

Patient Satisfaction and Health Care Today: The Trustee Perspective

Successful retailers have subscribed to such maxims as “the customer comes first,” or the “the customer is always right.” Savvy trustees will focus on the application of these principles to health care because of the strong correlation between patient satisfaction and the bottom line. Hospitals that concentrate on satisfying the “customer” are more likely to experience greater profitability, and also may witness improvement in the areas of physician recruitment, collections and a reduced risk of malpractice suits.

Why Patient Satisfaction?

“Nothing is more critical to the long-term success of a hospital than patient satisfaction,” said Rodney Ganey, Ph.D., president of Press Ganey Associates of South Bend, Ind., in his presentation during the Texas Healthcare Trustees 2002 Spring Forum in Houston.

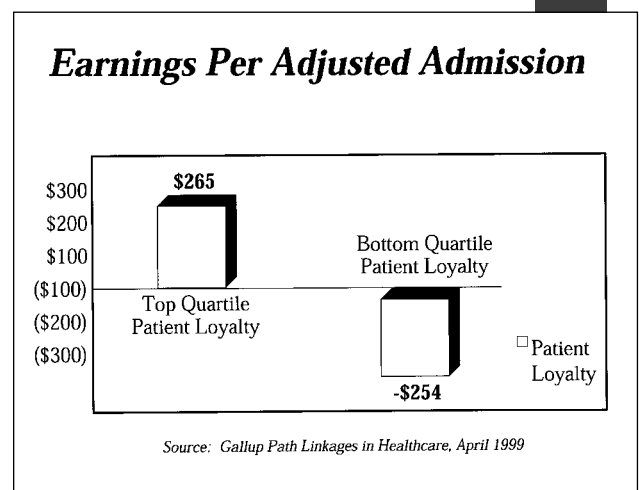
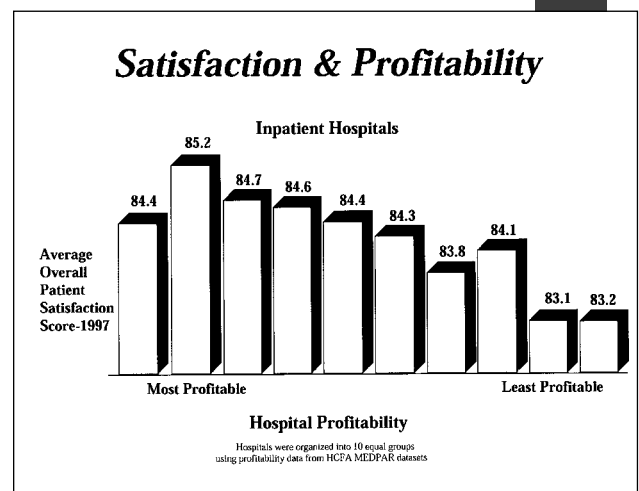
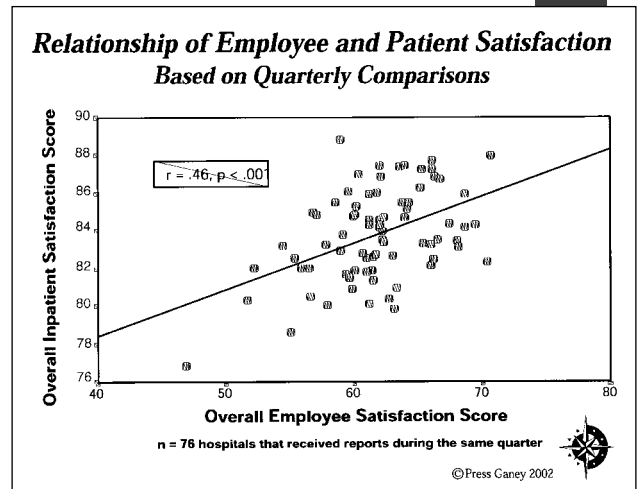
When an individual is determining the quality of a hospital, they consider many sources of information as believable. A full 50 percent of people surveyed consider family and friends to be “very believable.” Only 29 percent expressed the same confidence in their physician and a scant 5 percent regarded the media as a “very believable” source (Americans as Health Care Consumers: The Role of Quality Information, telephone survey, Kaiser Family Foundation, the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research and Princeton Survey Research Associates, October 1996.) If patients are satisfied with their hospital experience, they will tell their friends and family. On the flip side, they also will share their dissatisfaction. Either way, the comments affect the hospital’s bottom line. Ganey says trustees must ask the question, “What would make residents of this community wildly ecstatic about their health care experience?”

What Do Patients Want?

“Communication is king when it comes to customer service. If nobody notices or talks to them, you will lose them as customers,” says Ganey. Positive communication with patients and their families is a direct measure of the level of respect and dignity you show them. Not only is communication with the patient important, but also critical are conversations between employees.

Delivering respect and dignity in a hectic emergency room can be difficult, but it is essential. And whether it’s closing the curtain or exhibiting discretion when discussing a patient’s condition, protecting the consumer’s desire for privacy is paramount.

People want to know that health care professionals care about them. Ganey says that caring should be a part of every mission



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statement. Additionally, the patient wants to witness competency – from the doctor to the housekeeping staff.

Some New Wants

Consumers want to be involved in their care, something made easier by widespread Internet access. Raising the level of patient involvement can improve the quality of care, because the more a patient tells a doctor, the better the diagnosis. Patients want to be consulted about their desired level of involvement and they want to be listened to. Ganey says that a physician listens for an average of about 17 seconds – and that this can improve.

Patients expect efficiency, and become frustrated when things take what they consider an inordinate amount of time. While they may want things handled efficiently, they are not willing to sacrifice safety or increase the likelihood of errors.

Finally, consumers desire an overall positive experience.

Relationship of Employee and Patient Satisfaction

“Employees will treat customers only as well as they are treated and not any better.”

– Mary P. Malone

Ganey emphasizes the strong correlation between employee satisfaction and patient satisfaction. “A hospital wants to be a provider of choice, and an employer of choice.” Employees want the hospital administration to be visible. As with patients, communication is essential, and the extra minute spent in the hallway with an employee can go a long way in making someone feel connected and part of the team. Keep employees informed of progress made toward hospital goals.

Encourage ownership of the job and recognize service. Thank employees when they live the mission of the organization. Ask employees their preferred method of commemorating success. Whether it’s a fruit basket for the nurses or balloons for the night shift, be sure to celebrate the “wins.” “People don’t like the job if it’s not fun,” says Ganey.

Sometimes the little things can zap the fun out of a workday. So, strive to identify and eliminate the barriers. If the ice machine doesn’t work, staff can’t get ice chips for the patients. Either the patient goes without ice chips, which affects patient satisfaction, or the nurse treks to another floor, which cuts into efficiency and employee satisfaction. Find your hospital’s “ice machine” and get it fixed, Ganey advises.

Patient Satisfaction as a Financial Asset

Hospitals should consider the total cost of a lost customer. What if you lose them for a lifetime? What if you lose their family and some of their friends too? Serious financial implications can result. For example:

- Employers will listen to employees who express dissatisfaction with a hospital, and may switch coverage.
- Patient-perceived quality explains up to 30 percent of the variation in hospital profitability.
- Dissatisfied patients are associated with significant losses in revenue.
- Patient satisfaction information identifies areas of strengths and weakness in the organization, thus contributing to the quality improvement process.

Potential Payoffs

On the other hand, increased customer satisfaction can have favorable outcomes. These include:

- Elevated profitability and higher market share;
- Improved patient retention and increased patient referrals;
- Better medical compliance and reduced risk of malpractice suits;
- Increased productivity and better staff morale;
- Greater bond ratings and collections;
- Reduced staff turnover and improved physician recruitment;
- Enhanced efficiency, personal/professional fulfillment; and
- Higher organizational success.

All Aboard!

“Hospital boards can get behind patient satisfaction, and people respect board decisions,” says Ganey. For long-term survival, senior leadership and employees must support patient satisfaction as a goal. “A hospital with high patient satisfaction has a marketplace advantage. People will go where they are treated well. Think customer service and you’ll get the outcome you want financially.” ■