

Base Decisions on What Patients Want and Expect

Alan A. Ayers, MBA, MAcc

Content Advisor and Board of Directors, Urgent Care Association of America

Associate Editor, *The Journal of Urgent Care Medicine*

Vice President, Concentra Urgent Care

Retail stores, restaurants, hotels, airlines and other “service” businesses have learned many lessons about how to meet or exceed their customer’s expectations. Specifically, what they “sell” must meet a customer need and customers must like and value the experience. Urgent care centers are no different—not only must they provide “quality” clinical outcomes (solve the patient’s presenting medical problem) but they must also offer more of what patients “want” than other health care options in the community.

So, how does an urgent care operator know what patients want? Intuitively, you could ask past, current and potential patients to tell you. But consumers do a notoriously horrible job if you ask them for solutions. That’s because their desires are removed from the need to operationalize, deliver, and make a profit on a service. Figuratively they’ll ask for a “Tesla” but desire to pay for only a “Hyundai.”

Instead, a more fruitful activity is to ask patients what problems they’re facing as it relates to the services your urgent care center can reasonably offer. Consumers are far better at describing “pain points” than devising “remedies.” For example, in relation to episodic illness and injury, patients may complain about:

- Difficulty getting a non-scheduled appointment (or waiting days/weeks for an opening) at their primary care provider’s office;
- Weekday business operating hours at their primary care provider’s office (i.e. no availability nights, weekends, and holidays when injury/illness frequently occur);
- Not having a primary care provider relationship due to being uninsured, young and healthy, or new to a community;
- High co-pays of \$100 or more at emergency rooms and additional financial responsibility for the ER visit under high-deductible insurance plans; or
- A desire to remain anonymous or avoid facing their regular physician with a potentially embarrassing condition.

Once you, the urgent care operator, understand the needs and desires driving consumer behavior, then it’s much easier to define your service offering. And a useful tool in doing so is the “service blueprint.”

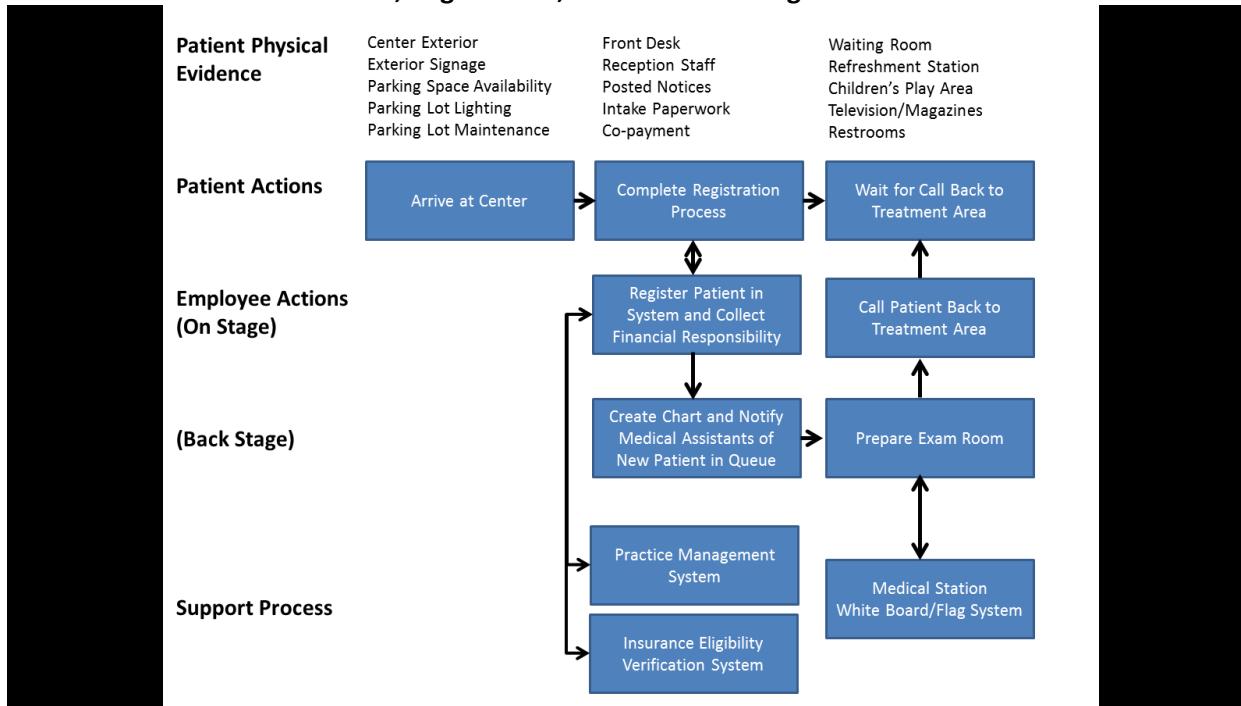
Defining the Service Blueprint

A service blueprint is a picture or map used in the design or redesign of services that portrays the service process in discrete steps, illustrates the points of patient contact, and provides “evidence of service” as it’s experienced by the patient. The end result is that operations management, information technology, human resources and marketing better understand the service offered and can coordinate their activities around meeting patient needs.

Consider the following illustration of a patient’s arrival, registration, and wait at an urgent care center. The service blueprint includes:

- **Patient Actions:** All of the steps, choices, activities, and interactions that occur as the patient chooses, utilizes, and evaluates the urgent care center.
- **Patient Evidence:** What the patient experiences and perceives including contact with the center’s employees, steps in the process, policies and procedures, technology, and the physical environment.
- **On-stage Employee Actions:** Employee steps and activities that are directly visible to patients.
- **Back-stage Employee Actions:** Employee steps and activities that occur outside of patient view to support the on-stage actions.
- **Support Processes:** Internal services, steps and interactions that enable the front- and back-stage employees in providing service to the patient.

Illustration of a Patient's Arrival, Registration, and Wait at an Urgent Care Center



Using Service Blueprints to Coordinate Activities

A service blueprint can be used in developing new services, improving the efficiency, quality and consistency of existing services, and for identifying and remedying service delivery problems that negatively impact the patient experience. Moreover, it can be used in coordinating the activities of:

- **Operations Management:** Being responsible for front-line execution requires understanding what the service should be in order to develop training programs, quality control systems, and evaluation/tracking metrics.
- **Human Resources:** Understanding how services should be delivered enables creation of job descriptions, selection criteria for new hires, and performance evaluation criteria for existing employees.
- **Information Technology:** The role of IT is to facilitate operations service delivery, which requires an understanding of the service in terms of system capabilities, data needs, process integration, and user interfaces.
- **Service Marketers:** Understanding how a service meets patient needs and how patients experience the service enables marketing to promote the service in terms of patient "pain points" while also setting realistic expectations of what the service entails that affect patient satisfaction with the experience.

Conclusion

Urgent care centers are successful to the extent they meet patient needs better than other health care options in the community, which starts with understanding patient "pain points" and then building a service offering that solves them. Service blueprints—a tool to identify steps in the center's processes as experienced from the perspective of patients—can be used to coordinate operations, HR, IT, and marketing in developing what the center's service should be and then improving delivery on that service.