

Improve your bedside manner

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I ended up in the emergency room last Friday night. On her way to work, my sister stopped behind a car whose driver was waiting to turn left. Unfortunately, the driver that came up behind her didn't see that she was stopped. She hit Rachel pretty hard. Although she didn't immediately report any injuries, after an hour or so, Rachel started to feel not quite right. So she asked me to take her to the ER.

We arrived by 7:30 and didn't leave till after midnight. In the intervening 5 hours, we had plenty of opportunities to experience excellent service as well as really crummy service. The difference between each interaction with each healthcare professional was striking. Upon reflection, I think there are 4 main components of what makes a good patient experience. And they are pretty similar to what makes a good customer experience, in many situations.

1. Shake hands. It has always bewildered me at the gynecologist's office to be taken back by a nurse who weighs me, asks really personal questions, and instructs me to take off all my clothes, all without even telling me her name! Did you know you can establish the same level of rapport with a handshake as you can in 3 hours of continuous interaction? At the end of our 5-hour ordeal at the hospital, the PA who had been taking care of Rachel shook her hand. At the end! Imagine how much more at ease we would have been if she had done that at the beginning. A handshake shows we're in this together. And when a handshake isn't an option, a simple introduction, "Hi, my name is _____ and I'll be taking care of you" works great.
2. Show concern. It was mind-boggling to me that of all the people we encountered that night, only one person said, "I'm sorry you had an accident." It was the person who was taking down the insurance information. Hardly anyone else expressed any compassion at all. I remember this experience when I delivered both of my kids; some of the nurses acknowledged the pain and the miracle I had experienced, while others seemed to be just viewing me as the last thing between them and going home to a steak dinner. Obviously it's just another day of work for them and they can't get too attached, but even the smallest amount of concern would be meaningful.
3. Share information. Over an hour passed between Rachel's x-ray and CAT scan. There was a full hour (which felt like two or three) during which not a single person came to give us an update or check in on Rachel. Her situation wasn't dire, but it would have felt so much better if someone had just said, "Hey, radiology is really backed up so it might be a while. Can I get you a drink of water?" Finally, moments before she was wheeled away for her CAT scan, the PA came in to say, "Sorry for the delay; they've been really backed up tonight." Imagine how much more reassured we would have felt if she had

told us that 60 minutes prior! I've read that when people are given an estimated wait time, they underestimate how long they actually end up waiting; when people aren't, they overestimate. This is an easy fix!

4. Smile. This is perhaps the simplest step that makes the biggest difference. The people who looked miserable were the most difficult to deal with. We didn't get a smile from the emergency room receptionist; we barely received eye contact. After a while we got called back into triage; that nurse was super friendly! Then after another long wait for a spot to open, the person who took us back to our own little corner was one of the least friendly people I've encountered. Our PA looked miserable for the first half of our stay, yet the x-ray tech who came to get Rachel was cracking us up with jokes, which made us feel more at ease.

I'd be willing to bet that the people who exhibited several of these components had a better shift and have better job satisfaction. How much extra time does this take? Hardly any. Read this to yourself... "Hi, Rachel. I'm Christin, the physician's assistant who will be taking care of you tonight. I'm sorry to hear you had an accident. What happened? Does it hurt here..." "Okay, we're going to take an x-ray and a CAT scan. You should see the x-ray tech in the next 20-30 minutes. It'll be longer for the CAT scan but I'll keep you informed."

Of course many of my readers aren't health care professionals; neither am I. But these basic techniques can be applied in a number of positions and situations. Next time you're dealing with a disgruntled customer, a student who's going through a difficult situation, a member who has a problem, shake hands, show concern, share information and smile. It will make a difference.

Improve your bedside manner.