

The Service Encounter in Radiology:

Acing the “Moments of Truth” to Achieve Patient-Centered Care

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Radiologists are increasingly recognizing their role as direct service providers to patients and seeking to offer an exceptional patient experience as part of high-quality service delivery. Patients' perceptions of service delivery are derived from the chain of numerous individual real-time encounters that occur throughout their visit. These so-called “moments of truth” define the overall experience and form the lasting impression of the given practice in their mind. Providing excellent service can be difficult to achieve in practice given its intangible nature as well as the heterogeneity and unpredictability of the large number of patients, frontline staff, and environmental circumstances that define the patient experience. Thus, broad commitment and team effort among all members of a radiology practice are required. This article explores important areas to be considered by a radiology practice to ensure positive and meaningful patient experiences. Specific ways in which every member within the practice, including schedulers, receptionists, technologists, nurses, and radiologists, can contribute to achieving high-quality patient service are discussed. Examples of patient-oriented language that may be useful in particular scenarios in radiology practice are given. The role of the practice's physical facility, including all aspects of its aesthetics and amenities, as well as of Internet services, in shaping the patient experience is also described. Throughout this work, a proactive approach to promoting a service-oriented organizational culture is provided. By improving the patient experience, these strategies may serve to enhance patients' perceptions of radiology and radiologists.

Key Words: Patient; patient experience; service; quality; radiology practice; radiologist.

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The Service Encounter

Radiologists are increasingly recognizing their role as more than a consultation service or the “doctor's doctor,” but rather as direct service providers to patients. As such, radiologists strive not only to achieve technical excellence in imaging interpretation but also to provide an exceptional patient experience. Achieving excellence in service delivery is a critical determinant of patient satisfaction (1–6), potentially comprising its primary basis. In addition, patient satisfaction is increasingly being tracked by external stakeholders and impacting levels of reimbursement (6,7). Some studies have even shown significant associations between patient satisfaction and adherence to recommendations and clinical outcomes (2,8–12). To this end, a central component of the success, growth, and survival of a radiology practice can be the extent to which its members embrace and excel in quality service delivery.

In the business world, it is recognized that customer perceptions of service quality are largely derived from the

chain of numerous individual encounters that occur throughout their experience (13,14). These so-called “moments of truth” define the overall experience and form the lasting impression of the organization in the customer's mind (15). In radiology, a patient typically interacts with numerous individuals, including a scheduler, receptionist, technologist, nurse, and radiologist. Although each of these interactions is an opportunity to enhance the patient's experience and prove that the organization can deliver on its promise of excellent service, any single negative encounter has the potential to undermine the combined impact of otherwise positive encounters, leaving an overall negative impression (16). As it is these real-time human interactions that are most meaningful in the patient's mind (14), it is important for a radiology practice to recognize and optimize all potential encounters to enrich patients' perceptions of service quality.

Providing excellent service may seem like common sense but is in fact difficult to consistently achieve in practice. Unlike a physical product for which production can be centralized and automated, services are inherently intangible and created in the moment through the provider-patient interaction (17,18). These moments not only involve a variety of patients in unique scenarios but also a large number of staff with different backgrounds, training, personalities, and motivation, as well as their own personal issues that may influence their work (19). Such heterogeneity leads to unpredictability and enormous complexity in trying to standardize service quality. This challenge is compounded by the extremely high expectations that patients maintain

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for health care services, as well as uncertain budgets and limited resources that many practices have available to dedicate to service quality (20).

In view of these challenges, achieving excellence in service quality requires broad commitment and team effort among all members within a radiology practice. The remainder of this article will explore important areas to be considered by every practice to ensure positive and meaningful patient experiences. Although many of these concepts apply to service industries in general, specific examples of how radiologists may apply the principles in their own practice are provided.

HOW PROVIDERS IN DIFFERENT ROLES CONTRIBUTE TO POSITIVE SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

Research has identified a number of dimensions that define perceptions of service quality, which Alderson and Hoe each related to radiology practice (21,22). These dimensions include reliability (consistently performing appropriately examinations correctly and providing an accurate interpretation), responsiveness (minimizing wait times for appointments, examination starts, and interpretations), assurance (instilling confidence that patients are receiving the best of care and that the practice is knowledgeable and capable of handling their concerns), and empathy (treating patients compassionately as individuals) (23). This section describes specific ways in which every member within a radiology practice can strive to attain these attributes and contribute to the overall patient experience.

Schedulers

Schedulers have a critical role as they often serve as the initial point of contact and thus form the basis of the patient's first impression. Research in other industries has demonstrated that the earliest encounters generally are weighted more heavily in the customer's overall perception of service quality (24). The scheduling department should take into consideration a number of factors to ensure positive encounters:

- 1) Phone calls should be answered quickly, in as few rings as possible.
- 2) Once on the phone with a scheduler, patients generally should not be placed on hold. If inevitable, the patient should be informed of the expected hold time and be provided the alternate option of receiving a call back once the scheduler is available.
- 3) Schedulers should be sufficiently knowledgeable about radiology examinations to schedule them accurately and efficiently.
- 4) Schedulers should be empowered to make exceptions to standardized or block scheduling templates to allow examinations to be scheduled within a timely fashion, without needing to seek permission or transfer the patient to someone with higher authority.

Receptionists and Other Front-Office Staff

- 1) The front-office staff should recognize and greet the patient promptly on their arrival and provide instructions on how to proceed with registration. Patients should not be left waiting to be addressed while a staff member finishes a conversation with another coworker.
- 2) The patient should receive a realistic estimate of the wait time for the examination to begin. If there will be a substantial delay, the patient should receive an apology and, if possible, an explanation.
- 3) Front-office staff should maintain a warm and friendly attitude. The staff should maintain eye contact and refer to patients by formal name, preferably by Mr. or Ms. and their last name, unless otherwise instructed by the patient. This approach conveys courtesy, respect, and professionalism.
- 4) Patients should be provided privacy when registering and interacting with the office staff. Adequate space should be maintained between those in line and the patient currently checking in.
- 5) The office staff should maintain an overall professional and upbeat atmosphere. Patients should not be exposed to employee dissatisfaction or complaints about the practice, coworkers, other patients, or being stressed or tired. The sense should be that staff are happy to be working there and are alert to patient needs.

As frontline workers are the ones to interact with patients, it is these individuals who ultimately set the level of service quality and represent the experience in the patient's mind (25). Thus, the need to develop a service-oriented staff cannot be overstated. This process begins at the time of initial staff hiring and training. Beyond focus on identifying individuals with appropriate credentials and technical skills, the practice must also be attentive to applicants' character and general inclination toward service: Applicants predisposed to provide better service tend to exhibit a friendly and positive attitude, give optimistic responses, show a sense of humor, and are helpful and considerate with others (26,27).

Once hired, staff must receive proper training in service delivery. This can include education and coaching in listening skills, patient engagement, problem solving, and teamwork (28). Staff may be given specific scripts to follow in challenging patient scenarios, as well as receive feedback during simulated patient encounters (29). Stress management skills can be particularly important for staff to maintain their focus on service quality despite having a bad day or dealing with personal issues.

Technologists and Nurses

- 1) Address the patient with empathy and compassion throughout the course of the examination.
- 2) State their name and specific role when first meeting the patient.

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