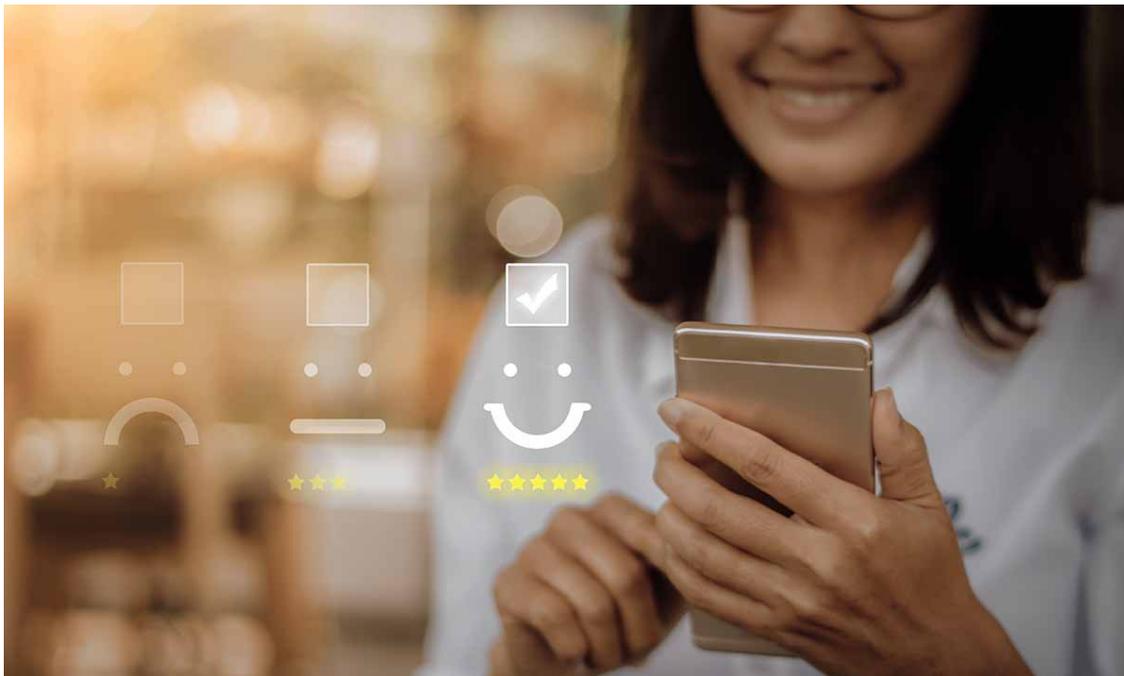


Use LEARN When Patients Complain



By Elizabeth Woodcock, MBA, FACMPE, CPC

As perceptions of value becomes ever-more important to your medical practice, now is a good time to review how you and your staff handle patient concerns and complaints about scheduling, billing, and other administrative functions. There may well be little that you can do to resolve some complaints, but a well-executed response will go a long way in boosting your practice's service reputation and keeping patients happy.

Think of complaint resolution as a multi-step effort centered around the LEARN process, which consists of listening, empathizing, apologizing, executing, resolving and (acting) now. Share this simple acronym – and the associated tips – with your team:

LISTEN. Hear patients out and try to understand why they have concerns. Avoid making a rapid, dismissive response such as “we aren’t allowed to do that” (even if that is actually the case). Pay attention to the fundamentals of positive body language, such as making eye contact and leaning towards (versus away from) the patient.

EMPATHIZE. After listening to the patient's concerns, show empathy. It will help create a bond between you and your patients, giving them assurance that they've been heard and

that you are going to work with them to resolve the issue as best you can. Again, the complaint may be about something you cannot resolve, such as a provider running late, but showing you care with your body language and words can quickly reverse hard feelings.

APOLOGIZE (even if it's not really your fault) and offer a solution. Keep the focus on what you *can* do as opposed to what you *cannot*. It may not be exactly what the patient wanted but at least you have offered a solution. Sometimes, just pointing out that there is another option can remedy the situation.

RESOLVE the problem, or at least enact the alternative proposed solution.

NOW, follow-up! Don't neglect this final step in the LEARN processes. Follow-up with complaining patients by telephone to make sure that they are satisfied with your solution to their concerns. If the complaint was about something under your control, such as lengthy waits on hold when calling the practice, then take steps to repair that function — likely it has been annoying other patients too. Consider sending a hand-written note in follow-up to really “wow” your patients: “Ms. Jones, thank you so much for bringing your concerns to our attention. We appreciate you.” You'll turn an exasperated patient into a loyal one.



Successful resolution of complaints, not to mention avoiding complaints altogether, hinges on something else that is **DIRECTLY** under your control: the quality of your staff and your internal processes.

Try and head off service complaints altogether by giving patients ways to help themselves, such as secure online options to schedule appointments, request medication renewals, make payments, and ask questions about billing.

When hiring new staff, look for evidence that the person embraces a professional commitment to delivering high quality service. Remember that professionalism is more than creating a positive impression through eye contact and body language, it's taking responsibility to be the patient's advocate on even the smallest details, like getting the right form completed or making them feel welcome in the practice.

Commit to reinforcing your customer service expectations through constant repetition. Devote time at meetings to discuss ways to improve service. Raise awareness by asking staff to describe situations in which they have experienced poor customer service themselves; turn those anecdotes from restaurants, hotels, stores, or other companies into learning moments. Do the same by debriefing and addressing your practice's customer service meltdowns without blame to the staff involved.

If you don't care *about* the patient, you can't care *for* the patient; allow your team to LEARN from one another.

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