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Improving Patients' Experiences

Focus on the interaction as opposed to the transaction.

By Rochelle Nataloni, Contributing Editor

Section Editor:

Shareef Mahdavi
Pleasanton, California

Editorial Advisors:

Matt Jensen
Sioux Falls, South Dakota
James D. Dawes
Sarasota, Florida



Premium Practice Today is a monthly feature section in **CRST** providing articles and resources to assist surgeons and their staff in the pursuit of premium practice development to facilitate exceptional experiences for patients and business success.

Improving Patients' Experiences

Focus on the interaction as opposed to the transaction.

BY ROCHELLE NATALONI, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Many years from now, we will look back and see that the early part of the 21st century marked the time when we entered "the age of the customer" in medicine. The category described as elective medicine is now well established and will only grow as patients demand to be treated experientially as a customer as well as—and even better than—they are treated clinically as a patient.

This month's "Premium Practice Today" is loaded with specifics that your practice can put into place to more strongly appeal to the customer-based needs of your patients. As we come to the close of our second year, this issue is, in my opinion, the best yet, and I am proud to serve as section editor.

The stakes for the medical practice are high in this era of uncertainty in terms of delayed product approvals, burdensome compliance, and mandatory insurance—three key factors that are all controlled by the government. Failure to adopt the tactics discussed herein leaves you vulnerable to the decisions made by outside forces that control reimbursement, formularies, and patients' preapprovals. Successful adoption allows you to regain greater control of your practice and its future. As always, the choice is yours.

—Section Editor Shareef Mahdavi

Striving to improve patients' experiences is a worthy goal for any practice and one that is perhaps even more meaningful in the competitive milieu of premium surgery. Exceeding the expectations of these typically demanding patients has clinical and practice management implications that are crucial to the ongoing success of any ophthalmic surgery practice aiming to increase its conversion rate.

EXPERIENCES DIFFERENTIATE YOUR PRACTICE

Delivering a great experience to patients is important, because it is often the only way to create sustainable competitive differentiation, according to Jon Picoult, business management expert and head of Watermark Consulting in Simsbury, Connecticut (www.watermarkconsult.net; twitter.com/jonpicoult; www.youtube.com/user/JonPicoult).

"The advantage accorded to a practice by new

procedures and new technologies is fleeting," says Mr. Picoult. "These are innovations that quickly get transferred from practice to practice." A distinctive experience for patients, on the other hand, is much more difficult to copy, he points out, because really good ones arise from a carefully managed ecosystem that addresses everything from business processes to hiring practices to individual staff members' behaviors. "As companies like Southwest Airlines, Zappos, and Nordstrom have demonstrated, 'experiential' differentiators can fuel success over a very long time—even in highly competitive industries," he says.

For Associates in Ophthalmology (AIO; www.aioeyesurgeons.com), a practice based in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania, there are several reasons why providing premium experiences for patients is a motivating force. AIO's Lisa Cibik, MD, points out that a patient's visual acuity outcome is largely affected by his or her perception of the overall experience. "As a multispecialty

practice, we see many patients with BCVAs [of] less than 20/30 based on their pathology," she says. "That is why it is so important for us to focus on improving patients' experiences from the time they first call the office through their postoperative appointments. We have found the phrase '20/happy' to be very accurate. Some of our most satisfied patients after surgery do not have the best clinical outcomes, but their experience at every step of the process was so positive that they are happy with their vision."

Richard G. Davis, MD, of Precision Eye Care (www.precision-eyecare.com) in Huntington, New York, says he and his staff are committed to providing an unbeatable experience for patients, because a happy patient is his practice's best advocate. "We are extremely diligent in doing our best to be sure the patient['s] experience is excellent," he says. "We monitor everything from patients' wait time until they are seen to how long the entire process takes. We constantly review our physical plant to be sure the presentation of our facility is up to the standards we set. When someone leaves our facility, we want them to be wowed by not only our physical space but by the friendliness and competence of the entire staff." Dr. Davis adds, "The patient should then go and tell their friends and family about the great experience they had with us, even if it is only for a routine examination."

PATIENTS' EXPECTATIONS HAVE BEEN ALTERED

Mr. Picoult notes that managing patients' experiences has become more important, because as other (non-medical) industries have focused on the customers' experiences, they have altered the expectations consumers have when interacting with any type of business or service provider. "For example, when consumers are exposed to the convenience of online appointment scheduling at Apple's retail stores, it sets a new bar in their mind[s] for what constitutes a great customer experience," he explains. "As they get exposed to such conveniences and other customer experience innovations, they begin to notice [the] absence [of these experiences] in dealings with other businesses—including your eye care practice."

AIO's COO Michael Lutz agrees that providing an exemplary experience for patients is crucial, because health care consumers are more demanding than ever. "Factors such as convenient office hours, free parking, staff professionalism, wait times, and office atmosphere are weighted as

much if not more than the quality and experience of the physician," he says. "This was not the case 5 or 10 years ago, and I believe this trend will continue as we see fewer patients from the WWII era who generally have more of an inherent trust [in] and maintain longer relationships with their doctors. With Internet searches for providers being more commonplace and medical information being more available, practices need to focus on the overall patient experience if they want to continue to attract new patients." Mr. Lutz points out that, although this is true for all of AIO's patients, those who pay out of pocket for noncovered services such as premium IOLs will typically expect a premium level of service. "Our goal is to treat all of our patients with a high degree of professionalism and respect, while making sure our premium lens patients have the personal attention they desire throughout their cataract evaluation and surgery," he says.

Dr. Davis points out that, especially in the case of premium IOL candidates, there needs to be a certain level of comfort for them to reach into their own pockets to pay for surgery. "We look at our cosmetic plastic surgery colleagues to see how they cater to their patients by making the entire experience excellent," he says. "Even though we see more volume in the office, focusing on each patient['s] encounter enables us to capture the entire spectrum of out-of-pocket payments an eye patient might make. In our office that includes premium IOLs, eyeglasses, and even hearing aids." Dr. Davis adds, "The growth of the premium IOL market makes this a smart financial decision, but in our practice, we have been doing it this way since inception."

A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE

When attempting to implement a culture of excellence, Mr. Picoult cites three key elements: (1) show employees what right looks like, (2) hire for attitude and train for skill, and (3) open the feedback spigot. For the first element, he recommends giving employees very specific and actionable guidance about the behaviors that help shape a great experience for customers. "It's not enough to just exhort your staff to deliver a great patient experience, because what that really means is open [to] interpretation" he says. "Companies that deliver consistently impressive customer experiences leave nothing to chance. They clearly define for their staff the specific behaviors that will help drive customer[s] delight and loyalty, and they consistently reinforce those principles." At Ritz-Carlton, for example, employees are instructed always to address guests by



name. This is a key element of the organization's distinctive experience for customers. In addition, every morning, Ritz-Carlton managers hold a meeting with their people, where stories of great encounters for customers from the prior day are used to highlight and reinforce desired staff behaviors, he explains.

Regarding attitude and skill, Mr. Picoult says, "Southwest Airlines has long embraced the hire for attitude and train for skill mantra, recognizing that it is hard to train employees to be nice and friendly and a lot easier to train them on Southwest's systems and procedures. Of course, the airline would never put a pilot in the cockpit who wasn't qualified to fly. The point is, the company places a lot of weight on attitudinal qualities—not just technical skills—when making hiring decisions, and that's clearly evident in the customer experience the airline ultimately delivers."

In terms of encouraging feedback, Mr. Picoult explains, "The majority of customers won't take the time to tell you when something went wrong with their experience or if they were disappointed in some way. Leaders in customer experience like Apple and JetBlue tease this information out by surveying people at strategic points in the customer lifecycle. Then, they actually use the data gathered, relentlessly driving experience improvements based on thematic issues identified in the surveys."

HOW TO BE EXTRAORDINARY

With an eye toward improving patients' experiences, AIO drew inspiration from the business model described in Keith R. McFarland's book, *The Breakthrough Company* (www.breakthroughcompany.com), based on inter-

views with 1,500 executives from growth companies on four continents. According to Investopedia (www.investopedia.com), a growth company is any firm the business of which generates significant positive cash flows or earnings, which increase at significantly faster rates than the overall economy. A growth company tends to have very profitable reinvestment opportunities for its own retained earnings. Thus, it typically pays little to no dividends to stockholders, opting instead to reinvest most or all of its profits back into its expanding business. Mr. McFarland pinpoints in his book how everyday companies become extraordinary. "Our management team and partners participated in a seminar given by Mr. McFarland, and we decided to adopt the model for our strategic planning," explains AIO's Mr. Lutz. "This model, which has been very successful in non-health care industries, has helped us focus on our key priorities in a manageable 90-day interval."

As a multispecialty practice with a high-volume retina service, premium lenses compose less than 18% of AIO's overall business, but there are changes afoot. "Our current conversion rate of all cataract cases is 21%," says Mr. Lutz. "This is [affected] by the amount of pathology in our practice, which somewhat limits the number of eligible patients for a premium IOL. We recently started tracking the conversion rate of eligible patients for premium lenses to ensure that we are maximizing our potential of converting clinically appropriate patients. Since our implementation of laser cataract surgery in May 2012 using the LenSx Laser [Alcon Laboratories, Inc.], our conversion rate [to use of the laser] is already near 50% of all cases."

Mr. Lutz explains that some of what AIO does to improve the patient's experience includes the following: "Two days prior to the surgery date, one of our premium lens educators calls each premium IOL patient and reviews [his or her] preoperative drop instructions and answers any questions [he or she] may have. This often reduces anxiety about the surgery and helps decrease cancellations. The lens educators also visit with each premium lens patient when [he or she] arrives in the surgery center the morning of surgery and once in [the] preoperative area prior to transport to the OR. We found this provides a personal touch for the premium lens patient and helps reduce [his or her] anxiety. This has also helped reduce questions these patients ask the surgery center staff about their lens decision."

"We also ensure one of our lens educators calls each patient [on] the evening of surgery," he adds. "In addition to answering their questions about their eye drops, [addressing their] concerns about symptoms, and clarifying their post-operative appointment time, we also found patients really appreciate this level of concern and high degree of contact. It makes them feel special and as though they received a premium level of service, not just a lens implant."

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE NOW

Like AIO, Precision Eye Care also provides comprehensive ophthalmology services. Dr. Davis estimates that approximately 25% of Precision Eye Care is dedicated to IOL procedures. "We are actively trying to grow the refractive lens exchange side of the practice and hope to see some returns on our investment within the next 6 months," he says. "If you factor in toric and multifocal IOLs as well as femtosecond laser cases, I would estimate our conversion rate for eligible patients to be about 60%."

The following are Dr. Davis' suggestions to improve the experience of premium IOL candidates. "On first contact, send them information about the practice and the type of ocular problem they are experiencing and also direct them to your website and have the initial paperwork available there for them to download (or even better, to fill out online)," he says. "If the person is a potential surgical case, have someone assigned to greet them on arrival and give them further information. All of our staff know that, if it is a potential surgical candidate they are working with, they should laud the premium IOLs and tell the patient that they 'hope

GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY WANT

A survey of 400 baby boomers conducted by Catalyst Healthcare Research, Nashville, Tennessee found several things would improve the patient's experience¹:

- Hand the patient a printed summary of the visit as he or she leaves the office, including the diagnosis and recommended plan of action.
- Talk to the patient about changing his or her behavior instead of immediately prescribing a drug for his or her situation.
- Provide the patient with a reliable estimate of the charges for a specific surgical procedure that he or she needs.
- Offer an app that allows the patient to log in securely to see his or her test results, send private messages to the doctor, and more.
- Send the patient a text message about 30 minutes before his or her scheduled appointment to tell him or her if the doctor is running on schedule.
- Use a mobile device (smart phone or tablet) to look up information about a drug before telling the patient about it.
- Offer free WiFi so that the patient can connect to the Internet while waiting to see the doctor.

Approximately 85% of respondents said that their experienc-

es would be better if their doctor's office would provide them with a printed summary of their visit, including their medical diagnosis and the recommended plan of action, upon exiting the office; 84% of respondents said that their experiences would be worse if their doctor spent most of his or her time typing on a computer instead of making eye contact.

"While many practices are struggling to meet basic patient expectations, some are doing very well and want to go further in providing an exemplary patient experience," says Dan Prince, the president of Catalyst Healthcare Research. "Ten of the ideas we tested in the study were in that spirit. We feel that innovators in health care will ultimately implement one or more of these ideas as a way of building stronger patient loyalty and differentiated brands."

The study was conducted via an online survey of 400 people born between 1945 and 1960 and living in the United States during the month of March in 2012. To qualify, respondents had to have seen a doctor within the previous 2 years. The margin of error for the overall results is estimated at $\pm 5\%$.

1. Catalyst Healthcare Research. Public Study From Catalyst Healthcare Research. What's Reasonable. Patient and Clinician Perspectives in Provision of Service. March 2012. www.catalysthcr.com.

he or she is a candidate for the new technology to be less dependent on glasses.' For postoperative visits, be sure these patients do not go into the normal queue but are instead fast-tracked to get through the system."

Mr. Picoult offers several additional suggestions regarding improving patients' experiences from the initial point of contact through to postoperative follow-up visits:

- Create a bill that people can understand, one that is devoid of technical jargon.
- Create a physical space (waiting room, examination room, etc.) that evokes feelings of warmth and comfort (as opposed to the stark, antiseptic environment that characterizes many medical facilities).
- Be proactive in explaining estimated charges and payment plan options. Address financial concerns that patients may not be comfortable raising.

LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT

Sometimes, the little things make the biggest difference as far as leaving a lasting positive impression. Dr. Davis notes that his practice has provided free WiFi in the waiting room for the past several years and that this has been well received and appreciated by patients. Similarly, AIO opened a small café (that offers free WiFi) for patients and their caregivers to relax in while waiting to be seen. "The caregivers appreciate this as much—if not more—than the patients," notes Dr. Cibik.

There is no doubt that an accommodating waiting room and refreshments are better than spindly chairs and a water cooler, but there are some intangibles that Mr. Picoult says are even more enticing than electronic connectivity and cappuccino. First, he says, save people time. "Time is people's most valuable and scarce resource," he says. "When you give people the gift of time by making it effortless for them to interact with your practice, they'll be more likely to remember the experience in a positive light." Next, he says to set expectations. "Customers' satisfaction with a business is closely tied to the expectations they have going in," he remarks. "Take the time to set expectations with your patients—about their first office visit, how a procedure will be done, and how they are likely to feel afterward. This will help avoid unpleasant surprises that detract from the experience." Finally, he advises, take ownership. "When interacting with a business, how often do you hear someone say, 'I can take care of that for you' and actually mean it and then deliver on it?" he asks. "Sadly, it's become somewhat rare. More com-

mon are refrains such as, 'let me transfer you to that department' or 'sorry, that's our policy.' Ownership and accountability [are] a decidedly low-tech but highly effective way to differentiate your customers' experiences. When customers (patients) see that your frontline staff takes personal ownership for providing assistance, it's a strikingly positive departure from the frustrating 'pass-the-buck' service that they typically encounter at other businesses or practices."

Mr. Picoult recommends focusing on the interaction as opposed to the transaction. It is a small but crucial distinction. "How your frontline staff views and approaches their jobs can have an enormous impact on the quality of the patient[s] experience[s] they deliver," he says. "Consider, for example, how your receptionist defines his or her role. Is it to check patients in and verify their information, or is it to make people feel welcome? One approach is very functional and transactional. The other revolves around a higher purpose and focuses on enhancing the quality of the interaction. It's a subtle difference, but one that your patients will notice."

CONCLUSION

Finally, Mr. Picoult suggests giving the patient control—or at least the illusion of it. He explains that it is human nature that most people like to exert control over their lives. "When people are unable to do that, when they are enveloped in ambiguity and uncertainty, it makes them uncomfortable," he says. "In a health care context, though, it's not always possible to give people direct control (patients can't operate on themselves). But, what you can do is give them 'cognitive control': the perception that they're holding the reins. Accomplish that by educating the patient about his or her condition. Set clear expectations so the patient knows what is going to happen and when. During procedures, explain what's being done at each step of the process, and support information exchange and absorption by supplementing verbal patient instructions/consultations with written supporting materials." ■

Lisa Cibik, MD, may be reached at (412) 653-3080; lcibik@aioeyesurgeons.com.

Richard G. Davis, MD, may be reached at (631) 462-2020; eyeguy@precision-eyecare.com.

Michael Lutz may be reached at (412) 653-3080; mlutz@aioeyesurgeons.com.

Jon Picoult may be reached at (860) 658-4381; jp@watermarkconsult.net.