

Kristin Baird

Customer
Service
in
Health Care

***A Grassroots Approach to Creating a
Culture of Service Excellence***



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Customer Service in Health Care

A Grassroots Approach
to Creating a Culture
of Service Excellence



Kristin Baird

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About the Author

Kristin Baird has been in health care since 1977. She is currently vice president of business development and marketing for Watertown (WI) Area Health Services and president of Baird Consulting, Inc. Ms. Baird's expertise in health care marketing and communications began as a clinician and freelance writer. Her experience as a registered nurse, marketer, administrator, and consultant has shaped a keen understanding of customer service from a variety of perspectives. Her interest and expertise in customer service stems from practical, on-the-job experience as well as research.

An experienced focus group facilitator, speaker, and trainer, Ms. Baird has given speeches and seminars on health care marketing, communication, and customer service to dozens of groups in a variety of health care settings.

Ms. Baird holds a bachelor of science degree in nursing and a master's degree in health services administration.



Preface

Have you ever stood in the checkout line at the grocery store and been caught up in the magazine headlines for the dozens of diets claiming to melt pounds off you like butter in the sun? “Try this and you’ll lose anywhere from 10 pounds in one week to 50 pounds in a month!” I have to admit that more than once I have picked up those magazines in the hope of finding the quick fix. Maybe this one would be the magic bullet. Maybe it’s easier than I thought. However, anyone who has battled with weight problems will tell you that fad diets won’t work. What does work is a lifelong commitment to a healthy, well-balanced diet, moderation, and regular exercise. This isn’t rocket science. But knowing this information and living it are two very different things. Sitting on your sofa reading about fitness and nutrition will only improve your mind. In order to set a change into motion, you need to apply that knowledge into action.

Creating a culture of service excellence is very similar to living a healthy, well-balanced life. This book can’t make a tabloid-style promise of an organizational turnaround in 30 days or less. It does, however, present the fundamentals essential

to changing attitudes and improving performance that will bring individuals closer to the organization's mission and, in turn, in step with specific values and standards. Like any lifestyle change, a lasting organizational change requires knowledge, vigilance, goal setting, perseverance, and the ability to recognize and reward progress. But, above all, it requires a strong desire to change that is founded in a core belief that it is the right thing to do—for the patient, the employee, the physicians, and the public that you serve.

Slapping together a reward program or customer service training program without linking it to standards and core philosophies would be like getting liposuction to cure obesity. You may look better on the surface for a while, but the erosion of the internal systems will eventually kill you. Cosmetic or superficial changes won't alter the core of customer service.

This book is like a blueprint and action plan for remodeling. It will help you to check the foundation, reinforce the support beams, and then start remodeling. The foundation is what your organization stands for. It is the mission and the history that were there at the inception. The support beams are the middle management that will either give the structure stability or hasten a collapse. And, finally, the walls, floors, and fixtures are the line employees who make the finished product.

Figure 2-1 in chapter 2 outlines a road map for success. Presented as a storyboard/flowchart, the road map provides a visual schematic to follow on your journey toward customer service excellence. The diagram demonstrates that building a culture of service excellence takes commitment at all levels of the organization. Like any new habit, practicing customer service excellence doesn't feel natural at first and often feels downright uncomfortable.

This book is written based on personal experiences. There are several citations from reliable researchers in the field, but the core content is based on my 20 years of experience in a variety of health care settings ranging from nursing homes and rural hospitals to large integrated systems. My perspective

includes experience as a nurse assistant, an RN, a nurse manager, marketing and public relations director, consultant, and administrator. It was from this variety of past experience that I drew when introducing a customer service program at Watertown Memorial Hospital in 1997. As an organization, we are still growing and improving in the area of customer service, which is as it should be. The real work is never finished in customer service. If you want a quick fix or a one-shot training session, this book is not for you. You will only benefit from one or two chapters. If, however, you are willing to take a critical look at your organization, core values, and commitment to the well-being of customers, staff, and community, this book will provide you with a wealth of ideas and inspiration.

Health care is really the only profession rooted in a history of healing bodies, minds, and spirits. From its very beginnings and throughout recorded history, health care providers have been servants with a mission of healing. As we evolved, however, we became caught up in the science of medicine, technology, and pharmacology; and miracle drugs, state-of-the-art surgical techniques, and powerful imaging technology helped to foster the scientific focus. Simultaneously, we were becoming big business. We focused more on the cash flow, market share, and financial ratios and, in doing so, allowed the human elements of health care to slip through our fingers. Our role as true servants or, in modern vernacular, service-minded individuals was lost or at least misplaced. It's time to take it back. It's time to reclaim our role in society as the truest of servants. Then and only then will we be fulfilling the needs of our communities.



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CHAPTER ONE



Why Customer Service?

Objectives

After completing this chapter the reader will:

- Recognize customer service excellence as an essential component of business development
- Understand the financial repercussions of poor customer service
- Understand the levels of marketing achievement and the value of positive word of mouth