



# Building Your Practice the Disney Way

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There are many lessons to be learned from this theme park icon.

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ence. Some have done exceptionally well, while others could benefit from greater effort.

The change to better customer service and experience occurred largely due to the increased competition in medical practices, and frankly all busi-

the reasons that they enjoy and look forward to returning. Over time, that has morphed into wondering why other businesses fail to meet the same level of service as Disney does. This is what made Disney into the competition for all businesses.

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If you think about your experience going to the doctor when you were younger, there probably wasn't much of an experience to think of. You went to the office, waited in the waiting room for a long time, and waited even longer in the treatment room. Sound familiar?

Unfortunately, many medical offices still run this way. In fact, some of your colleagues' offices run this way as well. Many practices have changed over the years, trying to shorten wait times for patients and to improve the overall experi-

ences of all types. The competitor to all businesses who deal with patients, customers, or clients is Disney. Anyone who visits a Disney theme park leaves with a recalibrated expectation of what excellent customer service is.

Disney guests start seeing the customer experience on vacation as the "Disney Way" and is one of

It is the standard that all businesses are compared to. Because of that, all businesses need to change in order to build and grow.

#### **Who Is the Star of Your Show?**

When Walt Disney first opened Disneyland, his aim was to make it

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different from the amusement parks where he would take his daughters. Instead of a dirty place filled with off-the-shelf carnival rides, he wanted to create a park that would be enjoyed by children along with their parents.

Although Disney had an icon in Mickey Mouse, he felt that Disneyland, the park itself, was the star of the show. The park guests were the audience and the employees were the cast members. This differentiation holds true today. A visit to the Magic Kingdom in Orlando or Disneyland in Anaheim is set up as if you are going to see a show.

As you enter the park under the train station, there are posters on the wall. Those posters are coming attractions, just as you would find in a movie theater. They are coming attractions for the attractions you will shortly find in the park, in other words, the rides. As you proceed, you may notice the ground is red, as if the red carpet has been rolled out for you, and you start to smell the unmistakable odor of popcorn. Making your way along Main Street, you are welcomed and greeted by all of the cast members you pass. A triumphant soundtrack accompanies your entry. Your mind, along with your expectations, is being programmed.

Whether you have been to a Disney theme park or not, you likely have a picture in your mind of those first steps into the park. Let's think about your office. What kind of an experience is created when entering your podiatric office? Just as in the example of entering the Disney park, consider the senses.

**Sight:** What does your reception room look like? Is it updated and modern or does it show its age? Are there current magazines? Are the brochures orderly? Is someone present to greet the patient?

**Sound:** Is appropriate music playing at an appropriate volume? Is the office team loud or inappreciate?

**Smell:** Is there a pleasant smell in the office? Considering the nature of

podiatry offices, this is a significant concern.

**Touch:** Does the furniture have no dust when it is touched? Everything is tactile, from the floor or carpet under your feet. Our touch is very sensitive so any irregularity will be noticed.

Through the senses, the patients will form their opinions of the office, before they even step foot into a treatment room. Is this fair? Of course! Everyone makes judgments everywhere they go. Think about going to a new restaurant. Your experience entering, the ambiance, the music, and the decor, all influence your expectations for your meal once you are seated. If you have to wait a long time, it will start off your dining experience negatively. The same criteria apply to your office.

When Walt Disney chose to focus on the experience of the park, with

expect to be treated as customers and valued as guests. As Disney has proven, treating their guest right has brought them back, wallets wide open, time and time again.

## Ensuring the Performance Is On Point

Another well-known aspect of the Disney experience centers around the employees, known as cast members. Which employees are considered to be cast members? All of them! From the executives, to the managers, to the performers, to the ride operators, to the custodial staff. Going back to the analogy of the Disney park as a show, everyone who works there has a supporting role.

The message of being a cast member is an important one. Everyone has a supporting role for the success of the show, how the park runs. Whether the cast member is located with contact with the guests, known as "onstage," or in a support-

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a non-income-producing Main Street at the front and a strong focus on cleanliness, the operators of amusement parks thought he was crazy. How could he waste all of that real estate with no attractions to produce income? Why would he spend more money to keep the park immaculate? People don't care about appearances, after all? They did not think Disneyland would last a year. Of course, guests regularly comment on the cleanliness of the parks. Needless to say, profits have certainly come, year after year.

How can the experience of entering your practice be better at meeting, or exceeding, the expectations you wish to portray. Doctors like to think that their diagnosis and treatment should be memorable enough. In this competitive and changing healthcare environment, where healthcare providers are reviewed like restaurants, our patients now

ing role outside of the view of guests, or "backstage," everyone has a role that is relied on to ensure a superior guest experience.

All cast members at a Disney park, no matter what their role, begin with an orientation. At Walt Disney World, the program is known as Traditions. During this time, new cast members are taught the history of Disney, the core values, and the reasoning behind it. It introduces the new hire to the Disney way, which includes the expected conduct and grooming. For instance, there are strict regulations on visible tattoos, hair length, piercings, and more. At the end of the orientation program, it is not unusual for people to withdraw their application, as they are unwilling to conform to the standards.

Cast members are also trained on how to relate to the guests. Although the show and overall Disney values

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are important, there is a stated hierarchy when a cast member has to decide how to act and prioritize:

- **Safety:** Guest safety is the priority in every case. If something is happening to compromise that safety, it must be immediately addressed.

- **Courtesy:** There must be courtesy at the heart of each contact with a guest. The same courtesy is expected to be shown to colleagues and partners.

- **Show:** The show is what creates the magic. Maintaining the show is understandably a priority. Supporting the show backstage also applies to the positive guest experience.

- **Efficiency:** By managing the activities efficiently, events run more smoothly and unnecessary inconveniences are avoided.

Having these priorities helps guide cast members in various situations. For instance, speeding up a ride may help efficiency, but could compromise safety, and thus it would not be done. However, if a ride is malfunctioning and guests have to be brought backstage to exit and re-enter the park, it would be fine to do, since safety is a higher priority than the disruption in show.

After the orientation, each cast member is sent for comprehensive training specific to their role. After the prescribed training, the cast member is tested for proficiency. They cannot begin their job until the training is complete and testing is passed.

Is this similar to the training the members of your team go through? It is unlikely that most offices have such a detailed and delineated training plan. Most medical offices hire, allow the new team member to spend a day or two with a veteran, and then push them out to work with patients. Unfortunately, this can lead to a host of issues and frustration. The new employee will be frustrated because there are expectations that will not be met because the proper knowledge was not provided. The employer will be frustrated because efficiency and productivity may be down, even though it may be real-

ized that the tools were not given to the new employee.

Developing a training program is not simple and, once developed, will not be static. Begin by listing all of the common duties your team performs. This is important since it will be consistent for all team members in all positions. Add in some of the history of the practice, along with core values, and there is your office's version of "Traditions."

You then will create training manuals specific for the particular

at the park's expense. Why is this allowed? The theme parks know that a small gesture such as this will have resounding effects with the family and provide a story that will be told and retold. This is why they empower their team to make this happen with no approval from management necessary (and the process of obtaining management's approval might well take considerably longer than would be appropriate for "smoothing out" the situation).

There are also times where

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## Training the office team to Listen, Apologize, Solve, and Think is a perfect way to improve customer service.

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role the team member will serve. There may be some common elements across the positions, but try to be as specific as possible. Also, all training manuals will change, so be sure to update yours when necessary. It will also provide a good opportunity to retrain your team once the changes are made.

### Keys to Restoring Superior Service

Nobody is perfect. Your office is not perfect and Disney is certainly not perfect. How could a Disney theme park be perfect? Walt Disney World has 66,000 cast members employed to care for over 20 million guests a year. Certainly there are going to be deficiencies along the way. More important than if there are deficiencies is what is being done after one of these deficiencies is recognized. This is considered to be service recovery and is an important role for the cast members at a Disney theme park, and is also important in a medical practice and any business.

Consider a Disney theme park where the goal is to ensure the guests are enjoying themselves, particularly the kids. If a cast member encounters a crying child who dropped an ice cream cone or let go of their balloon, they are empowered to take action. Even though no one is at fault, these cast members will often get another ice cream or balloon to replace it,

a guest has an issue that is a park one. Whether it is someone who may have had a poor interaction with a cast member, or a ride that continually broke down, or waiting in a line that was much longer than advertised, things do happen. In this case Disney cast members are taught the "LAST" policy. This stands for:

- **Listen** to the guest to make sure the problem is understood and to make the guest feel heard

- **Apologize** to the guest. An apology is shown to defuse many heated issues.

- **Solve** the problem in a responsible but generous way

- **Think** about what system can be changed to prevent a similar situation from occurring.

The "LAST" policy is very applicable to the medical office. Unfortunately, there are service issues in the practice. This could be excessive waiting time, poor communication about lab results, or anything else that a patient could get upset about. Training the office team to Listen, Apologize, Solve, and Think is a perfect way to improve customer service.

While no one is dropping ice cream in the office, you also can empower your team in other ways. For instance, if they think it can help,

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the team member can offer a product that you may dispense or a session of a cash service offer as a means to provide service recovery. They may be empowered to provide 10% off a service or statement. These gestures

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would cost the office very little but could have a meaningful impact on your patient and future dealings.

### **Disney Makes It Look Easy**

Walk through a Disney theme park and take the time to observe. You'll see the Disney Way in action

everywhere. It looks second nature, even easy, but it is anything but simple. It is the result a unique vision by Walt Disney. It is the result of training programs for the cast members from before Disneyland even opened and continually, at every property throughout the world, to this day. The programs have required change over the years. It is also consistently implemented.

Training programs and policies are great ideas, but they need to be more than just ideas. In order to be effective, they need to be written and consistently implemented. Too often medical offices implement a program and assume that is all that needs to be done. Unfortunately, training once is not enough. The training needs to be refreshed regularly. The training needs to be updated when, for instance, a new treatment modality is brought to the office. Of course, training needs to be repeated for any new person that joins the team.

Whether it is the appearance and demeanor of the office, training, or the handling of a disgruntled patient, we have much to learn from Disney. There is a reason why Disney is able to raise their prices each year and still welcome capacity crowds. Imagine if you are able to embrace some of the power and magic that Disney brings. Your days will run better, your team and your patients will be happier, and you will continue to have a steady stream of new and returning patients to your office. **PM**

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