Build Bluegrass Loyalty

Concentrating on recruitment, personalized care, amenities and reputation both internally and in the community enhances patient experience.

By John Henson

We’ve heard of frequent flyer programs and frequent shopper programs, why not frequent patient programs? Admittedly, no one wants to be a frequent patient, and hospitals would prefer people stay healthy. However, one of the benefits of incenting patients to consistently use the same small pool of medical providers is that the providers become more familiar with the patients’ medical conditions, and therefore better able to counsel patients about how to stay healthy. The obvious question is, “What can a hospital do to build patient loyalty?” Here are five suggestions.

1. Recruit and retain the best nurses and train them to be superior communicators. Every staff member needs to be trained how to connect with patients and their families in a positive manner. However, patients spend more time with nurses, so focus on recruiting the best nurses. The next step is to train nurses to be superior patient communicators, meaning good listeners and sensitive to how they can best share information with patients. Sadly, this work can be sabotaged by nurse turnover due to excessive administrative headaches and an emotionally abusive work environment. Reducing nurses’ administrative burdens and creating a positive work environment is a key senior leadership responsibility.

2. Offer personalized care. Delivering personalized care means spending time at the bedside discussing the patient’s conditions and ensuring that the patient and family members understand the care plan. It also means showing patience. Many patients are reluctant to use the nurse call button because they sense medical personnel are annoyed by it. Part of offering personalized care is conveying that a patient is the only patient on the floor. We’re so serious about making patients feel welcome that we have adopted a zero tolerance policy for rudeness. If anyone is seen treating a patient in a fashion considered to be unfriendly, the offending employee is terminated, no questions asked. The basic rule of thumb is to pretend every patient is your own mother. Employees who do that will exhibit the appropriate amount of respect, service and concern.

3. Protect the organization’s reputation by reducing medical errors, but remember the organization’s reputation is made up of more than medical care. Our own long-term focus on quality has resulted in Baptist Regional being recognized with ISO 9001 certification, the only hospital with that designation in the state. However, eliminating all medical errors is beyond the realm of possibility. When mistakes happen, apologize and even publicize them if it helps everyone to move on more quickly. In my personal life, I’m far more accepting and loyal toward a business that tells me a mistake was made and is willing to do whatever it can to fix the situation than one that hides the error and allows me to discover it on my own later. However, medical quality isn’t the only factor influencing an organization’s reputation. Healthcare workers need to remember that the patient experience begins as soon as the patient or family member enters the parking lot. It ends when the patient is home and receives a thank you card from our hospital and a follow-up call from one of our team members.

4. Offer amenities that make patients and family members feel comfortable and want to choose your facility for care. Create services that complement your organizational strengths—hospitals with cancer centers might consider offering on-campus image spas or in-room image consults for women undergoing breast surgery or chemotherapy. Find ways to partner with local business to offer value-added services for patients and family members, such hotel shuttles for family members who must stay near the hospital.

5. Extend services into the community to build a positive perception of the organization. Sponsoring free support groups for cancer patients, senior health evaluations and mental...
health or hearing screenings builds positive equity for the organization, and it’s far easier to generate a positive patient experience if the foundation is strong.

It is important to find supporting resources when taking on this important effort and one place I turn to is The Beryl Institute, a Bedford, Texas-based organization devoted to helping healthcare organizations understand how to create the optimal patient experience. I’ve learned that improving the patient experience is not something that emerges from simple training classes. It is driven by a commitment across all levels of a healthcare organization. It must be supported by senior management and the board and built into the performance expectations and evaluations of all members of a hospital team. Healthcare organizations that don’t make this commitment, won’t last long in the coming value-based purchasing era.

*John Henson is president/CEO of Baptist Regional Medical Center in Corbin, Kentucky.*