

Making the transformation to a customer-service orientation

By Anne S. Rabert, MHSA, RN, CCRN, NE-BC

WITH CONSUMERS gaining greater control and more choices in their health care, consumer satisfaction is more important than ever. Consumers of healthcare services include patients, family members, third-party payers, governmental agencies, and employer groups.

The degree to which an organization is customer-oriented depends largely on employees' customer orientation. Yet few healthcare professionals receive adequate education in customer satisfaction. Given current care-delivery models and the emphasis on pay for performance, such education is necessary. This article describes a tool that helps healthcare providers understand the importance of customer satisfaction and outlines ways to improve it.

Is your hospital still waiting on the platform?

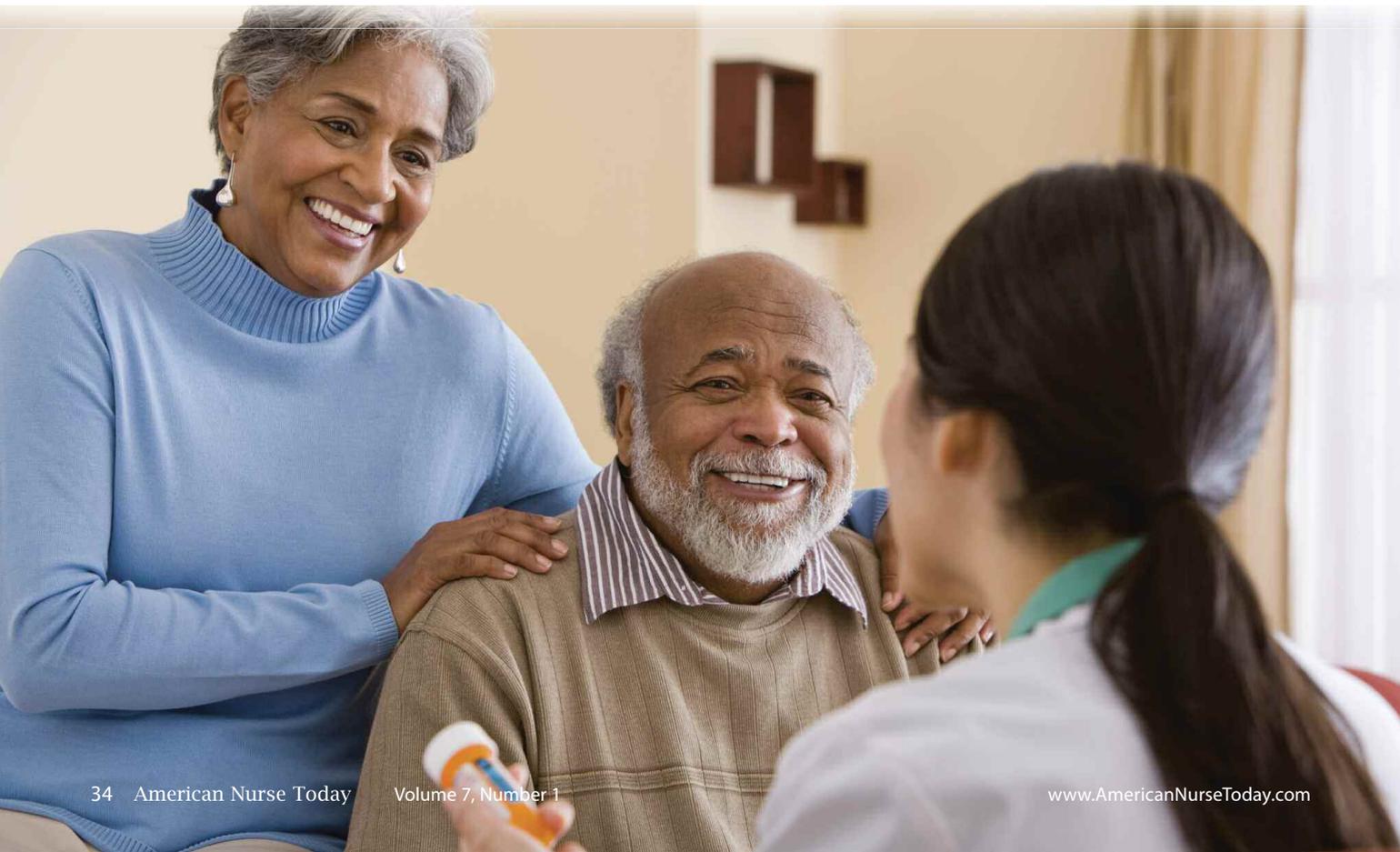
Reimbursement changes have forced healthcare organizations to adopt a customer-service philosophy to survive financially. Progressive organizations have already embarked on the transformation to a customer-service

Patients' perceptions of health care will play a key role in new pay-for-performance programs.

.....

orientation; reactive organizations continue to wait on the platform.

Starting with hospital discharges in October 2012, the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey will be among the measures used to calculate value-based incentive payments in the new Hospital Value-Based Purchasing program. The first national standard for collecting and publicly reporting information about patients' experience of care, the HCAHPS survey permits valid comparisons to be made across hospitals locally, regionally, and nationally. The survey asks discharged patients 27 questions about their recent hospital stay, including communication with nurses and doctors, staff respon-





Core competencies for improving customer satisfaction

Core competencies are areas in which organizations develop expertise, and convey that expertise in differentiated products or services. Core competencies required to achieve customer satisfaction include the following:

- **Values.** Clear values delineate the importance of customer satisfaction and the goals for achieving it. Every action an employee takes influences the customer experience and perception of the organization and its performance.
- **Education and training.** Organizations should provide employee training in customer-service skills that give them the knowledge, skills, and motivation to meet customer needs.
- **Empowerment.** Empowered employees with a customer-satisfaction goal can improve satisfaction by making changes that positively influence how they work to meet organizational goals.
- **Standardization of work processes.** Standardized work processes promote consistent behavioral expectations and outcomes, provide repetitive expectations for the consumer to readily identify, lead to greater efficiency and decreased waste, reduce variability, and ensure uniform quality.
- **Accountability.** Holding everyone in the organization accountable for their actions is imperative to improving customer service. Staff at all levels of the organization must have the same sense of urgency regarding the importance of customer service.
- **Measurement.** Measurement strategies that identify compliance or noncompliance align expected behaviors to drive results. Formal measurement also holds individuals accountable for their actions in observed results.
- **Transparency.** Making results and outcomes transparent reflects an environment of sharing and collaboration between the patient and the employee or organization. Current and future legislation and reimbursement programs demand transparency of quality and outcomes.
- **Expert resources.** Internal personnel can serve as consultants in their respective areas of expertise, helping staff with less experience work through unfamiliar situations to promote positive outcomes.
- **Feedback.** Communication at all levels of an organization is critical. Growth can take place only when everyone clearly understands their expectations. Feedback helps individual employees understand how their responsibility and actions relate to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

siveness, hospital cleanliness and quietness, pain management, communication about medications, discharge information, overall rating of the hospital, and whether they would recommend the hospital.

The HCAHPS survey has a threefold purpose:

- to produce data about patients' perceptions of care, allowing consumers to make objective and meaningful comparisons of hospitals
- to create incentives for hospitals to improve quality of care
- to enhance accountability in health care by increasing transparency of the quality of hospital care.

HCAHPS survey scores will soon determine reimbursement for the care of Medicare and Medicaid patients. To meet and exceed established HCAHPS targets, healthcare providers must understand the meaning of these targets and use tools and strategies to improve patient satisfaction and perceptions of care.

Organizations with a consistent and effective practice of customer-service skills and communication will have a clear score advantage. Research shows a healthcare organization's quality of care correlates positively with high HCAHPS scores. Similarly, advanced performance outcomes, above-optimal clinical care, and reduced medical errors are linked to a positive patient experience.

Bridging the gap with core competencies

Many colleges and universities include customer-service courses in various degree curricula, but not in medical or allied-health degree programs. Although the definition of *customer* varies across industries, the skills and tools needed to ensure customer satisfaction are similar in all of them. To improve customer satisfaction, employees must receive education on its importance, along with the tools and skills they'll need to attain it.

Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN), a nonprofit academic organization in northeastern Pennsylvania, provides development activities, sessions, and strategies to its leaders, who serve as role models for organizational behaviors and culture. Senior-level leaders designate structured educational sessions imperative to healthcare leadership success. Through this de-

velopment, core competencies specific to LVHN have emerged. The universality of these competencies makes them effective in multiple situations. For example, staff can use them to enhance patient satisfaction and leaders can use them to promote staff satisfaction. (See *Core competencies for improving customer satisfaction*.)

The "wheel" of customer satisfaction

I developed a tool in the form of a wheel that gives a working explanation of how to manage patient satisfaction and, indirectly, of the quality of care and customer loyalty to the organization. It can be applied not just in the healthcare industry but in many other service industries and situations. (See *Customer satisfaction wheel*.)

The wheel's inner circle shows the core competencies and skills needed to enhance customer service. Healthcare employees and organizations should possess these

Customer satisfaction wheel

Patient satisfaction is driven by communication and personal needs. In this tool, the wheel's outer circle represents the customer's perceptions related to a satisfying or unsatisfying experience. Perceptions at the top of the outer circle promote satisfaction; those at the bottom promote dissatisfaction. Customer satisfaction levels hinge primarily on the degree to which customers' expectations are met; if service meets or exceeds expectations, the customer is likely to be satisfied.

Customers' perceptions can change frequently, causing the wheel to rotate between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. External variables, such as economic conditions, illness, and culture, potentially influence customer satisfaction. To a large degree, the organization can't control these variables. But it can control the core competencies it promotes in employees and builds into the organization. Customers' perceptions of service quality correlate significantly with employees' per-

ceptions of the organizational climate.

Satisfaction appears at the top of the wheel because it's the endpoint that organizations strive to achieve. As the outer circle approaches or maintains satisfaction, customer quality and loyalty also increase, as shown by the green arrows on either side of the circle. The foundation of customer loyalty is customer satisfaction. Loyal, satisfied customers spread positive word-of-mouth information and share their experiences without hesitation.



competencies to promote patient satisfaction and a positive perception of care. Use of these competencies can be adapted to the situation: Sometimes, an employee may need to use many competencies simultaneously; at other times, just one may suffice. The more competencies employees have, the stronger the core and the easier it will be to create and sustain customer satisfaction.

Health care as a service industry

Current healthcare trends require organizations to adopt many of the skills and philosophies of the service industry, with customer satisfaction paramount. The quality of relationships between patients and healthcare professionals directly contributes to customer retention and loyalty. Service quality rests on a set of organizational foundation issues that support and promote frontline employee service delivery, including employee training.

Healthcare professionals need to acquire the core competencies that lead to customer satisfaction. This understanding begins with organizational leaders. When used appropriately in an individual situation, these core competencies can enhance customer satisfaction, per-

ceived quality of care, and loyalty while enabling the healthcare organization to receive optimal reimbursement from pay-for-performance plans. ★

Selected references

- Dye CF, Garman AN. *Exceptional Leadership: 16 Critical Competencies for Healthcare Executives*. Chicago, IL: Health Administration Press; 2006.
 - Fried BJ, Fottler MD. *Human Resources in Healthcare. Managing for Success*. 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: Health Administration Press; 2008.
 - Longest BB, Darr K. *Managing Health Services Organizations and Systems*. 5th ed. Baltimore, MD: Health Professions Press; 2008.
 - Lovelock C, Wirtz J, Chew P. *Essentials of Services Marketing*. Pearson Education; 2008.
 - Studer Q. *Hardwiring Excellence: Purpose, Worthwhile Work, Making a Difference*. Gulf Breeze, FL: Fire Starter Publishing; 2004.
 - Studer Q, Robinson BC, Cook K. *The HCAHPS Handbook: Hardwire Your Hospital For Pay-For-Performance Success*. Gulf Breeze, FL: Fire Starter Publishing; 2010.
- Visit www.AmericanNurseToday.com/Archives.aspx for a complete list of selected references.

Anne S. Rabert is the director of clinical services in the medical-surgical intensive care unit at Lehigh Valley Health Network in Allentown, Pennsylvania.