

5 Steps to Improving the Patient Experience

BY COLLEEN SWEENEY, RN, BS, CSP

The last decade has introduced changes to the healthcare environment like never before. Perhaps the most dynamic change of all is the shift toward improving the patient experience. A positive patient experience has the power to improve outcomes, lower costs and reach more patients.

With a commitment to providing a comfortable environment to help achieve improved outcomes, hospitals must deliver an engaging patient experience that speaks directly to patients and families. As such, patient experience has become an essential goal for any successful hospital or integrated health system.

We know that the patient experience is a journey without a destination. No one will ever say, “Our hospital has the perfect solution to the patient experience.” It’s an evolution with many different facets, strategies and outcomes.

Hospitals are most effective at delivering an engaging patient experience when staff have a deep motivation for both doing what’s right for patients and families. Such an initiative requires healthcare leaders to take a step back and analyze their own facility from the top down.

1. Recognize That Patients Are Savvy Consumers.

We live in a culture of immediacy where community feedback impacts many of our decisions. With a smartphone, it takes

only seconds to find the nearest, highest-rated coffee shop or restaurant. Reliable information is also available in an instant: hold your phone up to the stars, and it will tell you what constellation you’re looking at in an instant.

Today’s patients are savvy consumers and have adapted many of the review, recommendation and information services that they use in their day-to-day lives to help them distinguish between high- and low-quality care. Though the healthcare industry has made progress, our system has been behind the curve in many consumer and technology trends.

In our current economic and healthcare climate, the burden of payment has shifted and patients are now more responsible for their own out-of-pocket expenses. Hence, they have taken more ownership over healthcare decisions. Just like with any other consumer good or service, patients can now shop around for the best healthcare experience for their situation – and they do. With hospital scores and reviews easily accessible and more connected social networks, finding the best care experience is easier than ever.

With this shift in how patients research and “purchase” healthcare comes the necessity for differentiation. As a hospital leader, you must always ask yourself, “What can my hospital provide to stand out to these savvy consumers?” Hospital

amenities and convenience have come to be expected as part of the overall care package. The data now indicates that a key competitive differentiator is experience. Patients are looking for enhanced amenities such as a room service, valet service, integrative therapies such as massage, as well as top-quality entertainment offerings.

Healthcare leaders must be mindful of this shift at every phase of the patient care journey and introduce unique amenities that will stand out to consumers and make their stays more enjoyable.

2. Hire Passionate Staff.

Healthcare has become a very competitive market – not only for those savvy consumers referenced above, but also for health systems looking to recruit and retain top talent. Despite all our technical advances, at its core, healthcare is a business that revolves around people. When hospitals are unwavering in their commitment to put their people first – both patients and staff – only then can there be true emotional commitment that defines employee engagement.

Responding to the challenges of nursing shortages, coupled with a staff burdened by ever-increasing demands, hospitals are focusing on programs that lead to an improved culture – one that is representative of an attractive employment destination where leadership and staff are aligned toward a common goal.

Recruiting staff who are as passionate about the patient experience as they are about providing top-notch clinical care is an imperative – and often overlooked – strategy to impact a positive enhancement to an organization’s culture.

To examine the relationship between the patient experience and hospital financial performance, Accenture analyzed hospital income margin data reported to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and survey results from the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS). Although HCAHPS is just one of many evaluative tools measuring patient experience, its widespread U.S. adoption makes it a good proxy for health consumer experience.

3. Create a Comfortable Environment for Patients and Families.

Between staff rounds, testing and medication administration, patients face constant interruptions during their hospital stays. While necessary for top-quality care, these clinical activities are a distraction from rest and the healing process.

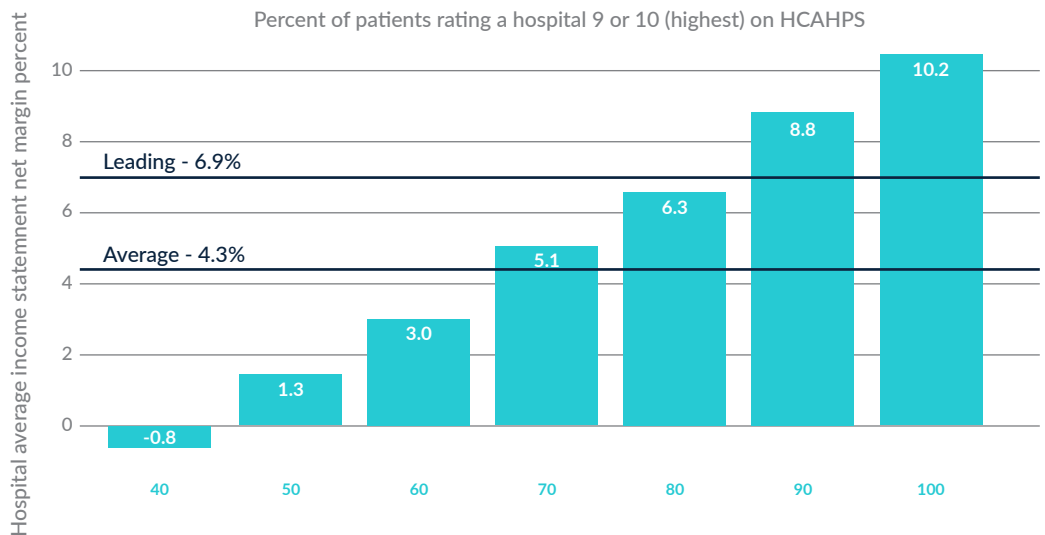
Even though it’s a critical component of any patient stay, providing patients with adequate quiet time continues to be a huge challenge. Hospitals are by nature noisy places, with alarms, monitors, conversations in rooms and hallways, overhead paging, and nurse and physician phones. However, we can take steps to provide a more restful environment by focusing on the things that are within our control, and the patients’ perception of these sounds.

While we consider ourselves patient-centric, we frequently overlook tactics that improve the day-to-day healthcare experience. More and more hospitals are working with healthcare vendors to implement amenities that make the hospital room feel more like home. What patient doesn’t want to be transported from the reality of their situation? High-quality amenities, like movies and television, spiritual and meditative content, as well as free Wi-Fi or relaxation tools, all boost the overall patient experience, and patients will naturally gravitate to facilities where they feel at home.

4. Create a Brand that Stands Out in the Community

In addition to following the recommendations of physicians, patients are increasingly taking into consideration what people around them say; we value the opinions of our families, friends,

Figure 1. Hospitals that offer patients a better customer experience tend to perform better financially. Hospitals rated a 9 or 10 on HCAHPS are more likely to have higher margins



Sources: Accenture analysis, HCAHPS Hospital Survey, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

neighbors and co-workers. And what do people share with one another? Their experiences. And that word inevitably becomes the brand that is recognized in the community and what ultimately drives patients toward or away from your facility.

In a recent study from Accenture entitled “Happy Patients, Healthy Margins,” data indicated there is a correlation between patient experience scores and overall profitability.

A strong patient experience must be part of your brand to succeed in today’s healthcare climate. It takes a determined leader to find out what’s really important to his or her patients. Of course, safety and quality are the industry’s top priority, but we must look for opportunities to connect with our patients as people. It comes down to strong communication: this means not shying away from opportunities to interact with patients. The more you connect with patients, the more insight you’ll have into your unique patient population. Patient experience strategies are the most powerful when they truly address the pain points of our diverse patient populations.

5. Engage Your Staff in All Efforts.

Patient experience leaders now have a seat at the decision-making table and it’s imperative we continue to fully engage clinical staff to ensure patient needs are met. We must recognize the importance of bedside best practices and integrate those with patient experience efforts in a way that supports both clinical workflow and a patient-centric culture.

When you are researching and beginning to craft your patient experience campaign, do not dismiss the voices of the front-line clinical staff. Instead, host regular meetings and ask clinicians what they’re seeing on the floor. What strategies are missing? What isn’t working so well?

And be aware that the work doesn’t end once you have determined what tactics to invest in. A good communication plan is a critical component to the success of your patient experience plans. Learn from your stumbles, but enthusiastically celebrate successes—both big and small. ■

About Swank Patient Entertainment

Swank Patient Entertainment partners with hospitals nationwide to provide a patient engagement program consisting of entertainment, relaxation and education content. Using hospital-friendly systems, we play our licensed content to all patient room and common area televisions – and even have an option for mobile devices for on-demand streaming. We partner with nearly 1,000 facilities nationwide to provide customized solutions to appeal to all patient demographics. Swank Patient Entertainment boasts a library of new release movies, TV shows, silver screen classics and relaxation content perfect for all patients and visitors.

About Colleen Sweeney, RN, BS, CSP

Colleen is a skilled communicator who instantly wins over audiences. Having spent a lifetime in hospitals as a nursing student, nurse’s aide, nursing assistant, graduate nurse, registered nurse, educator, manager, and director, Colleen knows healthcare. For the past twelve years, she held positions as Director of Innovation and Director of Ambassador and Customer Services at a hospital system in Indiana. Concentrating on the patient experience, Colleen conducted a three-year study about patient fears. Her research in “The Patient Empathy Project™” made her the nation’s thought leader in truly patient-centered care.

As a member of the National Speakers Association, certified facilitator with the Tom Peters Company, and founder of Sweeney Healthcare Enterprises, Colleen is on a mission to transform healthcare. She holds degrees in nursing and business, and a master’s certificate in project management.