

Hospitals Try To Cure Impersonal Service

Secret Shoppers, Hotel Services Raise Ratings

[Shiloh Woolman](#), Staff writer

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The modern decor is offset with low lighting.

She throws her car keys to a valet, breezes through the door, grabs a cappuccino from the lobby's cafe and greets the smiling clerk on her way to check-in.

This is not the Ritz Carlton, but it could describe the patient experience at one of hundreds of American hospitals trying to take their offerings to the next level.

Forget waiting hours to see a doctor or impersonal hospitals with bad food and grumbly nurses. Hospitals are spending money to figure out how to deliver the kind of customer services their patients experience outside the clinic walls.

Is That Patient Real?

Fake patients are one of the ways they're testing their staffs. Mystery shopping -- long a tenet of retailers and restaurants -- has found new clients in the health-care industry, and that's just one way health providers are rethinking how their services stack up.

Barbara Gerber began offering the service after 20 years as an assistant hospital administrator, after she became a patient herself.

"I had an abysmal experience," Gerber said. "I felt ... like they couldn't care less about me. When I was lying in my hospital bed thinking about it, I wondered how I could put this together (with my knowledge of hospitals)."

Gerber's [Devon Hill Associates](#), based in San Diego, provides mystery shoppers to hospitals. Gerber works with each client site to determine what it is they want to know about their operation then builds a program to elicit that information.

Gerber said her contractors bring to life for hospital administrators something a written questionnaire can never do.

"The shopper becomes a patient. We bring all level of detail beyond, rude (or) courteous. We can tell them how and why (patients are left feeling cold) in our narratives. One administrator called it a 'virtual tour,'" Gerber said.

The consulting firm [Second To None Inc.](#) started mystery shopping at clinics when Concentra Healthcare of Dallas asked to have its more than 300 clinics assessed.

"What is the mystery patient hearing, observing? Is (a procedure) explained to them? What sort of paperwork?" said Second To None President Jeff Hall. "It's all the sensory experiences that patients would encounter."

Competition Means Choices

Hall credits the availability of quick-care clinics inside retailers such as Wal-Mart and Target for spurring health-care providers to compete in a new marketplace.

"Another factor is that consumers are feeling much more empowered in making health-care choices," Hall said. "I attribute it to the depth and degree of information available to consumers through the web."

In his book, "Hardwiring Excellence," which is a blueprint for hospitals to improve both patients' and workers' experiences, Quint Studer said a focus on customer service when he headed Florida's Baptist Hospital grew his market share and added \$1.8 million to the bottom line.

Costs Of Quality

Mystery shopping carries a cost, of course, but the system director for Ohio Health's eight hospitals, Nancy Riggs, said her organization considered the price tag an investment. Riggs said her facilities already led the competition in market share. When she hired a mystery shopping company, she was interested in transforming the patient experience and improving customer feedback scores.

"We changed the way we did business in terms of our patient relations department. Our job now is to become much more proactive in our approach so we don't wait for complaints to come in," Riggs said.

Ohio Health rewards staff for meeting patient needs with everything from special parking spots to cash. The incentives helped put Ohio Health on the 2007 Fortune Magazine list of the 100 best companies to work for -- not a bad thing in an era of nursing shortages.

Patients See Benefits

Patients say they get benefits, too. Carla Owens' 15-year-old daughter Sarah had knee surgery in March.

"Doctors and nurses were telling her exactly what was going on. They were (forthright and) didn't treat her like a child," Owens said.

Owens said she now tells friends about her fantastic experience at Omaha's Alegent Health Immanuel Medical Center, and she wrote a letter to administrator Kevin Miller, the director for surgical services, praising his staff. Miller said he shared that letter at the next staff meeting, which he said creates a virtuous circle of ever-better care.

"We look at how motivating it is for a nurse, a tech, general staff, to see their name mentioned about going out of their way," Miller said.

Alegent Health also has staff from its nine hospitals test each other's services and report back to management. The system, which now offers valet parking and coffee shops, has gone from the 40th percentile in customer service studies to the high 90s.

"It's about, 'Did I impact your life?'" Miller said. "It drove home the focus. You already know the disease -- do you know the patient? We had to get the staff trained into finding out."

Personal Care Pays Off

Rick Wade, of the American Hospitals Association, said customer care started shifting in hospitals in the 1980s, when women's expectations for labor and delivery morphed from a surgical procedure to a life experience. It gave rise to birthing centers, and Wade said a current period of explosive hospital construction across the country is building on that theme. He said a lot of the new designs pay for themselves.

"Many of these things make the delivery of care cheaper (and) shorten the length of stay of patient because (they have) less stress," Wade said.

Hospitals across the country have another financial incentive to improve customer service. Those that don't want to lose reimbursements from Medicare and Medicaid will start reporting their customer satisfaction survey data by March 2008. The 27 questions will be standardized across the country so consumers can have apples-to-apples information when choosing a hospital, according to [the Consumer Assessment of Health Providers and Systems Hospital Survey](#).

More Than The Bottom Line

The benefits also have affects that don't show up on the bottom line.

Alegent Health Immanuel Hospital nurse Deb Fuchser recounted the story of how that impacted one elderly patient, who was in for a biopsy at her hospital's outpatient center. The appointment was on the woman's 50th anniversary. While she was undergoing the procedure, the nurses learned that her husband hadn't had a chance to buy her flowers. Fuchser said one of the nurses ran to the gift shop to buy the flowers and help the couple celebrate despite their surroundings.

"She got a bad result on her liver biopsy (that day)," Fuchser said. "And she (still sent) us a thank-you card for the care."

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