

Measuring

Capturing patient feedback is vital for addressing any issues and enhancing the experience provided by a visit to your practice, writes **Kerry Bielik**.

“The most successful people are usually the ones with the best information.”

This quote, published recently in an investment advice newsletter, really caught my attention and confirmed the widely held belief that good information is key to making good strategic business decisions. Bad information, on the other hand, can lead to the wrong decisions. No information, and you’re working in a vacuum.

If the most important person in any business is the customer, then surely the most vital piece of information a business owner can get hold of is how happy customers – or patients – are with the service being provided.

We’ve all experienced a hotel or restaurant that failed to meet our service expectations. We may have chosen not to complain at the time, but we swore never to return and probably related the experience to numerous friends. We might even have posted a negative review on Trip Advisor, Facebook or Twitter.

In this information age, the power of the consumers’ voice has never been greater and woe betide the service provider who doesn’t listen.

It seems the medical profession has taken note. In the UK, the National Health Service recently introduced a mandatory ‘patient satisfaction feedback’ program into all hospitals in the country. In Australia, various

state health departments have implemented similar quality improvement initiatives.

In realising that a patient’s satisfaction with the service or treatment is just as important as the clinical outcome, many private practitioners are taking a pro-active approach by implementing their own ‘patient satisfaction feedback’ surveys. By reviewing the information obtained, practitioners are able to benchmark the satisfaction ratings of various aspects of the practice and use the information to find ways of enhancing the customer experience at every stage of interaction.

Let’s face it – if we’re highly satisfied with a previous experience, we’re more likely to return in the future.

GETTING RESULTS

It’s worth noting that research has shown that 65 per cent of clients are more likely to use and recommend a business with pro-active customer-feedback systems. Harnessing patient opinions creates a genuine win/win outcome, for both the patient and the practice.

For patients, responding to surveys:

- Provides the opportunity to voice any concerns about their experience in a non-confrontational setting.
- Makes them feel they have an opportunity to make a positive contribution to the practice.



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Satisfaction

- Demonstrates that their contribution will ultimately result in an enhanced service experience.
- Engenders greater trust and confidence with their chosen practitioner.

For practices, obtaining patient feedback:

- Identifies where strengths and weaknesses are, from the perspective of patients.
- Sets you apart from your peers in a competitive environment.
- Demonstrates your commitment to the overall patient experience.
- Will enhance the loyalty of existing clients, who will feel that their opinions are valued.
- Shows potential clients you have confidence in your clinic's quality of service.
- Establishes a relationship between the patient and the practice that goes above and beyond the bond with the doctor.
- Will promptly alert you to any emerging operational problems.
- Provides you with information that will help you streamline business operations and enhance profitability.
- Results in Patient Satisfaction Ratios, which are an excellent management benchmarking tool and can be used as Key Performance Indicators to motivate clinic staff.

YOUR SURVEY STARTS HERE

How do you set about implementing an effective survey? There are three key steps:

1. Creating a well-designed patient questionnaire

This is the most critical part of the entire survey process. Start by putting yourself in the patients' shoes and consider the sequence of all their

interactions with the practice, from making an appointment until the time they leave.

Consider what factors impact on those interactions – i.e. efficiency, courtesy, friendliness, helpfulness, compassion, privacy and even physical factors such as cleanliness, comfort and ambiance. From these factors you can create questions that get to the core of the patient experience at your practice.

There's an old expression in market research – 'You can get any answers you wish, it just depends on how you ask the questions'. When phrasing the questions, you'll need to ask yourself what you want to know, and what form of answer you require. Your answers will determine whether your questions should be qualitative or quantitative in nature.

- Qualitative questions generally require the respondent to provide answers in their own words, in a commentary or narrative form. They typically start with a phrase such as, "Please comment on..." or "Describe your experience with...". A suitable space is then provided for the respondent to provide their comments or opinions.
- Quantitative questions typically provide a selection of pre-determined answers, to be 'ticked' by the respondent. The questions generally ask people to 'rate' their opinion on a specific issue according to the rating scale provided. Examples of common rating scales are: 'Yes/No'; a numerical scale from 1-5; a quality scale that runs from Poor to Excellent; or an expectations scale that starts with 'Did not meet' and ends with 'Exceeded'.

There are advantages to both question types and surveys often employ a combination of each.

2. Deciding on the ideal survey distribution method for your practice

Firstly, there is the issue of timing to consider. It may be better to ask patients to complete the survey a few days after their visit rather than before they leave the clinic – people may be reluctant to provide frank opinions if they are uncertain about anonymity being maintained. Additionally, the delay provides a chance to capture any 'after-care' issues.

Secondly, how is the survey going to be delivered to the patient? If you choose a paper questionnaire format, make sure it is printed on good quality stock. A faded or dog-eared photocopy does not give the impression you're serious about feedback. If you post it out, be sure to enclose a reply paid envelope to encourage maximum return rate. Alternately, you can email a PDF version of the survey form to the patient and ask them to email, fax or post it back.

Online surveys are a simple, efficient and convenient way to obtain customer feedback. The questionnaire is set up in exactly the same format as a hard copy using an online-survey platform, and a hyperlink is provided for that specific survey.

You can give patients a written request or send an email, which includes the embedded link. When they open the link, it will automatically take them to the questionnaire. Avoid placing the link to your online survey on your business website, as this leaves room for the possibility of tampering.

3. Developing a method of analysing the feedback

Having gone to the trouble of collecting all that valuable information, don't simply give each response a quick glance then put everything into a filing cabinet. The power of information is all in the consolidation of data, analysing trends and using this to make informed decisions.

You'll need to devise a method of converting the quantitative responses into 'measurable scores'. The narrative comments should be consolidated into a single report so any repetitive issues become apparent.

Create reporting periods, either monthly or quarterly, and track the satisfaction-rating trends in response to any procedural changes you make to practice operations. Anything below a 10 per cent response rate to your survey should ring alarm bells.

SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

You may wish to consider outsourcing your customer-feedback program to a professional service provider. There are several benefits here:

- A professional's experience with designing surveys can help you get the information you're really looking for and they can efficiently handle all the data analysis,

reporting and benchmarking requirements for you.

- Behavioural studies have shown that customers are more likely to respond openly to satisfaction surveys conducted by an independent research organisation than to employees of the business, as it's less confrontational and increases confidence that their anonymity will be preserved.
- Doing so provides the assurance that your feedback data has not been influenced in any way by anyone within the practice.
- Professionals generally host surveys on platforms employing 'bank level' encryption security for the data.

If you decide to outsource, be sure to select a service provider who really understands the particular needs of medical practices and will customise a survey and reporting solution that perfectly fits your business.

Finally, don't keep your patient-satisfaction performance scores to yourself. Share the information with your clinic's staff in the form of Key Performance Indicators, which can serve as powerful management tools to help motivate your staff and encourage them to generate ideas on improving the overall customer experience for your patients. ©

CREATING YOUR QUESTIONNAIRE

There are few general rules when creating a questionnaire to measure patient experience:

- First and foremost, absolute confidentiality must apply. It should be left to the patient's discretion whether or not to give their name or other personal information. People will be more inclined to be totally frank if they can remain anonymous.
- The questionnaire shouldn't be too intrusive. It should ask for opinions without necessarily getting into the specifics of why these opinions were formed. If patients want to add a comment, it should be their choice.
- Completing the questionnaire shouldn't be an onerous task. Participants are giving their time freely so if there are too many questions they'll be less inclined to participate. Tick-box-rating scales are a convenient way to cover most of the issues. A good rule of thumb is to keep the average completion time to less than 11 minutes to avoid survey abandonment.
- Clarity of the phrasing and response options are also important. Participants shouldn't have to second-guess what is being asked.
- If you don't want to risk losing credibility, keep your motives clear. Don't turn your survey into a marketing exercise by asking for demographic or socio-economic data, or how they heard about the practice.



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