Customer Retention – Will They Stay?

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Author: Carolyn Merriman, president

If you build it, they will come. Remember the whispered message that spurred Kevin Costner’s character in “Field of Dreams” to carve out a baseball diamond smack dab in the middle of acres of corn? Sure enough, when he built it, they came. This message can be applied to healthcare, only the emphasis is not only on getting customers, but getting customers to come back.

Years ago, it was assumed that if a hospital or other care facility was built, people would come and utilize the services. And usually, the care facility was able to decide what was best for the patients it treated. Then arrived HMOs, which started making decision on the type of care patients should receive. After the arrival of HMOs came the movement toward healthcare mergers, which resulted in fewer, but larger competitors. Now healthcare professionals must deal with the Internet and more savvy consumers. Obviously, the face of healthcare has changed.

It is possible to build a hospital, or an after-hours care facility or even build an occupational health center that people may come to and seek services. However, until you build a lasting relationship with your customers, they won’t have a reason to come back. Building lasting relationships with healthcare customers is the secret to customer retention.

The time has come to take stock in how an organization handles customer relationships. Here are some ways to keep customers coming back, including a few stories about client retention strategies.

Focus and Accountability

Until there is a strategy in place, healthcare providers will never be able to capture their share of the marketplace. Sit down with the executives and employees and ask them what they think the customer relationship plan is and how it ties into the organization’s strategic goals and relationships.

Identify the 5Ws and H about the current customer base. If there is a customer retention plan, make sure to put it on paper and hold employees responsible for meeting plan goals.

Of course, it takes lots of time and effort to get new customers. However, it takes even more time and effort to keep them. When Work Fitness, an occupational health center, Moline, Ill., merged with an area hospital system, the growing company found it simply could not be as responsive to its clients as it once was. In order to serve its current and new clients, president Pat Doherty hired a full-time customer service representative.

This representative set up mandatory meetings once a month for employees of the center. A part of each meeting is dedicated to customer service issues, says Doherty. Today, business is booming thanks to a detailed customer retention strategy that includes frequent breakfasts with its employer clients, corporate newsletters, face-to-face meetings and an employers on-site flu shot campaign.
Understanding Customers
Take a look in any bookstore and you will likely be overwhelmed by the self-help healthcare books. We live in the information age. And today’s consumers are far more sophisticated about healthcare. Consequently, people are buying healthcare services differently today. Interestingly enough, price is not the most important factor in a customer’s decision. Customers are buying the experience, the education, the service and the value they perceive they are receiving through a relationship with a healthcare provider. People buy for both personal and emotional reasons. And whoever pays attention to those reasons will end up getting and, more importantly, keeping the customer’s business.

Market Your Services
So you have done your homework and understand what customers want. How do you market to their specific needs? Tess Niehaus, Director of communications and marketing at BJC Health System, St. Louis, says her organization has harnessed the power of a relational database to fill its customer’s needs.

When prospects call BJC’s hotline, 362-WELL, they can receive physician referrals, class registration or general information. And the next time they call, BJC reps can pull up the caller’s name, usually by Social Security number, and find a history of the person’s interaction with the call center.

It has been a valuable tool for cross-marketing appropriate and citizen age-appropriate services to the consumer. Niehaus says the service is a valuable way of reconnecting with prospects and keeping them informed. And, every year, BJC tracks callers in the database to see if they have actually come to BJC.

“It allows us to segment which types of interactions have the best potential to ultimately drive business and how much business they drive,” she says.

Focus Externally
0SF Saint Francis Medical Center, Peoria, Ill., found a need in the community and filled it, thereby adding to its customer base. In 1989, when area hospitals needed a way to stabilize heart patients before sending them on to 0SF, the system seized on the then-emerging TPA drug therapy as a way to educate its referral facilities. 0SF personnel visited outlying hospitals, taught staff how to use the new therapy and answered questions. Jill Stratton, Director of Business Development at 0SF Saint Francis, says the feedback was tremendous. “Patients are coming to us in much better shape,” she says. Consequently, referring physicians are eager to choose 0SF for their patients who need specialized care.

In addition to its cardiac education program, 0SF also has a stroke, trauma and prenatal network that travels to 32 counties and 20 area hospitals.

Teach Your Employees
Everyone in your organization is responsible for the customer’s service experience. This means the billing department, lab technicians, the custodial staff, as well as physicians and nurses, must be held accountable for customer service.

It is important to recognize and reward proactive customer service behaviors in employees. Once ownership for the customer experience is created in employees, they will take pride in their work, and this will open up lines of communication both internally and externally.
Differentiate Your Business
Before demanding attention from potential customers, make sure the company’s identity is set in stone. Too many healthcare providers are preaching the same broad message and the public is not seeing the difference between providers.

At Saint Elizabeth Regional Medical Center, Lincoln, NE, special celebrations have created lasting relationships with customers, says Charlotte Liggett, Vice president of Strategic Planning and Business Development. To mark its one-year anniversary of providing full-service cardiology to the area,

Saint Elizabeth hosted a “heart heroes” picnic, inviting former patients, physicians and staff.

Another time, the hospital threw a party at a local hotel for a patient who had recovered from a particularly serious condition. While a celebration for just one patient is not the norm, it does represent the kind of atmosphere the hospital tries to foster. With this kind of differentiation, Liggett says, they are fulfilling their mission of caring for people, for life. It is present in all their services and in their contact with customers. “We want to build a 30-year relationship with our customers. We want them to go out and tell 20 of their friends what a good experience they had,” says Liggett. Their efforts have not gone unnoticed. Saint Elizabeth has seen volumes increase 17 percent in the past year.

Walk the Talk – Be Passionate
Remember, a customer relationship is constantly changing and a company will have to continually monitor and change with the attitudes of its customer base. Keep listening to the customers. Stay in touch with what other businesses, both inside and out-side the industry are doing regarding customer retention. Ask customers for feedback and act on it. Sure anyone can talk the talk about customer retention. However, if a company truly values a customer relationship, those customers will pick up on the company’s ability to fulfill promises. But best of all, they will tell others about it, and they will come back.

Carolyn Merriman, FRSA, President, Corporate Health Group, www.corporatehealthgroup.com, 1-888-334-2500