

What Business Are You In?

Spurring Word of Mouth and Repeat Visits in Urgent Care

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Think about a time when you quit using a business that you had frequented in the past. Perhaps it was a restaurant, a retail store, an airline, or a hotel. Your reasons are probably quite personal and could have varied from dissatisfaction with a single incident, a pattern of service deterioration over time, a change in your consumption needs or budget, or even a new competitor opening with better prices, quality or convenience.

What did you do? If you're like most people, odds are you did nothing to inform the business you formerly patronized that it did something to offend you—you simply made a “mental note” to next time avoid the business and perhaps try a competitor instead. That's because when a consumer abandons a business—she rarely picks up the phone to review what they could do to retain her—she quietly “votes with her feet.” Likewise, it's not reasonable to expect that once-loyal urgent care patients will notify the center's leadership team when their facility gets “crossed off the patient's list.”

What do Urgent Care Patients Expect?

On its surface, the urgent care transaction is simple—the patient walks in, fills out some paperwork, is diagnosed by a physician, and leaves with script in hand. But within each of these steps is a multitude of patient expectations regarding how the provider and staff should behave, how the center's processes and systems should function, the way physical facilities should look and feel, and the types of information provided and received by the patient.

Generally speaking, patients expect the foremost professionalism of medical establishments and demand that urgent care centers:

- Keep their promises and commitments—especially when time and money is involved. People don't want to wait when they have a specific time commitment and they don't like to pay more than the up-front quoted price;
- Show flexibility in dealing with special situations or requests—businesses are considered “unjust” when they don't help someone who needs help;
- Have friendly providers and staff who listen to the patient and treat him/her with courtesy and respect; and
- Be honest. If a provider or staff member doesn't know the answer to a question—it's better to tell the patient they need to “do research and answer at a later time” than to lie or misinform a patient.

The degree to which an urgent care center meets these expectations, patients will be satisfied with their experiences, return to the center, and tell friends and family to do likewise.

Successful Businesses Strive to Exceed Customer Expectations

Think of some businesses you patronize who “do” customer service particularly well—names like Apple, Disney, Southwest Airlines, Starbucks Coffee, and Nordstrom Department Stores probably come to mind. These best-in-class organizations differ from their competitors by their emphasis on spurring positive word of mouth and fostering repeat customers for future business, their use of customer surveys and mystery shoppers to evaluate the quality of their customer experiences, and their training of front line staff to assess customers' satisfaction levels. They understand not only the *benefits of customer satisfaction*, but also the *detriments of customer dis-satisfaction*.

To illustrate—consider an example outside of urgent care, such as what happens when a hotel disappoints a guest:

- The guest may vacate the property immediately, putting cash in the register of a competitor and leaving the hotel with an unsellable room that could have been occupied by a different guest;
- The guest may rage at, insult or demoralize staff, leading to costly turnover, “stress leave,” or negative employee-management relations;
- The guest will likely not return to the property in the future;
- The guest will probably tell 5-6 friends about his/her unhappy experience; and
- The guest might post online reviews on websites like Yelp and TripAdvisor.com seen by hundreds of other people.

Moreover, if it’s a branded hotel—like a Hyatt, Hilton or Holiday Inn—the guest who had a bad experience in Philadelphia will likely avoid the chain’s property in Pensacola, and the guest’s retelling of the bad experience will damage all other hotels of the same brand. Giving a competitor a chance to capture a loyal guest may also mean the hotel chain never sees the disgruntled guest again resulting in potentially tens of thousands of dollars of lost revenue to a competing chain.

For urgent care, the same concepts apply but due to the sensitive nature of health care, “disgruntled patients” go beyond lost revenue—some go so far as filing formal complaints with the State Medical Board, their insurance companies, and federal agencies, which can result in costly legal responses on the part of the urgent care operator.

Service Failure Recovery is Paramount

Best-in-class service organizations know that some customers will always be disappointed because people and systems are imperfect and the expectations of customers vary. And customers are, for the most part, reasonable in that they understand some failures are inevitable. But what customers will not accept is when a company refuses to fix a failure or fixes it poorly.

For the urgent care operator, when mistakes occur, the best strategy is to:

- Commit to fix the problem immediately with no questions asked. If a problem cannot be fixed immediately, then follow-up with the patient and keep the patient informed;
- Solve the problem the first time—patients have no tolerance of “double failures”—consider the chance to recover a “one time shot;” and
- Leave the patient better off than before the error. Ensure that the patient feels safer, better about him or herself, and feels justly treated. Effective service recovery can actually result in greater patient satisfaction and loyalty than if no error had ever occurred.

Even if service recovery results in foregone revenue or additional costs related to a single patient encounter—consider such a marketing investment in repeat visits and positive word of mouth.

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When the question is asked of urgent care operators “what business are you in,” the most frequent responses allude to “episodic treatment of minor injury and illness.” While not necessarily incorrect—a more meaningful description could be that urgent care is in the “patient satisfaction” business, or more specifically, in the business of “capturing repeat business and spurring positive word of mouth.” That’s because long-term, urgent care centers cannot thrive on single, once-in-a-lifetime episodes—they must build a base of loyal long-term patients. And this occurs by meeting patient expectations on a consistent basis and effective service recovery when delivery falls short of expectations.