

Patient Satisfaction Makeovers

Six Strategies to Win Brighter Patient Smiles in the New Year

Have the greetings delivered by your front-office staff gone from chipper to clipped? Is your waiting room décor stuck in another era? Or do you rush through patient visits faster than ambulances speed to ERs? All these factors weigh heavily on patient satisfaction—or dissatisfaction.

Since next month starts a new year, why not take a fresh look at ways to improve your relationship with patients. To help, *Southern California Physician* interviewed Susan Keane Baker, the New Canaan, Conn.-based author of *Managing Patient Expectations* and a popular speaker on providing exceptional patient care. Baker shares ideas collected from practices nationwide.

1 EASE WAITING TIME WOES

Long wait times are at the top of patients' gripe list, Baker says. "Dissatisfaction starts to kick in about 15 to 18 minutes past the appointed visit time," she says. After that point, patients expect more of your time to compensate them for delays in the waiting room—about two minutes for every minute past the 18-minute mark, Baker says. So if you are running 20 minutes late, your patient thinks her typical 10-minute visit should now be 14 minutes.

One solution is in better managing the wait time, Baker says. First, it's essential that staff members greet patients happily and seem genuinely interested in their presence. All the basics apply here—making eye contact, using names and thanking them for coming. Second, it's important to ensure that your reception area conveys the same message—you value patients.

2 CREATE ENGAGING WAITING ROOMS

Baker says there are two styles when it comes to reception areas. They can appeal to Type A or Type B personalities, but not both. The key is deciding which approach best suits your patient population and specialty.

"Some physicians make their waiting rooms so engaging and interesting by giving patients enough things to do that the time passes quickly," she says. Providing Internet access, telephones for local calls, stationary

with stamps and a great selection of magazines can keep Type As feeling productive.

The alternate strategy is to make the waiting time relaxing, Baker says. Physicians can use aromatherapy and soft colors to foster a calm environment and offer bottled water and hand cream samples as amenities. "Waiting rooms like this feel like a respite away from the world and make waiting so comfortable," she says.

For those physicians not ready for an extreme office remodel, Baker suggests one easy fix—add some mirrors. She says hotel industry studies proved people don't mind waiting for elevators and in elevators as much when there are mirrors to look into. She shared the tip with her personal obstetrician/gynecologist. The next time she went to his office, she noticed beautiful new mirrors in the reception area, the bathrooms and patient rooms. The result? Her doctor said complaints were dramatically reduced.

3 PERSONALIZE OFFICE VISITS

It's been said before, but were you listening? The quality of your listening skills determines whether patients are likely to be satisfied with their office visits, Baker says. Giving your undivided attention and effectively listening to patients for the first 60 seconds of a visit makes all the difference.

After that, patients are most satisfied when they receive personalized information in writing, Baker says. Don't just hand out prepared information sheets: write their names on them, circle key points or add specific instructions. "They need to feel the information they are getting is not just generic," she says.

4 PROVIDE HAPPY ENDINGS

Baker believes strongly in a recent *Harvard Business Review* article suggesting that good first impressions only carry so far, and that negative opinions can be formed about the end of an experience.

For this reason, she recommends physician offices make improvements to their good-byes. Consider collecting co-payments before a patient sees the doctor, so there's no delay in getting him on the way and his final memory is not about writing

a check. And try to close visits creatively, Baker says. Some physicians have taken to offering "goodie" bags. During cold season, one doctor offers pain reliever samples and chicken soup packets. An oral surgeon provides gelatin and pudding mixes.

5 HONE COMPLAINT-HANDLING SKILLS

It's unlikely that you can prevent all dissatisfaction. So being ready when the occasional angry patient erupts is important, Baker says. The best thing to do is make a change in the complainer's physical setting. Have staff take the patient to a private space away from the reception area to address the complaint. "When a person doesn't have an audience, he's far less likely to dig his heels in," she says.

6 MONITOR YOUR PERFORMANCE

Regularly monitoring patient satisfaction enables you to identify and correct problems. While they may seem elementary, self-addressed, stamped comment cards set in your reception area can provide good insights, Baker says.

Another approach is to simply ask a question at the end of the visit. For example, Baker suggests you set aside one afternoon a week to pose this question: "Is there anything that would have made visiting us a nicer experience today?"

Sophisticated patient surveys have a place as well. Some of Baker's clients have had success with tools from Doctors in Touch (www.doctorsintouch.com).

Overall, you may miss many areas of potential patient dissatisfaction simply by being too close to the situation. Baker observes: "The guest sees more in an hour than the host sees all year." Therefore, it's important to listen for disconnects. Statements such as "No one told me" or "I didn't know" are opportunities to improve for the future.

Baker is offering *Southern California Physician* readers a free copy of her brochure, "100 Ways to Make Your Organization More Patient-Friendly." E-mail her at susan@susanbaker.com. —Janis Rizzuto