

## How to Ruin a Practice

Sheila Sobell

Last month, I undertook what for millions of consumers is a simple, routine purchase -- buying new eyeglasses. Little did I realize that the experience would prove that CEOs who set policy are often completely out of sync with those on the front line of customer service. Although CEOs of major companies rate customer service as the most critical factor to remaining competitive in the 1990s, those who deal with customers on a daily basis are never trained in the fine art of translating platitudes into performance.

Like a lamb to slaughter, off I trotted to a local department store recommended by my health plan. After trying a few styles, I ordered a pair I thought would work.

Once home, buyer's remorse set in. Concerned the frames might prove too heavy once the lenses were fitted, I phoned to cancel my order as soon as the store opened the following day.

"I'm sorry, but that order has already been processed via computer," the manager of the optical department told me. In other words, I was stuck.

Despite the "miracle" of electronic computer processing, delivery took more than a week. When the glasses finally arrived, my gut instinct was validated: The heavy glasses gave me a headache. What had begun as a simple exercise in consumer spending was about to become a major customer satisfaction headache.

Because I lead seminars and write articles about customer service, I decided to view this experience as a test case. Did the company back up their pledge of customer satisfaction with something more than lip service?

After a letter (never answered) to the store's general manager, followed by a campaign of phone calls, I became convinced that complaint resolution was not the GM's top priority. I began climbing the corporate ladder.

When I phoned corporate headquarters, the regional manager wasn't in, but his secretary was. Because she appeared genuinely interested, I outlined the saga. When the telling was done, she assured me that corporate did not consider such behavior satisfactory, and that she would have my refund processed that afternoon.

She did.

Moral of the story -- excellent customer service means never saying "It's not my job!" Clearly, the organization's top manager recognized his secretary's smarts and had empowered her to act on her instincts on behalf of the company. She did and gave top management a good name.

Although 99 percent of people never complain directly about a service, a dissatisfied patient whose expectations have not been met will complain to as many as 10 to 20 others. And the doctor will never be the wiser until patients stop coming in the door.

Staff courtesy is the most important reason patients select the health care practices on which they depend for their health care.

So many practices give lip service to delivering quality customer service -- the buzz phrase of the '90s. Yet someone, no doubt the doctor, never provides the staff with the necessary training to transform aspirations into actions.

How to please patients isn't a secret. Here are seven simple rules that will convince patients you care and make them stay with your practice forever.

1. Never pull a fast one. Don't have secret policies that don't make sense and are only revealed to the patient at your convenience. Everyone knows you can cancel an order if you act quickly; don't give a customer trumped up excuses such as "the order went via computer and can't be cancelled."
2. Don't pass the buck to other employees or managers.
3. Handle complaints promptly when they occur.
4. Never use the four dirtiest words in customer service: "It's not my job."
5. Use five good words: "I'm sorry you were inconvenienced." It communicates to patients that they are your top priority, then remedy the complaint immediately.
6. Treat patients in the way in which you would like to be treated.
7. Empower your staff to make necessary decisions affecting patient satisfaction.

Remember, when you psyche yourself and your staff up to deal with the public, "Excellent service is the patient's right, it should not become his job!"

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