



# INCREASE YOUR REFERRALS BY ANTICIPATING PATIENT NEEDS

*Brandi Musgrave*

In the past, the main way to “sell” your elective surgery practice was through external advertising. Aside from word-of-mouth patient referrals, you needed the patient to walk through your doors before you could really differentiate your practice.

Today, it is estimated that 70% of the sales process is done before a patient ever picks up the phone to call your practice—or goes online to schedule an appointment.<sup>1</sup> Today patients have the power to fully research you and your competitors in great depth before you ever know they are prospective patients to your practice. They come into your practice with much more knowledge than ever before... even if that knowledge is somewhat skewed, outdated, or misguided.

The driving force behind this knowledge is no secret: it’s the Internet. Prospective patients can find anything about your practice and your competitors, anytime, on the Web. Besides looking on your own “guarded” website

and social media presence, they are reading both positive and negative reviews that have been posted by your other patients.

Unfortunately, those bad reviews seem to pop up more easily than not; people are ten times more likely to share a negative experience than a positive experience.<sup>2</sup> And it takes 12 positive experiences to make up for one unresolved negative experience.<sup>3</sup>

When you provide exemplary customer service, this will translate into a positive patient experience...one that your patients will be excited to share. The result of this positive sharing is more patient referrals from virtual sources—from people they have never met—rather than from friend, family, or acquaintance referrals. In fact, a 2013 study by BrightLocal showed that 79% of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations.<sup>4</sup>

So how can you create a positive patient experience? Here are seven tips to incorporate into your practice.

## ANTICIPATE THEIR NEEDS

Your patients often don’t know what they need until you tell them. In order to go above and beyond in terms of customer service, your practice must anticipate the hot button issues that a patient expects—and those that are unexpected.

For example, patients who come into your office for LASIK consultations are probably concerned about the cost of the procedure and have anxieties about something going wrong. Your staff needs to be prepared to address those issues in a non-threatening manner and help the patient work through the obstacles.

Alternatively, if a patient has come in for an appointment with a small child, anticipate that the child might become bored during the appointment. Offer a toy or coloring book or possibly a healthy snack (with the parent’s approval) to keep the child occupied.

Don’t just listen to their concerns or wait for them to be expressed; anticipate them.

## COMMUNICATE OFTEN

Nothing is more frustrating than wondering about your medical treatment. Make sure you communicate with patients fully during the appointment, answering all common questions before they are asked and spending the appropriate amount of time to do so. Appointment reminders and follow-up emails or phone calls to patients will also help strengthen your patient/practice relationship.

## BE ON TIME

The issue that patients complain about the most in medical practices is wait time. Plan your daily schedule to allow wiggle room if appointments run long and make sure each patient does not feel rushed during the appointment. If you see patients on time, you will be starting that experience off on the right foot.

If you cannot see patients immediately upon their arrival, go above and beyond to make them comfortable and relaxed while they wait. Offer beverages, entertainment, free Wi-Fi, etc., and keep them updated often on the status of their appointment.

## BREAK THE MOLD

Break the office protocol. Your patients are going in with certain expectations about what a medical visit looks like—and that often isn't pleasant. Invest just a little extra money to create a spa-like environment with your office space and make sure every staff member is exuding a friendly and happy vibe. Make your office a place they want to visit.

## ESTABLISH A FLOW

As patients go through the appointment (whether for a consultation or for surgery), ensure that every step is explained clearly so they have the right expectations. This starts with the front desk staff and continues through the

coordinators, technicians, and doctors. Every staff member should be aware of the patient's possible needs, anxieties, and obstacles. This process should look seamless to the patient.

## PROVIDE SUPPORT

Even though 70% of the sales process may be complete prior to entering your office, there is still that 30% that requires your staff's expertise. Empower your employees to perform at their very best. This may require specialized staff training on sales skills, interpersonal interactions, phone skills, consultation flow, service offerings and more. Be specific in what you expect from your staff so they can meet your practice's expectations and exceed the expectations of your patients.

## BE CONSISTENT

You can't expect to provide great customer service one day and a terrible experience the next and still come out on top. These tips for success must be followed each and every day.

If you follow these tips, the end result should be the patient walking out of your office saying, "Wow! That was unlike any other medical visit I've ever had!" With this mindset, patients will be excited to share their experiences.

The more positive online discussions about your practice, the better. A 2009 study by Convergys found that just one negative review or comment on the Internet—meaning a review site, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—can cause companies to lose as many as 30 customers.<sup>5</sup> Monitor your online presence often.

Don't lose out on online referrals. Make sure your practice is doing everything possible to create the very best patient experience. **AE**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Hoffman, J. (2014.) Secrets of the Ritz-Carlton's "legendary" customer service. PSA Insurance & Financial Services. <http://www.psafinancial.com/2014/05/secrets-ritz-carltons-legendary-customer-service/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Nolan, P. (2015). Mapping the buyer's journey. Sales & Marketing Management. <http://www.salesandmarketing.com/content/mapping-buyer%E2%80%99s-journey>.
- <sup>3</sup> Newell-Legner, R. (N.d.). Understanding customers. Help Scout. 75 Customer Service Facts, Quotes & Statistics. <http://www.helpscout.net/75-customer-service-facts-quotes-statistics/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Anderson, M. (2013). 2013 Study: 79% of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. Search Engine Land. <http://searchengineland.com/2013-study-79-of-consumers-trust-online-reviews-as-much-as-personal-recommendations-164565>.
- <sup>5</sup> Shannon, S. (2009). One bad Twitter "tweet" can cost 30 customers, survey shows. Bloomberg. <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&cid=afod9i5PqoMQ>.



Brandi Musgrave ([brandi@fast-trackmarketing.com](mailto:brandi@fast-trackmarketing.com)) is the business development manager at Fast Track Marketing in Broomfield, Colo.

## IN A BLINK

- Don't just listen or respond to patient concerns; anticipate them.
- Your patients often don't know what they need until you tell them.
- Be specific in what you expect from your staff.



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