

Marketing Matters



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Someone recently asked me what I thought was the single most important factor that hospices ought to concentrate on. It was a tough question: If you've read my last column, you might guess I'd answer "Marketing," but what about specifics like using and constantly improving performance metrics, measuring patient satisfaction, employee satisfaction, staff training, providing quality care to patients, seeking the strategic insights of experts, lobbying, building referral relationships, recruiting more effectively, improving employee retention, fundraising—and the list goes on. My first instinct was that I should protest: Surely the question was out of line; there are many things that ought to be tended to equally, because they're complementary. Since none of the items on my list are substitutes, you really can't pick and choose; to be the best provider you can be you need to pursue all of them. Still, dismissing the question was too easy for my taste, and I never want to take the easy way out. Here's what my answer was:

The single most important factor hospices ought to concentrate on is building a customer service orientation. If you're wondering whether I really mean "patient-focused orientation," you shouldn't: I mean customer service, because that's the one common thread that affects everything you do. It's neither crude nor uncaring to talk about customers instead of patients. Patients are customers, but so are their families, a doctor you hope to get referrals from, a hospice nurse, a chaplain, social worker, the staff member who answers the phone at your office, the volunteer, the person who bought a raffle ticket for your fundraising event; they're all customers, albeit different types of customers. Either way, your goal—your professional reason for being—should be to serve them all in a way that meets or exceeds their expectations.

Of course patient care is the core of what you do; it's just that you can't do that very well (if at all) without a customer service orientation that caters to the needs of both internal and external customers. If you fail to meet the needs of a patient's family—their need for information, comfort, support—you may never get a chance to care for their loved one at all. If the doctor isn't happy with how promptly or nicely or accurately his/her requests for information or referrals are processed by your agency, he/she may not give you any more. If you don't serve the needs of your employees, they may not continue to work for you for very much longer, or their ability to care for patients may be severely

compromised. If your hospice volunteer or someone who supports your fundraising efforts doesn't feel appreciated, he/she can very well donate his time or money somewhere else next time. What suffers? You guessed it; your all-important patient care. Unless you adopt a customer service orientation, before too long you're not going to have any patients to care for!

In most people's minds, "customers"—the people we're here to serve—are virtually synonymous with external customers. If only that had naturally resulted in a customer service orientation where every effort is made to achieve total customer satisfaction, we'd be more than halfway there. Maybe you consider it intuitive that a hospice organization—by virtue of the services it offers to its patients—would have a customer service orientation, but if you pause for a moment, you can probably think of at least some hospice, somewhere across the country, that wouldn't know customer service if it hit them on the head with a stick. So can I. There's nothing intuitive about a customer service orientation; one is created as part of a plan or it's not created at all.

Even hospices that thrive because they had the foresight to make a customer service orientation central to how they serve external customers, could become better still by realizing that internal customers should be explicitly included in that orientation too. It will make employees more effective at what they do, it will streamline processes, and it will identify service delivery weaknesses that might have passed unnoticed. Efficiency will increase across the organization, and employee satisfaction will soon follow suit. Although it takes some extra effort early on, it soon becomes seamless, and an integral part of how everyone in the organization deals with the needs of others, including co-workers. Things get done faster and better, and they're even accompanied with a smile, which is never part of a task list or request, but is something people notice and appreciate. Changing the definition of "serving customers" to include internal ones will not only result in improvements in the workplace, but it will ultimately make a positive difference in patient and family satisfaction.

When it comes to a customer service orientation, talk is cheap. It's like engraving the values of your organization on a plaque, hanging it on the wall, talking about them a lot, but otherwise going about your daily business without really living those values: You're just reminding everyone that you don't deliver on what you promise, plus you wasted thirty five bucks on the plaque. If you plan to go tell it on the mountain, over the hills, and everywhere that you have a customer service orientation, you'd better be prepared to deliver—because accountability is part and parcel of a promise.

Are you convinced, by now, that a customer service orientation can improve your hospice agency in a meaningful way? I hope so—because if you're convinced, eventually a great many patients and their families will reap the benefits. In order for it to work, however, a customer service orientation has to become part of your organizational culture and your Strategic Marketing plan. In essence that means it will be part of who you are, who you aspire to be, and what you're doing to get there. Cultural changes take time, of course, and implementing strategic decisions doesn't happen overnight either—but achieving both is worth the trouble.

In the process of making a customer service orientation part of your hospice's very fabric, you'll notice that a great many things you value (many of which were on my initial

list) will improve, often dramatically. You'll learn a lot about your organization and how you can make it better, you'll be able to draw sharper distinctions from your competitors, and you'll be a step closer to providing truly legendary care. It turns out that sometimes forcing yourself to answer a tough question can help you get a clearer glimpse of the big picture. And yes, I was tempted for a moment to protest the validity of the question or skirt the issue altogether—but my own customer service orientation would have none of that.