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SURVEY SAYS

Use Negative Patient Feedback to Your Advantage

By Kelli Smith

Receiving negative feedback, even within a sea of positive feedback, can ruin your day. Patients may get angry about long wait times or call to complain about not understanding their post-visit care instructions. And while some complaints are more valid than others, in health care there is a silver lining: feedback from patients can serve as a crucial tool for enhancing patient care and customer service.

One of the most effective ways to receive feedback from patients is through surveys. Patient surveys are a simple but crucial way to gather feedback directly from patients after a health care visit. They help clinics, hospitals, practices, and other health care delivery settings understand how patients feel about their experiences, including communication, wait times, staff behavior, and overall satisfaction.

Considering that 1 in 3 patients switch providers due to a bad experi-

ence,¹ these surveys can prove incredibly crucial for medical assistants aiming to use their position as frontline health care workers to strengthen their workplaces and patient care.

To properly respond to feedback—particularly negative feedback—practices must first understand why this feedback matters and how to design and distribute surveys.

Polling Priorities

Patient feedback is crucial as a tool to

enhance quality and safety, strengthen patient trust and engagement, and support organizational growth. Feedback from patients can reveal blind spots in communication, scheduling, rooming, and general interactions within the practice.

Administering surveys and collecting patient feedback is also crucial because patients want to feel respected and heard. In fact, 76% of patients say that how they are treated by staff is as significant to them as the treatment itself, according to the Agency for

Healthcare Research. And 84% of patients say communication is the most important part of their experience, according to a survey by NRC Health.¹

Moreover, collecting patient feedback can support the growth of the organization, as public reviews influence the reputation of the practice. This is a crucial element of patient retention, and even growth when patients decide whether to recommend the practice to their family and friends.

Increase Survey Response Rates

Many practices have reported a decline in survey response rates. This can be a concern because surveys with low response rates provide data that is less representative of the patient population.

To maximize the number of responses, practices can do the following⁵:

- Ensure that addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses are up to date and accurate.
- Try to improve contact rates after the surveys have been sent out (e.g., follow up with patients on the phone and email them reminders to complete the survey).
- Use multiple methods of communication, including email, mail, and text messaging.

Put On Your Thinking CAHPS

Patient surveys are essential for gathering real and actionable feedback from patients about their experiences. Ideally, patient feedback should be collected directly after appointments, procedures, or discharges.¹ Regularly administering surveys can help you track changes over time and see whether a practice is improving.

The federal government helps providers measure patient satisfaction and evaluate outcomes using data collected from patients. For instance, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) funds and administers the Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS) program.

Due to the complexity of the health care system and its delivery settings, the CAHPS program comprises several surveys that ask patients to report on their experiences with a range of providers and specialties. These cover care providers ranging from physicians' practices to hospitals, nursing homes, dialysis centers, and more.²

Whether or not you use CAHPS to design your surveys, asking the right questions can uncover gaps in patient experiences and find areas to make improvements. Here are 10 crucial questions feedback surveys can ask³:

- 1. “How easy was it to schedule your appointment?”** Scheduling an appointment is one of the first interactions a patient has with your practice. Finding this process frustrating can prompt them to switch providers.
- 2. “How long did you wait before seeing a provider?”** Long wait times are one of the most common complaints in health care. When patients wait too long, they are more likely to seek care elsewhere.
- 3. “Did you feel listened to and understood by your provider?”** Patients want to feel heard, respected, and understood by their providers. If they feel rushed or dismissed, they are unlikely to keep returning to your practice.
- 4. “How would you rate the friendliness and professionalism of our staff?”** The front desk staff sets the

tone for the patient's experience. A warm and welcoming environment can make all the difference in satisfaction and retention.

- 5. “Was your treatment plan clearly explained?”** Patients who understand their diagnosis and treatment plan are more likely to follow through with their care recommendations.
- 6. “How satisfied are you with the follow-up care and communication?”** Patients may have more questions after their appointment. If they cannot get answers from their provider, their health and satisfaction will be affected.
- 7. “Would you recommend our practice to friends and family?”** This is the ultimate measure of a patient's satisfaction with your practice.
- 8. “How satisfied were you with the comfort and cleanliness of our practice?”** A comfortable and clean environment helps patients feel at ease during stressful moments. If your practice is unkempt, they may question your attention to detail.
- 9. “Did we provide enough information about billing and insurance options?”** Clear communication about bills and insurance policies will reduce financial stress.
- 10. “What is one thing we could do better?”** This open-ended question provides valuable insights into patients' expectations and gaps in their experience.

Good Answers!

Practices can implement surveys in many ways. Some practices may choose a third-party vendor, whereas others may print surveys and hand them to patients. Other practices may distribute online surveys.

Feedback in the Educational Setting

Just like in health care practices, medical assisting educators can use surveys to collect feedback from students and students' employers on the quality and effectiveness of their teaching and medical assisting program, according to Latasha Ladd, MEd, BS, CMAC, medical assisting program director at South University in Columbia, South Carolina.

“These surveys help us evaluate curriculum relevance, instructional effectiveness, and how well our students are prepared to enter the health care workforce,” she says. “The feedback also helps us identify areas for continuous improvement and ensure that our program outcomes align with industry expectations.”

The student and employer surveys include questions related to professionalism, communication skills, technical competencies, and overall job readiness. “Employers are also asked to evaluate their satisfaction with our graduates' performance and whether they would consider hiring South University graduates again in the future,” explains Ladd.

Any negative feedback from an employer or student is taken seriously by Ladd. “[Negative feedback] is reviewed carefully and discussed among faculty and the program advisory committee,” she says. “We use this information to guide program enhancements, improve instructional strategies, update course content, and strengthen externship experiences. This continuous feedback loop ensures that our graduates remain well-prepared and competitive in the field.”

Regardless, the negative feedback acts as a tool to guide the program and make it better. “Constructive feedback is an essential tool for growth and improvement,” concludes Ladd. “It helps us maintain program excellence, meet accreditation standards, and most importantly, prepare students to provide high-quality patient care. By fostering open communication with students and employers, we ensure that our program continues to reflect current health care industry needs.”

Digital distribution of surveys may entail messages through the patient portal, automated text messages, email follow-ups, and QR codes posted in examination rooms or at checkout desks.

However, some may opt for options that have patients take the survey in-office, whether on a kiosk while waiting or on paper cards with a few quick questions.

Regardless of how an individual practice decides to collect their feedback, they should follow best practices:

Send surveys out as soon as possible. Survey data loses integrity when respondents take too long to react after receiving care. Once time has passed, patients may find it harder to remember multiple steps and care providers.⁴

Prioritize accessibility. Know your audience and create surveys that are accessible to as many patients as possible. Optimize the layout, readability, and length of the survey to empower and encourage people to provide valuable patient experience insights. Offering surveys in multiple languages can also engage a broader demographic. Equity among respondents creates insights that are more representative and drive more meaningful change.⁴

Optimize surveys for web and mobile. People are often more receptive to digital messaging. In fact, text message surveys are estimated to reach 98% of people and have a response rate of 45%. Digital delivery can also reduce costs for the practice and provide more flexibility for patients.⁴

Additionally, encourage all patients to complete the surveys, not just those with strong negative or positive opinions.

The No. 1 Answer(s)

What is even more important than the presence of patient complaints is how they are dealt with by the practice. Collecting and acting on feedback is crucial to delivering better, more personalized care.

Pointers for Playing

Be prepared to deal with negative feedback⁶:

- **Do not respond out of anger.** Take a moment to pause and breathe. This will help you avoid making impulsive responses that come across as unprofessional, spiteful, or rude and reflect poorly on you or the practice.
- **Do not take it personally.** Patient complaints may be out of your control. A patient could be having a bad day or have anxiety about their health. You can validate patient complaints without blaming yourself.
- **Put yourself in the patient's shoes.** Try to see where they are coming from. You may be in the right, but the patient deserves to feel heard and taken seriously.

Some practices, including Albany ENT and Allergy Services in Albany, New York, decide not to rely on surveys but on Google and Facebook to obtain feedback on their practice visits, according to Todd Lasher, AAS, CMA (AAMA), who is a medical assistant and audiology assistant at the practice. In lieu of surveys, Lasher's practice looks at how patients rate their visit from 1 to 5 and the content of their review. This way, patients can freely comment on providers, the practice, and specific employees.

"Our negative feedback is sent to our provider relations team, and negative comments [are] forwarded to our practice administrator to follow up with the patients," says Lasher, who is also the president of the New York State Society of Medical Assistants.

Some issues patients may comment on pertain to medical assistants' workflows. While this negative feedback can sometimes feel overwhelming or upsetting, it provides the opportunity to implement better practices. Medical assistants can consider how to improve their communication, rooming practices, or process of taking vital signs to make positive changes to the patient experience.

Patient satisfaction and experience surveys are a crucial part of a practice's effort to close care gaps. The goal for health care employees should be to make patients feel heard and cared for. After all surveys have been completed, distributed, and collected, be sure to take action on the survey results—both to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. Even small adjustments, such as making eye contact and smiling at the

patient, can go a long way toward reducing the likelihood of negative feedback from patients.

As the link between patients and providers, medical assistants can facilitate change in the practice. The goal is not perfection but continuous improvement, which medical assistants can foster with strong communication, efficiency, and empathy.

Regardless of negative feedback, medical assistants have the power to transform patient complaints into positive, productive interactions. ♦

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