and caring, they went out of their way to go the extra mile and make me comfortable. They worked long shifts and were clearly exhausted. But they always smiled, laughed at my jokes, and cheered me through those tough couple of days. Score A

On the morning of day 4, they packed me up to leave. Some of the nurses and aids lined up in the hall and applauded as I left. It was nothing short of a parade, and it underlined the uniqueness of their team. I understood how it was that they had won all of their awards for customer service.

The ambulette took me to my next stop—an inpatient rehab facility (skilled and nonskilled nursing with physical therapy and long-term care). Like the hospital I'd just left, the appearance of the facility sent a message of state-of-the-art care. Its mission statement hung proudly in the lobby. As I came to learn, it was not exactly accurate. I'll give you some examples:

When I arrived, I asked for a bed pan. An aid came to the room and informed me that I was going to have to learn to "live according to her rules" and proceeded to take my vitals. Afterwards, I asked again for the bed pan. She helped me onto it and left me there for 30 minutes. Score D-

The LPN that was assigned to my room greeted me with a cup filled with medications that weren't mine. She argued with me as I assured her that none of the pills in the cup were on my list. She raised her voice and told me she wouldn't leave until I'd taken the pills. My husband had to intervene. Score: F

The RN that was assigned to me tried to remove my surgical dressing, ignoring strict orders from the surgeon that the dressing was to remain intact for another two days. When I told her so, she pushed my hand away and ripped off the dressing. I asked if it was within a patient's right to refuse treatment. She laughed at me and walked out. Score: F

The facility had a routine of holding weekly meetings of the department heads to discuss patient progress. They posted a letter stating that my case would be reviewed in three days and invited me to attend. I couldn't wait.

I hobbled into the room to find four women sitting around a table. A stone-faced tribunal, they proceeded to talk about me as if I weren't there. I asked to be heard, and they allowed me to tell them about improper medications, etc. They looked like deer in headlights, clearly at a loss regarding how to deal with me or the situation they found themselves in. They simply listened to my concerns and thanked me for coming. Score: C-

Some additional highlights:

- Day 5: I received my copy of the Patients' Bill of Rights. It was 10 pages long.
- Day 6: A gentleman came to check the electronic appliances I'd brought in to make sure they were safe.
- Day 7: The charge nurse brought me all of my medications, suggesting that it might be better if I self-administered.
- Three months later: After reading my customer feedback evaluation, the new head administrator of the facility called me at my office to inquire about my training services. Specifically, she wanted three, one-hour sessions for her staff on customer service. I suggested that this would not be enough of an intervention. She never called me back.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Obviously, there was a big difference in the two facilities with respect to their ability to provide good customer service. But what made the difference?

Contrary to what you might think, of the two facilities, it was the *hospital* that had the longer shifts, a lower pay scale, and a substantially greater ratio of patients to staff. In point of fact, the rehab facility should have been able to provide a significantly better level of customer service than the hospital. It was smaller and more intimate, and it had fewer patients and employees to manage. So what created such a difference in their outcomes?

The answer is best described by a conversation I had at 2:00 a.m., while sitting on a bed pan in the hospital.

My aid had just come back in for her second shift of the day. She was clearly in pain—I saw her limping as she brought me a towel. I asked her why she didn't just go home. Her answer said it all:

"If I go home now, then somebody else is gonna have to come in early and double up on her shift. That wouldn't be right."

The staff and doctors of the hospital did more than care for their patients. They cared for each other. The rehab facility, on the other hand, had been in flux for three years, with changes in management and ownership. The staff had suffered the consequences of being overlooked in the interim, and the patients paid the biggest price of all.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There's truth to the adage that "stuff" flows downhill. The fact is that five-star service begins at the top. Whenever we work with a practice, our first step is to work with the doctors to make certain that they are giving five-star service to each other and their staff. Start here, and the rest will follow.

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So what *is* five-star service?

Flexibility: Do your staff members willingly shift their style of communication to accommodate each other and all patients?

Integrity: Do they make all decisions based on a clearly understood and fully owned set of ethics?

Value-driven: Do all team members go the extra mile to make sure that every internal and external customer is held in the highest level of esteem?

Excellence: Do all members of your team have a clear definition of what it means to achieve their full potential in their individual positions?

Safety: Does everyone use their full capacity to ensure that your environment is always physically and emotionally safe?

Team-oriented: Do all staff and doctors give five-star service to each other?

Accountability: Is every member of your team answerable to your customers, each other, and themselves?

Relationship-savvy: Does everyone know how to build and sustain long-term relationships with internal and external customers?

When you have a team of doctors and staff who exhibit these characteristics, the lemon-water is secondary. ■