



Three Steps to Exceptional Patient Service

Take your practice to the next level.

BY SAM GUILLORY

Practice Management Pearls is a regular feature that focuses on practice management issues presented by successful DPMs who are members of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management. The AAPPMM has a forty-plus year history of providing its member podiatrists with practice management education and resources they need to practice efficiently and profitably, through personal mentoring and sharing of knowledge. To contact AAPPMM call 978-686-6185, e-mail aappmexcedir@aol.com or visit www.aappm.com

submerging them in why they are there. Disney over-manages certain areas that many other companies overlook. Now, keep in mind that over-managing is not micro-managing, which very often has a poor impact on your staff, therefore negatively impacting your patients as well. Over-managing, on the other hand, is paying *extraordinary attention to detail and being intentional where other companies are unintentional.*

Today's society has become accustomed to mediocre customer ser-

Service Design

Service Design is based on three factors:

- 1) Purpose: What do I want to do for my customer?
- 2) Customer: What does my customer want me to do?
- 3) Economics: What can I afford to do?

What is the purpose of your office? Purpose should be an *emotion*, not an outcome or how you're going to achieve it. Why? Because an emo-

What keeps millions of satisfied customers returning, year after year, to Disney parks around the globe? It's not the churros, the dole whip, or even the mouse. The reason millions of patrons flock to Cinderella's castle is because of something Walt Disney imbedded in his company years ago—The Disney Difference. Just imagine if your practice had an appeal close to that of Disney, to attract people back again and again, bringing their friends and family, and telling everyone they met about how amazing your office is. That sounds rather similar to what our practices' marketing goals are to be the premier choice for podiatric healthcare and have all your patients become raving fans. This scenario is no fairy tale; it can become your reality if you implement The Disney Difference into your practice.

Disney provides a holistic approach to their guests by completely

vice. In years past, gas stations were full-service and you didn't even have to get out of your vehicle. Now, you have to fight with the scanner at the self-checkout line just to buy a gallon of milk. The dehumanized customer service to which our society is accustomed is an *opportunity for service-based differentiation!*

Exceptional service results when you excel in three areas:

- 1) Careful service design: what are you trying to achieve?
- 2) Flawless and intentional service delivery: how will it look?
- 3) Service recovery: a recovery safety net when service does not go as planned.

What is the purpose of your office?

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tional connection is long-lasting and changes economic behavior. Disney's purpose is to create happiness.

The second aspect of service design is the customer. You must understand your customer holistically and provide holistic customer service. Most organizations limit themselves to doing the obvious things they know their customers care about such as wait time or number of phone rings before someone answers. You must move beyond the *obvious* service criteria to provide exceptional customer service. It is critical to know who your customers are and understand them holistically to provide exceptional customer service.

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You can do this by remembering the Customer Compass:

- **N:** Needs
- **S:** Stereotypes
- **E:** Emotions
- **W:** Wants

Utilize the customer compass to understand your customer holistically. What do customers need from us? What do customers WANT from us? What preconceived notions do customers have about us? Burst the stereotypes surrounding medical practices and create an emotional connection with your patients. Unfortunately, medical offices are associated with the stereotypes of being cold, sterile, money-hungry, and using our patients to fund our next extravagant vacation. We can—and should—prove to our patients through over-managing certain areas in the office that we truly care about them—not their wallet. An

emotional connection will drive and change economic behavior because an emotion is long-lasting and will stay with patients long after they have forgotten your name or face. They may not remember what you said, but they will remember the way you and your office made them *feel*.

Every customer has their own unique compass; what matters to one person does not necessarily matter to another. Keeping this concept in mind when trying to ‘close the sale’ or recommend a product or service to a patient can be extremely helpful. Having ‘canned’ scripts for these recommendations is useful, but it is better to customize your presentation depending upon the patient’s compass.

Staff Exercise #1

After determining your patient’s compass, a helpful exercise for you and your staff is to construct a Customer Touch-Point Map for a new or an established patient. A custom-

er touch-point is any medium (both physical and virtual) that engages a patient when interacting with your office. Each touch-point is an opportunity to impress or fail. Let’s begin: What is the first interaction a new patient has with your office? Most would answer the new-patient phone call; but how did the patient get your phone number—your website? And how did the patient get to your website—Google? As you can see just from this brief demonstration, we already have three customer touch-points: the new patient phone call, your website, and your practice’s presence on Google—and the patient hasn’t even set foot in your office! After creating the Customer Touch-Point Map with your staff, evaluate each touch-point (both physical and virtual) and discuss how the patient experience could be improved at that touch-point.

- **Phone call:** How is the phone being answered? Is everyone following

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the script? How is the tone and inflection? Is the volume of speech sufficiently loud for patients to hear without feeling like they're being screamed at? Is the rate of speech sufficiently slow for the patient to jot down any pertinent information? Or, are you/your receptionist speed-talking? Is all insurance information collected to complete an insurance verification before the patient arrives for an appointment? And are you thanking the patient for selecting your office, etc.?

- **Office website:** Is it user-friendly? Up to date? Is all pertinent office information easily accessible, with friendly pictures of you and your staff?

- **Google:** Where do you rank? Is all of your office information (address, contact information, hours) accurate and listed? Are your reviews positive?

The last aspect of designing exceptional customer service is economics. With respect to economics, it's important to remember that service is an economic asset and your return on investment may not always be immediate or measurable. Keeping this in mind, go back to your Customer Touch-Point Map and brainstorm as to how you can make the patient experience *even better*. For example, if you have water for patients in your office, perhaps you could put a Keurig machine in your lobby with individual K-cups of coffee, tea, and cocoa as well. You could have smart phone chargers in the exam rooms or reception area. Do you think patients really want to watch infomercials on your products and services on the TV in the exam room or welcome area? Instead, switch to HGTV or another enjoyable station.

Analysis of purpose, customer, and economics is wasted unless the analysis results in clearly-defined quality standards. Quality standards are operating priorities that guide consistency of customer service. These standards provide parameters for making quality decisions while delivering customer service and empower employees to make decisions.

Staff Exercise #2

Another great way to involve your staff and help them to understand the purpose and mission of your office is to work together to create the quality standards for your office. Allowing your staff to be involved with creating quality standards gives your staff a sense of involvement and ownership, increases staff morale, and provides a better office environment.

- 1) *Identify:* What words describe the ideal customer service experience you want your patients to feel?

- 2) *Select:* Select the top four.

- 3) *Define:* What is the *behavioral definition* of each quality standard? (Behaviors are observable, coachable, and trainable.)

- 4) *Prioritize:* Rank quality standards based on priority. (Prioritizing standards acts as a decision-making tool and tie breaker.)

For reference, following are Disney's quality standards, in priority order:

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- 1) *Safety*: Providing for guests' welfare and maintaining peace of mind.
- 2) *Courtesy*: Treating every guest like a VIP and respecting diversity.
- 3) *Show*: Providing seamless per-

formance; don't allow reality to interfere with fantasy.

- 4) *Efficiency*: Smooth operation of parks and resorts.

Now, follow these carefully defined quality standards to deliver exceptional customer service.

Service Delivery

Exceptional service results when you excel in three areas:

- 1) Process
- 2) People
- 3) Place

Place: Do the protocols in your office enable your people and support your purpose?

People: Your people (i.e., employees) must understand your purpose and quality standards. Remember: When you defined your quality standards, you defined the behavioral definition of each because you can teach and train behaviors. YOU need to empower your employees to be on purpose and make decisions through your prioritized quality standards. Lastly, place can either enhance or hinder your patient experience.

Place: Place is where patients meet you, whether that's physical (the office) or virtual (website).

There are four aspects of place:

- 1) Place sends signals; everything speaks.
- 2) Management of place separates the features to which customers should and should not be exposed.
- 3) Place can drive customer behavior.
- 4) Place should assist, empower, and enable people.

Staff Exercise #3

Walk (physically or virtually) through your patients' footsteps as they interact with your office: as they browse your website, as they submit a 'contact us' message, as they schedule an appointment, as they walk into the office, back to the exam room and x-ray room, into the restroom, as they check out, etc.

Think of the five senses—sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. When a patient walks into your office, what are each of their senses experiencing? Do they see dying plants, an overflowing supply closet, dust bunnies, wrinkles on your receptionist's scrubs, smell the autoclave, and hear patients checking out at the front arguing over being overcharged for a bill and a pediatric patient screaming from an ingrown toenail procedure in Room One? Imagine the perception

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this gives to a new patient—your office is cold, sterile, money-hungry, and torturing a patient in Room One.

You get only one chance to make a great first impression and whether intentional or not, you just blew it and possibly lost that patient and all their potential referrals. Now, instead, imagine a new patient walking into an office greeted with a smiling face surrounded by cool and calming wall colors and welcoming decor, smelling coffee brewing at your complimentary refreshment station, and hearing tranquil spa music playing in the background.

You get only one chance to make a great first impression.

Doesn't this paint a much prettier picture in his/her head? This first impression is much more likely to lead to repeat business and referrals.

Service Recovery

Now, what happens when service doesn't go according to plan? Poor service can and will happen. We're all human, we're not perfect, and mistakes do happen, so you must have a game plan for when it does happen. The heart of service recovery is to reconcile the relationship, not just resolve the issue. Service recovery is about salvaging potentially damaged relationships, so you must believe that the patient is of more value than the issue itself. Patients will be more upset by a practice's inability to fix a problem than they will be by the problem itself. When you are providing service recovery remember:

- Be quick.
- Be convenient (hassle-free).
- Be one time only (don't transfer multiple times).

Some offices have small gift cards (\$5-\$10), movie passes, or office 'swag' (mugs, flash drives, paper weights, etc.) on hand to use in case service doesn't go as planned.

In conclusion, exceptional service is achievable because it is derived from systems and processes you can—and should—control. You can achieve exceptional service with:

- Purposely designing an exceptional service strategy.
 - Purposely delivering exceptional service through all process, place, and people.
 - Purposely recovering from a service failure. **PM**
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Sam Guillory joined Heartland Foot and Ankle Associates in 2009 as their first employee and has been credited with much of their success. She is the director of the AAPP's Executive Manager's Group and Medical Assistant Group. Recently, Sam assisted in the creation of the CMOM-POD certification and teaches learning modules, the review course, and proctors the examination.