

Turn Complaining Patients Into Enthusiastic Referral Sources!

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Every business gets complaints. People are people; clear communication is difficult, and there are misunderstandings even among the best of friends. In running any business, there are items that fall through the cracks, no matter how hard you try or how good your intentions. In addition, when people are sick, their patterns of disharmony cause them to filter what they hear in certain ways - not to mention the fact that some people are complainers by nature.

It is an unfortunate truth that someone unhappy with your services is 10 times more likely to be vocal about his or her dissatisfaction than a happy customer is likely to be about his or her satisfaction. None of us can afford too many "bad-mouthing" ex-patients running around spreading bad news. So, do you have to lose a patient because he or she is unhappy about something? Of course not (unless you choose to "fire" the patient on purpose, which is also an acceptable option). Here are some hints on handling unhappy patients and turning them into loyal, enthusiastic cheerleaders for your clinic.

1. Listen carefully and attentively. Let the person blow off some steam. Don't become defensive. If possible, make it clear to the patient that you are on his or her side (even if you think some of the patient's issues are unreasonable). Try to avoid an adversarial posture.
2. Ask the patient for details. Ask the basic questions: who, what, where, when and why. This lets the person you know about his/her concerns while allowing you to clarify what really happened and what you might do about it. This also allows the patient time and perspective to move from the position of simple anger to one of rationality.
3. Propose one or more solutions. If you give people an either/or proposition, they are in the driver's seat. They get to choose how the situation may be rectified. Another possibility is to ask the patient how he or she would like the situation handled. Most people will be more reasonable than you might think. In fact, statistics show that if you let the complainant choose the solution, it often saves you money (or time) in the long run. If the patient's request is unreasonable, you can come back with, "Well, here's what we can do."
4. Get it over with and move on. Make sure your patient is satisfied with the solution that is agreed upon. Make sure the patient knows you appreciated him or her bringing the problem to you directly instead of letting it fester, or just disappearing without contacting you. Also, if there are any fundamental problems in your clinic, you need to know about them or they cannot be fixed. After you've done this, take the following three steps:

- Make sure you apologize for the patient's inconvenience or discomfort.
- Make sure whatever solution(s) is agreed upon is acted upon promptly.
- Make sure every phone conversation, e-mail message, fax or letter is documented and in the patient's file. This is of vital importance if there are any legal or insurance ramifications.

Of course, taking these steps may not work every time (but let's hope you don't need to use this technique very often). You may lose the person as a patient anyway, but he or she will be far less likely to speak ill of you to others, and there's always the chance the patient may remain an enthusiastic customer. Finally, you also will know that you have treated the patient fairly, and that you did the best you could to deal with any problems or mistakes made by you or others in your clinic. Since it is ourselves we have to live with, knowing you did your best ultimately is the most important issue.

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