

Customer Service Excellence in Outpatient Imaging

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As it is not one swallow or a fine day that makes a Spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy...these virtues are formed in man by his doing the right actions.

—Aristotle

THE ESSENTIAL

Demonstrating value is more important than ever, and private practice radiologists are uniquely positioned to successfully compete in the current health care market. Under a volume-based care model, the pursuits of promptness, accuracy, and safety might have made radiologists overlook other opportunities to provide value. These opportunities abound as payer models transition to value-based health care, some of which are highlighted by the ACR's Imaging 3.0™ initiative and the 2020 multisociety expert statement on radiology in the era of value-based health care [1]. Private practice radiologists must adapt to and lead this change to maintain autonomy from employed physician models and to prevent displacement by other competitors or non-physician-owned groups. To demonstrate value to our imaging center partners, we must challenge ourselves to be more than accurate, safe, and efficient; we must provide excellent customer service.

But before we discuss excellent customer service, we must define

excellence; without a goal in mind, we are aimless. Luckily, the philosopher and historian Will Durant distilled Aristotle's statement into this more concise citation: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit" [2].

Excellence in customer service is always doing the right thing for your customers as a habit. And it is critical to realize that we do not have just one type of customer; we are not a storefront with patients merely consuming services. Yes, we serve patients and their families, but we also serve health care systems, referring clinicians, and imaging center owners.

SEVEN WAYS TO LEAD BY EXAMPLE

As an outpatient imaging center clinical leader, both patients and employees are looking to you for guidance. The habit of excellence will inspire others and raise the bar of quality in an iterative process. The following are seven conceptual areas where we can strive for excellence.

1. Listen to the Customer: Add Value

Excellence is about surpassing expectations and going above and beyond; with work and planning, you can impress your customers. For example, a referring clinician may have specific needs regarding a report, which

informs the treatment plan or assists with billing. Providing specificity in reports adds value that will not be easily supplanted by a less vigilant competitor. Other examples include comparison with prior examinations, specific measurements to guide decision making, or an explicit statement of "no evidence of granulomatous disease" when screening for tuberculosis. Finally, don't rely solely on lists to decide when to call findings; calling nonemergent but unexpected findings gives you an opportunity to show your sincere interest in patient care.

Referring clinicians are not our only customers, however; this added value benefits patients as well. Patients tend to understandably focus on being imaged efficiently, safely, and comfortably. But sometimes patients may ask to see their images, and you should offer to review their studies with them when appropriate. The imaging center owner may want staffing for after-hours or weekend imaging, and your group should partner to support reasonable initiatives when possible. Many requests can be met with a variety of approaches, but having clear conversations with each customer is crucial. These are just a few examples of how we can provide added value to our customers as we aim for excellence.

2. Answer the Phone

Inefficient care and dissatisfaction due to long hold times and complicated

phone trees are ubiquitous. You don't need to be in medicine to have experienced frustrations with automated phone systems and the inability to reach a living, breathing human being. Outpatient imaging centers should strive for a 0% call abandonment rate; that is, a phone call should never be missed because we were too busy to answer. Radiology reading room assistants can be useful to reduce call abandonment and have been shown to improve triaging of incoming phone calls as well as many other aspects of radiologists' communication [3]. Be available to take calls from referring offices and patients who have specific, detailed questions that staff members may not be able to answer effectively. Assist staff members in clarifying how they can perform their roles better and provide the best possible care for not only the case at hand but each that follows. Distributing your personal number to referring clinicians helps them order the correct study, builds your personal relationships, and increases referrer satisfaction, as highlighted in one Imaging 3.0 case study [4].

3. Don't Make Empty Promises

Be honest about limitations. If a subspecialist won't be available after hours, don't make that commitment. If a cancer follow-up can't be done until after a long holiday weekend, make it clear to the patient if asked. Taking personal responsibility for specific requests will build trust as you prove your integrity and reliability. You should delegate appropriately, but remember to verify that the task was completed, or your credibility will suffer. Providing 24/7 radiology subspecialization is a challenge for many private practices and may not be feasible depending on the circumstances. There are many solutions, however, ranging from final

interpretations by teleradiology services to preliminary reports that are finalized by a local subspecialist as soon as possible. In both instances, radiology groups would benefit from following up the original interpretation and verifying that the final report reaches the referring service in a timely manner.

4. Resolve Complaints

Your customers are not always right, but their complaints are typically valuable. The first step in improvement is to acknowledge that there is a problem. Unless you are listening to complaints, you are not learning how you can improve. Consider solutions as a team with those involved, and then improve processes to ensure it doesn't happen again. Create a culture in which team members feel comfortable doing their jobs and working to make their jobs better when possible. For example, referring physicians often have concerns regarding the level of radiologist certainty, which can be addressed by adopting a standardized language across the practice, resulting in improved satisfaction for both radiologists and referring providers [5].

5. Train People

To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, "an investment in training pays the best dividends." Everyone has a role to play in customer service excellence, from the front desk staff to the radiologists. As often as possible, radiologists should be teaching the medical jargon, the science and technology, and setting an example of excellence. One simple step is to train all staff members to review clinical or pertinent information ahead of time. If they can detect an incorrect request, such as the wrong body part, unnecessary contrast, or even the wrong modality, poor utilization of resources and communication, as well as frustration, can be avoided. As they improve, staff

members will ask questions less frequently, ensuring that each individual who interacts with a patient during an encounter will significantly improve overall patient "customer" satisfaction [6].

6. Be Helpful: Success Follows

It might seem counterintuitive to believe that avoiding unnecessary waste in imaging would lead to greater rewards under the current fee-for-service payment system, but that's exactly what happens. Not all patients need the more expensive study, not all patients need contrast, and not all patients need multiple follow-up examinations. By acting with integrity, you will build trust among your referrers, with the knowledge that their patients will get the appropriate study every time, which will increase volumes through loyalty and globally reduce inefficiency. This will be particularly helpful during the CMS transition to clinical decision support for advancing imaging after the end of the current "operations and testing period." As many referring providers attempt to navigate the uncertainty of getting studies approved, radiologists can provide helpful guidance and tools, such as the R-SCAN initiative, and work to make clinical decision support both effective and less burdensome for all involved [7].

7. Do the Right Thing

As radiologists, we have an important job to do, and career satisfaction comes from excellence. We can satisfy our ethical, moral, and spiritual career needs by making a habit of doing the right thing. This also results in personal wellness and can help prevent burnout. We are lucky that our work makes an important, valuable societal contribution by making a difference in people's lives. Always do the right

thing; a habit of excellence is an end in itself.

THE MANTRA

Radiologist-owned outpatient imaging centers have recently decreased in number, with venture capital and outside investors driving acquisitions as well as a result of hospital consolidation or as a hedge against a site-neutral payment model [8]. As physician partners, we must work together to ensure mutual success with our customers. In the spirit of Imaging 3.0, these outpatient imaging challenges represent opportunities. Radiologists increasingly find

themselves challenged to prove their high value. Complacency is our enemy. Make a habit of excellence.

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