

Eight Principles for Improving Your Urgent Care Operation

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The number of health care choices available to consumers for minor illness and injury is rapidly expanding. Not only is the urgent care industry adding another 500 centers this year—meaning in some communities patients have several competing urgent care options—but pharmacy-affiliated retail clinics, walk-in family practice offices, freestanding emergency room centers and hospital ED fast-tracks are all vying for the same foot traffic as your urgent care center. When there is competition, to be successful, an urgent care center must stand out in consumer's minds as the first place to go when a minor illness or injury occurs—and for the urgent care operator, that starts with taking the patient's perspective in everything you do.

1) A patient's first impressions upon entering the facility set his or her expectations for the visit.

Has a patient ever walked in to your urgent care center, signed in, sat down, and then left without being seen by the doctor? Do you know, or will you ever know, the reason why he or she left? The answer may lie somewhere in the cliché, "you never get a second chance to make a first impression."

Consider the patient's perspective upon entering your center. Is he/she greeted with a smile and a friendly "how may we help you?" Or does the greeting entail a barrage of permanent and copy paper signs instructing the patient to "sign in here and wait to be called," "turn off cell phones," "do not change the TV channel or thermostat," and "notify the nurse if waiting more than 15 minutes?"

What is the appearance of front office and waiting area? Is the front desk organized and free of clutter? Is the waiting area decor inviting to the patient, is there a variety of seating arrangements including sofas and chairs, and does it include basic amenities like Wi-Fi, television, coffee and bottled water? And perhaps most important—is the center spotlessly clean? Meaning...no dust on plants or furniture, no stains or litter on the floor, no clinical or unpleasant odors, empty trash cans, organized magazines, and good repair of the physical plant, furnishings, fixtures and equipment?

The patient's first impressions will set the tone for the rest of his or her visit. If the front office is hectic, disorganized, and cluttered—and the waiting room is crowded, dirty and in disarray—the patient will expect "second rate" medical care reflective of the surroundings.

2) Cleanliness is a virtue, so use a checklist to assure all is complete.

Patient demands that a medical facility be clean cannot be understated. Not only does a clean facility make a strong brand impression, when you consider that a patient with a cold or the flu contaminates up to 30-percent of the items they touch—a clean facility is also a requirement for the health and safety of the staff and all other patients. A patient who perceives that a medical facility is unclean is certain to not return, may post negative reviews online, and may also complain to the health department or his or her insurance carrier. As an urgent care center operator, cleanliness needs to be removed from the patient's "satisfaction equation" by having firm processes and systems in place.

How do you know your facility is clean? You should develop a regular cleaning checklist to assure all tasks are completed and to keep cleaning crews focused and accountable. Checklists can be developed for hourly, daily, weekly, and monthly cleaning tasks. Those responsible for cleaning—no matter how many times they have cleaned—should check off items as they're completed and the center operations manager or a responsible staff member should periodically conduct spot reviews of the facility and completed checklists to assure accountability.

3) Realize you are not running your business on your time.

Urgent care is a unique business model in that the name implies a service standard of promptness. Even if they put off their urgent care visits by days or weeks—by the time patients finally do arrive in the center, they are likely to think that their medical situation requires immediate attention. Therefore, when urgent care patients experience long waits, lags in communication, passive staff, and delays in moving between process steps—they're certain to become impatient and dissatisfied.

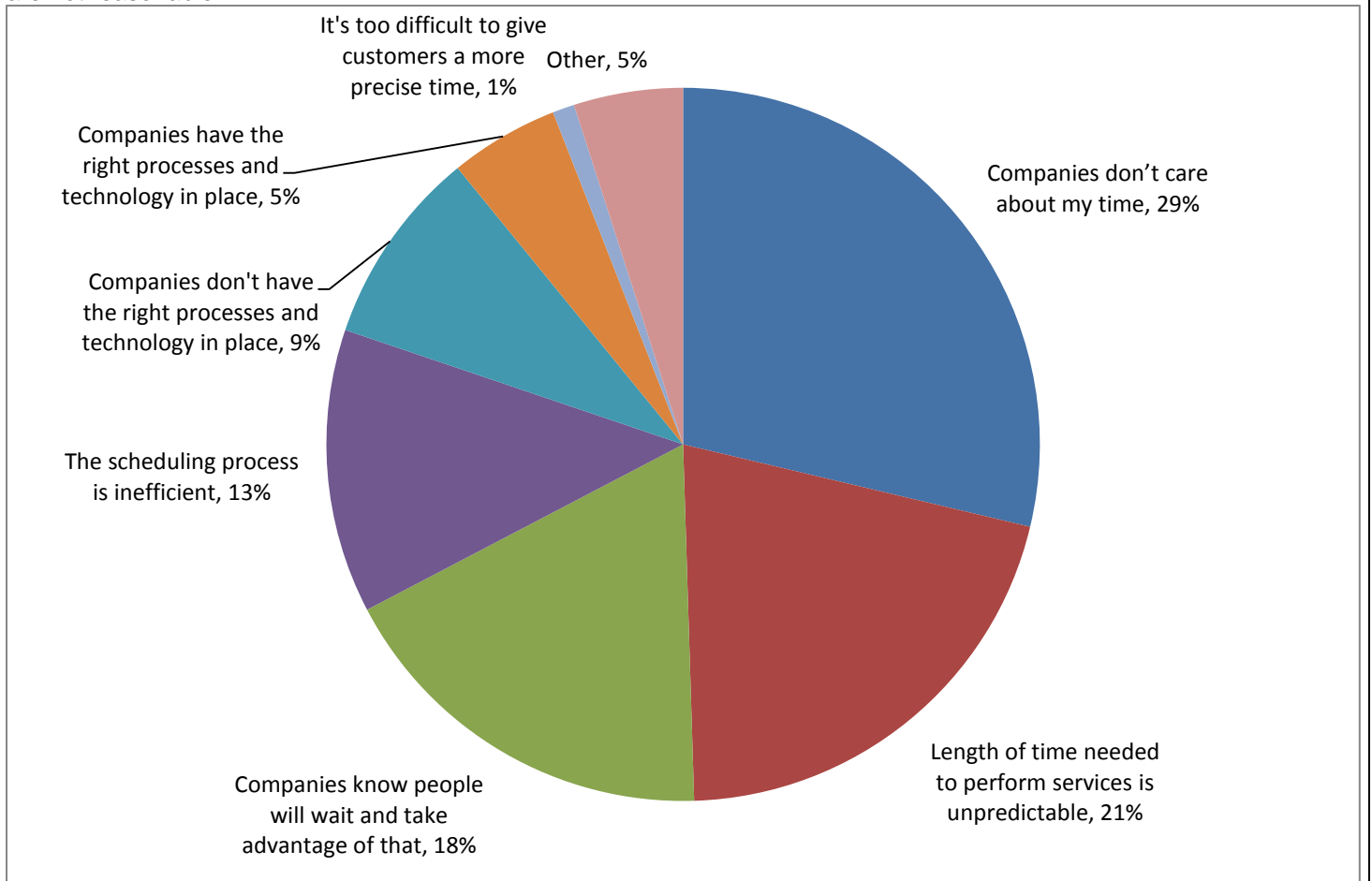
As Table 1 illustrates, when surveyed as to why wait times occur, nearly half of all respondents in a Wall Street Journal poll pointed to something deliberate on the part of the company—that the company didn't care about the customer's time, that it was taking advantage of the customer, its processes were inefficient, or that it had the wrong processes and

technology in place. Only a handful of respondents acknowledged the difficulty in coordinating operations to avoid wait times or empathized that service providers try but cannot precisely predict wait times.

The key takeaway is that the patient is not operating on the center's time or even the physician's time—the patient is operating on his or her own time. And the patient's time is now, immediate, and proactive.

Exhibit 1: Wait-Time Misery Index: How Much to Tolerate?

A recent survey by TOA Technologies, published in the Wall Street Journal, reveals “why consumers believe wait times are not reasonable:”



Source: The Wall Street Journal, Thursday, March 1, 2012

4) Don't make things complicated for your patients. Strive for simplicity.

When patients seek medical treatment for an acutely rising illness or injury, they want care right away without any hassle. However, when designing processes, systems, training and forms, there is a tendency in health care to think only in terms of compliance, how policies are needed to “protect” the center, and how providers and staff are impacted.

Taking a cue from retail, hospitality, banking and other “service industries,” urgent care operators should seek to make the “patient's journey” as smooth and unencumbered as possible. This entails explaining to patients what should occur during their visits and replacing thick packets of registration forms, confusing financial policies, and annoying post-visit collections tasks with technology that facilitates processes, captures and disseminates information, and streamlines financial transactions.

Walk “the patient's shoes” though every step of a typical visit from arrival to departure (and even post-departure) and question—what does the patient do, see, feel, hear, and think? Whenever something doesn't seem quite right—that's inconvenient, confusing, annoying, or wastes time—examine the underlying processes, staff training and systems to make the appropriate changes.

5) There is no excuse for not knowing what is happening with your business—the Internet makes it transparent.

In customer service, the cliché used to be “a patient who has a good experience will tell one or two friends while a patient with a bad experience will tell five or ten.” Today, with the advent of social media (Facebook, Twitter) and online review sites including Google and Yelp—patients who have bad experiences can tell hundreds or even thousands of “virtual friends.” A Wall Street Journal survey recently revealed that 16% of consumers regularly post complaints online—not only broadcasting their anger, but naming company names—and that 37% read online reviews before acting.

Have you read your center’s online reviews recently? Set a regular schedule to review and track what is being said about your center on the Internet, and take such commentary as a call to action to fix whatever issues patients have with your center. When a patient has a sufficiently bad experience that they’re willing to write an online review, odds are they aren’t the only one—others have had similar experiences but chose to remain silent. The best way to prevent negative reviews in the future is to fix the problems that past patients pointed out.

6) Take customer feedback to heart.

What do you do when a patient provides you with feedback on your service or suggestions for improvement? When approached regarding problems, does your staff respond with excuses or do they acknowledge the patient’s concern and act immediately to resolve it? When a patient has an issue with an urgent care center’s service, the last thing he or she wants to hear is an explanation why. The way someone handles a dissatisfied patient is a litmus test for the center’s entire customer service philosophy.

Likewise, patients who make suggestions for operational improvement are more valuable than the highest paid consultants—through their experiences they’re providing a roadmap on how to make the urgent care center successful. When an urgent care operator disregards these suggestions, it’s as if they really don’t care about the future success of the business. If the center exists to serve its providers and employees “today” and the patients are viewed as mere chattel to be “processed”—then go ahead and respond defensively to (or worse, ignore) patient feedback.

7) Management, not the staff, has ultimate responsibility for the day-to-day operations.

An operations manager is responsible for developing and implementing processes and systems, as well as recruiting, hiring, and training staff to delivery consistent, high quality care. Moreover, the manager is the ultimate person responsible for when those processes, systems and people fail. The manager who thinks he’s doing nothing wrong is likely to blame all three, but doing so is cowardly, lazy and reactive. If something isn’t working, it’s the manager’s duty to identify the cause of the problem and correct it.

While a common concern raised by urgent care operators goes to the “limited labor pool” and “how hard it is to find good people,” the same could be said of Starbucks, Nordstrom, Marriott and others who pride themselves on delivering exceptional customer experiences while working with often low wage staff. These “best in class” providers somehow manage to find and develop “good people” or at least squeeze good experiences out of the people they have—so there’s no reason why your urgent care center can’t do likewise.

8) To grow the business, you must get the word out.

If an urgent care center delivers exceptional service, patients will return and tell others to do likewise, but word-of-mouth alone is insufficient and takes too long for a center to meet its critical operating volume. That’s why urgent care operators need to spread the word—by way of advertising, grassroots marketing tactics and community engagement, and public relations. Urgent care is successful insofar as the center achieves “top of mind awareness.” Meaning, that whenever a need arises that the urgent care center can resolve—that the patient will chose to come to the center first. Marketing budgets for a single urgent care center often range from 5% of revenues to \$50,000 or more—if your center is spending proportionally less on marketing and also not hitting your volume targets—then you really need to make investments today to increase awareness in your community and drive traffic through the door.

What else can you do?

These eight principles are by no means conclusive or exhaustive—experienced urgent care operators can add many more to this list. The underlying themes are to recognize the patient as a paying customer who chooses to use the center versus other options, who expects a clean facility, friendly and helpful staff, hassle-free processes, and sensitivity to their time. To the extent than an urgent care center does these things, and lets the community know, it will have a leg up on competitors who are inwardly focused.