

## Patients ... or Customers?

by Liz Lippoff

The answer is ... Yes.

The people who receive medical care are, by definition, patients. Here are the final sentences of the Hippocratic Oath:

If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy life and art, respected while I live and remembered with affection thereafter. May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help.

Heady stuff.

Healthcare today, though, can be a complex, time-consuming, and expensive business for both the patient and the physician. From a medical standpoint, the person in the gown that opens in the back is a patient. From a business standpoint, however, he is a customer. To attract him to the office and send him on his way satisfied with his experience means that healthcare providers must implement many of the same customer service strategies that other businesses use. Just for starters: be prompt, polite and courteous. Provide an atmosphere that offers comfort, convenience and resources. Say please and thank you. Return phone calls.

Some patients, perhaps still in awe of their doctors or scared by their symptoms, will put up with just about anything. Others understand that they may need to cut the doctor some slack by the very nature of the beast: their obstetrician, for example, may be called out to deliver a baby. Many patients, however, now realize that they have the right to expect good customer service as well as excellent medical care. You may deliver the latter, but if you don't deliver the former, a rapidly growing number of patients will find someone who will.

In fact, customer service protocols should be a part of a larger, carefully conceived marketing plan. "Marketing" and "physician" are not contradictory terms; whenever someone answers the phone, marketing is happening. The question is: is it smart marketing designed to bring the right patients in the door, or is it random or, worse, counterproductive?

Who are you and what distinguishes you from others who do similar work? Who are your potential patients and what do they want? What are the messages you want to communicate? Who do you need to tell? How will you reach them? How will you know if you've been successful?

Medical marketing can be tricky. There are rules, written and tacit, that inform any medical marketing plan. A Lasik surgeon, for example, can advertise in ways that a neurosurgeon never would. A successful physician's office will have a marketing plan that adapts to meet the changing face of medicine in general and their practice in particular.

Patient good will is one of the most valuable assets a physician can have, and it comes from delivering both superior medical care and excellent customer service. The physician who understands this will be "respected while (he) live(s) and remembered with affection thereafter." And his customers will give his card to their friends.

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Liz Rabiner Lippoff and her company, Liz, ink, provide marketing, public relations, and communications services for small and medium-sized service providers such as medical practices, attorneys, financial consultants and dental offices.

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