

Ten Sure-Fire Ways to Customer Satisfaction

By Barbara E. Weinstein, PhD

Customer satisfaction is very closely linked to the concept of quality which can be defined as meeting or exceeding customer expectations.¹ Until recently, delivering quality services was sufficient for a successful healthcare organization. In competitive markets, merely satisfying consumer needs will not achieve success; organizations or businesses must exceed customer expectations. A business which adopts a Total Quality Management (TQM) approach is dedicated to continuous improvement in an effort to ensure that the customer's needs are met and their expectations exceeded.²

TQM is a customer-oriented philosophy of management in which quality implies a comprehensive, systematic and process-focused method of analyzing, implementing, monitoring and upgrading the quality of every aspect of a practice.³

TQM is a fundamental way to deliver healthcare because it promotes positive results by designing systems which rely heavily on a philosophy of continuous improvement based in large part on customer input.

Key elements of a total quality management approach include viewing the customer as the judge of quality, devotion to satisfying or exceeding the consumer's needs or expectations, and continuous self-evaluation and improvement. In keeping with the philosophy of TQM, it is probable that the characteristics of the organization dispensing the product and of the vendor are important determinants of quality or customer satisfaction. One might also pre-

Consumer confidence must be inspired by practitioners' devotion to understanding and promoting consumer satisfaction. It is only through such efforts that we can convince the more than 20 million hearing-impaired "non-believers" that a hearing healthcare professional can influence the quality of their lives.



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Table 1: Leadership Traits Associated with Quality Service

- Honest, fair, straight-forward, decisive and committed.
- Good listener, empathetic, tolerant, respectful and nurturing.
- Delegates complete, complex and significant jobs.
- Sees patient satisfaction as a means and an end.
- Takes blame and gives credit when appropriate.
- Passionate about his/her vision and shares it with others.
- Makes decisions and lets others make decisions.

dict that practices which adhere to some of the strategies inherent in TQM will achieve long-term success more readily than those organizations which do not embrace this philosophy.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to patient satisfaction, but there are a number of steps that hearing healthcare professionals should take to increase the proportion of satisfied hearing aid users. The key elements of success include: organizational structure, communication, quality of the audiologic services and adequacy of technology.

Organizational Structure

A successful healthcare organization views the client/patient as a *customer*. The term customer is preferred as this acknowledges that the person seeking the service will participate actively in diagnostic and treatment decisions. Viewing the client/patient as a customer is a major paradigm shift, because it acknowledges that the patient has certain rights in the healthcare relationship. Creating a practice where the customer's needs come first in all areas can be difficult at the outset. However, in the long run, a customer-first philosophy will benefit the practice by placing the emphasis on client/patient care, and by giving staff members the necessary feedback to fully understand customer

expectations and take the steps to fulfill those needs whenever possible. According to Brown et. al.,³ a customer-first focus ensures better audiology and better outcomes.

A successful hearing care practice also should have a leader at the helm who possesses and conveys the traits listed in Table 1. In addition, a good leader is one who hires good people, then trains and helps them to improve client/patient care. In turn, good employees help the practice to become successful. The successful leader has the ultimate responsibility for the office and for ensuring patient satisfaction.

Communication

Hearing healthcare professionals have a mission to promote, enhance or maintain an individual's ability to communicate in the face of potentially disabling conditions. They have a responsibility to ensure that all staff members communicate effectively and with empathy, irrespective of disability or nationality.

Communication is the key to compliance and positive patient outcome. In fact, according to the consensus panel of the 1991 International Doctor-Patient Communication Conference, "the physician's interpersonal skills largely determine patient satisfaction, compliance and positively influence health outcomes."⁴ Communication must be interactive, positive, verbal as well as non-verbal, and must at all times reflect a caring attitude.³

The most effective communicator is one who has a social orientation, is non-judgmental, and takes the time to listen and ask questions. Compliance with treatment recommendations is more likely to occur if the conditions listed in Table 2 are met. Communication is a key element of patient satisfaction, as are the professional capabilities of the hearing care professional.

Clinical Assessment

Generally, hearing-impaired individuals rely on a physician's recommendation or word-of-mouth when choosing a hearing healthcare professional. One aspect of healthcare reform is an effort to quantify patient outcomes on the basis of objective and subjective quality of life indicators. Information about the quality of a practice from the perspective of the consumer satisfaction may assist in the selection of a qualified professional.

It behooves healthcare professionals to establish practice parameters and clinical standards to guide hearing-impaired consumers and referral agencies in the selection of a qualified professional.³ Program evaluation data demonstrating the proportion of indi-

**Table 2:
Action Steps to Promote
Compliance Via Communication**

- Your recommendations must address your client's wants, needs, beliefs and experiences.
- Prepare and disseminate educational materials regarding conditions you commonly encounter.
- Establish realistic expectations from the outset. Measure and monitor client expectations as they constantly change.
- Staff must be courteous, caring and solicitous.
- Make follow-up phone calls to clarify concerns or questions raised during the appointment.
- Review your recommendations with the client at the end of the session and determine if their needs are met.
- Return phone calls promptly.
- Personally greet and escort clients into treatment room.
- Be an active listener.

viduals fit with a hearing instrument, cochlear implant or ALD who experienced improved communication and a reduction in the psychosocial handicap associated with hearing loss is an indirect measure of the quality of a practice. Documentation of these results can be extremely helpful for overall performance assessments, identifying needed improvements, as well as for marketing efforts.

A number of techniques are available for measuring customer expectations and satisfaction with the hearing care services at a given practice. This includes post-visit survey cards, follow-up phone calls, focus groups, and self-assessment questionnaires which gauge change in communication and psychosocial status following the intervention.

The latter, referred to as *outcomes measurement*, can serve as an indirect measure of clinical skills and can be shared with consumers to demonstrate the benefits of the treatments you provide. For example, if you find that 80% of new hearing instrument users report that their hearing instruments improve communication and enhance psychosocial function potential, the practice can use this information to encourage consumers to choose your services. Similarly, if your practice has a hearing aid return rate of 5%, this would suggest that the hearing impaired who have purchased hearing instruments are quite satisfied. By providing data and explaining its significance to the consumer, it can be used as a measurement of your clinical mastery for promoting the practice.

Product Issues

The most important consideration for persons purchasing hearing instruments is the value of the device relative to price or "performance versus money spent."⁵ At practices across the country, these factors were highly correlated with satisfaction:

- Fit/comfort;
- Size of the hearing instrument;
- Ability of the instrument to improve hearing/understanding in multiple environments;
- Ongoing expense;
- Reliability of the instrument.

These variables are important determinants of consumer satisfaction according to marketing surveys recently conducted by Kochkin.

Summary

Extrapolating from the above discussion, the 10 most important ways to promote consumer satisfaction with hearing care services in general and hearing aids in particular are as follows:

- 1 Know your client's wants/needs.
- 2 Maintain expectations at a reasonable level.
- 3 Have a consumer-first focus.
- 4 Exceed consumer expectations with regard to the service and product(s) being dispensed
- 5 Emphasize the need for communication between the staff and your hearing-impaired consumers.
- 6 Listen!
- 7 Educate!
- 8 Be quality-oriented in the delivery of products and services.
- 9 Measure outcomes and how well you are meeting the needs of your clients.
- 10 Employ personnel who have excellent people skills, as well as excellent technical skills.

It is clear to hearing healthcare professionals that people with hearing impairment are well-served by hearing instruments. Consumer confidence in available technology must be inspired by the practitioners' devotion to understanding and promoting consumer satisfaction. It is only through our efforts that we can convince the more than 20 million hearing-impaired "non-believers" that a hearing healthcare professional can influence the quality of their lives. ♦

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