

Ritz customer service rules boost staff morale during difficult transitions

If a fancy hotel can make its guests feel well cared for, why can't a surgery center do the same? Spivey Station Surgery Center in Jonesboro, Georgia, discovered that using principles of hospitality could take it beyond excellent patient care to higher levels of patient satisfaction and staff morale.

A year of changes

As the year 2013 began, Spivey (pronounced SPY-vee) Station found itself in a state of administrative upheaval. Originally formed by a physician-owned joint venture with Southern Regional Medical Center, a 331-bed hospital affiliated with Emory Healthcare, Spivey Station had been acquired by Southern Regional and turned into a hospital outpatient department (HOPD).

The conversion created multiple legal and administrative complications.

Spivey Station is a for-profit ambulatory surgery center (ASC), but the hospital is not for profit. Spivey Station had to obtain a new tax identification number, Medicare number, and business license. It had to abandon its electronic medical record system for one compatible with the hospital's system. The business office staff had to learn new billing and documentation systems. The center's 30 physicians were affected also; they had to be recredentialed twice.

"You can't run an ASC as an HOPD," notes administrator Vangie Dennis, BSN, RN, CMLSO, CNOR. Spivey Station soon reverted to ASC status, requiring more paperwork.

For the 42 employees, the situation created more than administrative confusion. Many feared losing their jobs because of the acquisition, and the discontent was reflected in workplace conflicts.

"People were getting grumpy," Dennis recalls. "They complained about other departments." While patients were not affected, and satisfaction numbers remained high, they were beginning to fluctuate. Dennis believed it was only a matter of time before the staff anxiety would begin to show up in the quality of care. "The question was how to turn things around," she says.

Looking outside the box

Dennis, who has been Spivey Station's administrator for 3 years, brought her own perspective to the task. Her certification is in cosmetic laser services. Unlike medical facilities, staff at laser centers consider those who come for treatments as clients or customers, rather than patients. Staff members are trained in customer service, which includes dressing attractively, being courteous, and responding to customer concerns. "Treat others with respect. That's the key," Dennis says.

She began to do more research about how other industries approach customer relations. Then she recalled a vacation stay at a Ritz-Carlton hotel. Founded in Switzerland, the Ritz chain has been renowned for its ability to make guests feel welcome and pampered. Dennis decided to take those principles, which are widely published, and apply them to healthcare.

Employee Satisfaction Survey					
In an effort to promote improved care and employee satisfaction we are asking for your input to provide insight into what is going well and to indicate areas for improvement that will contribute to the enhancement of our workplace. Thank you.					
How satisfied are you with.....	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
1. Your job	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. Direct Manager: positive role mode	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Director	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. Your morale	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. Co-workers morale	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. Sense of department teamwork	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7. Co-workers professionalism	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8. Level of patient care provided	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9. Communication from leaders	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10. Feeling of work fulfillment	<input type="checkbox"/>				
11. Recognition for contributions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
12. Your influence of quality care	<input type="checkbox"/>				
13. Amount and frequency of praise	<input type="checkbox"/>				
14. Compensation	<input type="checkbox"/>				
15. Work life balance	<input type="checkbox"/>				
16. Job security	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Additional comments/suggestions (you may or may not include your name):					

*Employees are asked to rate supervisors, morale, teamwork, recognition, and quality of patient care, among other things.
Source: Spivey Station Surgery Center*

She began by talking with the staff. “I didn’t sugarcoat things, but I wasn’t doom and gloom, either,” she says.

The first goal was to transform the infighting that grew out of fear and frustration into a spirit of teamwork. She displayed posters giving the biblical admonition, “the last will be first and the first will be last”—meaning that people would treat each other with respect regardless of rank. A janitor or billing clerk could address a surgeon or administrator about any concerns, as long as it was done with respect.

Applying one of the Ritz principles, Dennis explained that an employee’s first customer is every other employee. The second customer is the patient, and the third is the physician. Why? “A happy staff gives good care,” she says.

I’m always wrong

In practice, seeing others as your customers means no arguing. “We are always wrong” when a customer is dissatisfied, according to the Ritz philosophy. In a customer service-based organization, commitment to service begins at the top, with the

Service Excellence Physician Survey					
In an effort to promote improved care and customer satisfaction here at Spivey Station Surgery Center, we are asking for the input of our physicians to suggest any ideas that will contribute to the enhancement of services offered here at Spivey Station Surgery Center. Thank you.					
1. Patient Concerns	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
A. Scheduling/Patient Accounts	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B. Registration	<input type="checkbox"/>				
C. Preop	<input type="checkbox"/>				
D. Intraoperative	<input type="checkbox"/>				
E. PACU	<input type="checkbox"/>				
F. Post op follow up	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. Physician Concerns	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
A. Scheduling	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B. Communication	<input type="checkbox"/>				
C. Preoperative	<input type="checkbox"/>				
D. Intraoperative	<input type="checkbox"/>				
E. Post Operative	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Miscellaneous	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
A. New Initiatives/Improvements	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Comments:					

Satisfaction with scheduling, patient admission, OR services, and communication are among the questions posed on a physician survey.

Source: Spivey Station Surgery Center

administrator and governing board. The focus of efforts is always on improvement rather than past success. The organization attracts and keeps good employees with good pay and benefits as well as trust and respect that make them feel like valued team members.

According to Spivey Station’s new guidelines, which new employees must agree to, there are six ways to demonstrate commitment to customer satisfaction:

- **Be professional.** Wear professional attire, with your name badge visible. Speak positively about the ASC, the hospital, and your fellow employees. Keep patient information confidential. Respond promptly and courteously to requests.
- **Be a team player.** Don’t let internal disagreements interfere with patient care. Work to resolve conflicts promptly. Help other employees when asked. Put the good of patients, colleagues, and the ASC before your own interests.
- **Be competent.** Follow all hospital and ASC policies and protocols. Work to improve the experience of all people with whom you come in contact.

- **Be responsive.** Escort patients to their next destination. Offer assistance. Anticipate the needs of others and then address them.
- **Be respectful.** Uphold the dignity and self-esteem of patients, their families, and other employees. Respect the individuality of every person.
- **Communicate well.** When walking past someone, make eye contact at 10 feet, and say hello at five feet. Use correct telephone etiquette. Listen attentively and, when speaking to others, use terms they will understand. Thank each patient for choosing Spivey Station Surgery Center.

That's not all; Dennis asks supervisors to seek feedback from their staff members. A suggested list of questions covers an appraisal of the supervisor, the employee's sense of the level of morale and teamwork in the department, quality of patient care, the amount of praise and recognition the employee receives, and estimates of job security and work-life balance.

Another survey goes to physicians, asking about their levels of satisfaction with scheduling, patient admission, OR services, and communication. Patients also complete a satisfaction survey, which includes space to recognize staff members who were especially helpful.

The gold standard

The Ritz-Carlton hotel chain has been known for superior service since its founding in the early 20th century. Nowadays, Ritz capitalizes on its reputation with its leadership center in Chevy Chase, Maryland, where consultants train managers in other industries, including healthcare, to follow the model.

The leadership principles are called "gold standards." While slanted toward hotel activities, they translate easily to other functions. "I continuously seek opportunities to innovate and improve the Ritz-Carlton experience" is one of the 12 service values.

Diana Oreck, vice president of the leadership center, says the principles apply to healthcare because patients have come to expect better treatment than in the past.

"We no longer live in a transactional economy," she says. People do not want to feel like 'just another procedure.' Today it is all about creating unique, memorable, and personalized experiences. When I arrive and check in, I want to receive a warm and genuine welcome."

Surroundings matter as well, Oreck notes. Convenient parking, clear signage, and clean facilities are important to the customer experience. "If there are live plants in the waiting area," she adds, "they'd better be alive. If you cannot keep your plants alive, how can you take care of me?"

In the case of Spivey Station, application of the Ritz principles has led to higher morale all around. That's a good thing, because the ASC may be sold later this year, as a joint venture with Emory Health System. Staff would then become Emory employees.

But this time, Dennis says, no one is worried—they know how to manage change with teamwork and professionalism. ❖

—Paula DeJohn

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