Can enhancing patient experience lead to higher sales, greater customer loyalty and overall improved business health? Based on a recent conversation we had with a colleague, the answer is a resounding “yes.”

Here, we reveal this conversation, the importance of word-of-mouth referrals and how, specifically, you can enhance your patients’ experience with your practice.

An enlightening chat
Our colleague, a stylish fellow who updates his spectacle and sunglass frames often, said he was on his way to his annual eye exam when he received a text message from the practice that his 2:45 p.m. appointment had been moved to 3:00 p.m. because the staff was running a bit behind.

He said he was impressed with the text message because it showed that the practice respected his time. In addition, because of the advanced notice, he said he had time to stop for a cup of coffee.

Our colleague presented to the practice at 3:04 p.m. and apologized to the receptionist for being a few minutes late. The receptionist replied curtly, “You’re not a few minutes late; you’re 20 minutes late! We’ve already put another patient in your spot. You were supposed to be here at 2:45pm!”

Our colleague calmly showed his phone to the staff member so she could see the practice-issued text about the schedule change. He said he seemed frustrated about having to dig into the details of his lateness and then responded, “The text messaging system has never worked properly, so we stopped using it long ago. I’m sorry. You’ll have to reschedule for another day.”

Our colleague replied, “No need,” and left the practice. Enraged, he called us immediately to remind us how important it is that we champion the patient customer experience in everything we do.

Word-of-mouth referrals
Word-of-mouth referrals are paramount for practice growth. In fact, the biggest indicator of future growth in any healthcare practice is the patient’s willingness to recommend others to the practice. So, when you fail to provide a stellar experience, patients will not recommend their friends and family and worse, you may lose current patients, as was the case in the previous example.

Enhancing the patient experience
To provide an exceptional customer experience you must focus on each external and internal experience patients have with your practice.

External
The patient’s impression of you begins before he or she enter your doors. Specifically, you can enhance your patients’ experience with your practice.

Post-Cataract Surgery Patient
There are many opportunities within a practice to provide an exemplary patient experience. For example, when cataract surgery concludes at our practice, our staff offers the patient something to eat or drink, typically a muffin and some water or coffee.

One day, a staff member was returning a post-cataract surgery patient to her galley when the patient overheard a discussion between two other nurses discussing their like for Chinese cuisine. The patient mentioned, jokingly, to the staff member how wonderful some sweet and sour chicken would be now that her surgery was finished. The nurse, without mentioning it to the patient, took this opportunity to have some sweet and sour chicken delivered to the patient’s bedside.

At the patient’s one-day postop, she mentioned multiple times how amazed she was by the gesture. She stated that in this day and age, such gestures at healthcare facilities don’t happen. Our nurse seized a moment to provide an amazing experience for the patient, and make her day one of the best days of her life ... an experience that she will not soon quit talking about.
Customer service

cally, how does your website look? Is it clearly organized and up to date? Does it contain convenient online portals for scheduling bill pay? Are patient history forms available for patient convenience and practice clarity? It stands to reason that people have a higher propensity to purchase what they have time to consider. This is why it is important to give patients the opportunity to review your literature prior to arriving in your office.

What kind of impression does your front-desk staff make on current and potential patients? Have you had them undergo phone training to ensure they answer and talk on the phone in a friendly and professional manner? Do they send patient history forms ahead of time if the forms cannot be accessed online?

When staff members make reminder calls to confirm appointment times, do they ask patients to bring a loved one along if the patient is going to be dilated?

Can patients easily find parking in your parking lot? Does the signage outside your building accurately communicate the services you provide?

All these questions are tips that enhance patient experience with your practice.

• Internal. Once the patient enters your doors, do your staff members greet him or her with a “Hi, how are you?” and a smile? Do they actively listen to the patient’s needs and concerns?

Do your technicians explain to patients the diagnostic testing they perform in easily understood terms?

When the patient is with you, the provider, how do you interact with him or her? Do you look at the patient when you talk to him or her? Do you invite the patient to ask questions and broach any concerns? Do you explain diagnosis and treatment in easily understood terms? When the patient needs spectacles, do you hand off him or her to one of your opticians to facilitate the selection of the right lenses and frame?

Does the optician greet the patient and let him or her know she is available to help?

When the patient checks out, does your front-desk staff listen to the patient, in terms of his or her wants and needs and try to meet them? (See “Post-Cataract Surgery Patient,” page 19.)

Do you provide a survey to gauge whether the patient’s visit was a positive one? Do you use patient surveys to improve the practice?

Again, all these questions are tips that provide an amazing customer service.

Something to remember

The practice from which our colleague received a text message had the right idea: Enhance the patient experience by showing him you care about his time — something that can instill practice loyalty and referrals. Unfortunately, no one took the time to monitor this patient reminder system, causing it to have the opposite effect on our friend and, no doubt, other patients as well.

Remember, a patient’s experience has a profound effect on his willingness to stick with a practice and refer others, regardless of the fact that he has a medical vs. consumer need.

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