



# Royalty for loyalty

*For hospitals, doctors are saviours but customer continues to be king. Making him feel like one is key to patient retention, writes Shiv Joshi*

Way back in 1998, a Tanzanian patient checked into a reputed Indian hospital for an orthopaedic surgery. The surgery was successful, yet the patient didn't survive. The reason, the management later realised, was language and cultural barrier that prevented him from effectively communicating his needs, including the simple but important need to relieve himself.

After losing a patient, the hospital was quick to learn its lesson. It put together a process to make expat patients feel at home — from hiring translators, social workers and counsellors to chefs, who cooked food of their choice. It has also started paying special attention to the expat patient's need for religious support. The staff in the hospital was also educated to handle multicultural and multinational customers. And soon, the hospital started receiving hordes of patients from Tanzania. This is a classic example of strategising to retain patients.

If a hospital keeps the patient first, the staff is inspired to be proactive and serve the patient well. And that, according to experts, is what generates loyalty in patients, making the hospital their preferred choice for all their healthcare needs.

## IT'S ALL ABOUT PATIENT EXPERIENCE

It's important to differentiate, though, between patient experience and clinical outcomes. "The surgery may be successful, but the patient might still go back thinking that the hospital was lousy. Or, one may lose a patient and still think it is a good hospital. And this perception depends on how the patient feels at the hospital," says Ratan Janan, founder and principal consultant, Medium Healthcare Consulting, a leading healthcare consulting firm based in Hyderabad.

Patient experience is synonymous with transparency, value, ethics, trust and empathy. And as per experts, this could be a huge opportunity for differentiation, especially, in the case of hospitals with over 100 beds. Especially now, since most

large hospitals offer a certain ambience and a certain price band.

And with hospitals offering the same kind of marble lobby, great interiors, star doctors and a host of other things, one hospital is indistinguishable from another. Good marketing helps bring the patient to the door step, the first time, but after that it's over to healthcare delivery and the experience to ensure patient satisfaction.

The only way then for large hospitals to be very successful is by having a clear differentiation strategy. Deciding on what they want to do and for whom can help them deliver a much better customer experience—and that's the best way to retain customers. John Punnoose, managing partner, Oyster Healthcare, informs that hospitals are realising this. "Patient care is where the hospitals are trying to differentiate," he informs.

The same is not the case with smaller hospitals or nursing homes (which make up 80 per cent of India's healthcare sector), which thrive on proximity and the doctor-cum-owner's reputa-

tion. These two factors ensure a steady inflow of regular patients. As long as they continue offering decent service, they enjoy patient loyalty for years.

## WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

If a hospital fails to meet patient expectations, it will lose its patients. If, on the other hand, hospitals do manage to meet expectations and make them feel cared for, they will keep coming back for generations. According to Punnoose, patients now determine the preference of a hospital based on two parameters: the clinical quality and the care they receive. Clinical quality is largely determined by evaluating the quality of physicians and medical staff on board, the state of the art technology a hospital invests in, and the clinical protocols and outcomes benchmarked as per International and National certification/accreditation bodies. "Ultimately, the most important thing is how a hospital receives the customer. Unless you ensure that a customer feels wanted, you can't expect him or her to come back to you," adds Punnoose.

It's as Vijay Gupta, director, marketing of Hinduja Hospital says, "most marketing efforts are aimed at customer acquisition, often ignoring the experience of existing patient customers. Focussing on this captive base can be far more rewarding."

## THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

There are many ways to improve patient experience—right from beautification of the premises to improving interaction with patients.

**Good physicians:** Doctors are the biggest draw for patients. Getting good doctors on board and keeping them with you certainly works to keep patients coming back, especially for OPD.

**Accreditations:** These work two ways. They help draw the customer, but more than that they play a critical role in improving the quality of care. "NABH or even ISO accreditations ensure that you have certain systems and processes in place to give quality of care. That in itself helps uplift the care experience," says Punnoose.

**Comfortable stay:** Making patients feel comfortable during their stint at the hospital, irrespective of whether they spend a few hours there or a few days, is a sure-shot way to keep them with you. In the absence of the comfort factor, even the best of doctors and the most sophisticated infrastructure won't be able to impress patients. They'll want an out, even against medical advice.

**Grievance redressal:** How a hospital handles



## 'THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE IS TO OVER-PROMISE AND UNDER-DELIVER'

Dr Jagdish (Jag) N Sheth, Charles H Kellstadt Professor of Marketing in the Goizueta Business School at Emory University and an internationally known marketing guru with experience in a vast range of industries shares, his views on patient retention.

### 1. What can a hospital do to retain a loyal patient base?

The best way to retain a loyal patient base is post-visit communication to get feedback from patients and then using that feedback to continuously improve on the quality of healthcare delivery. A good follow up is reinforcing and reassuring. It indicates that the hospital cares about the patient, and does not view the patient merely as a source of revenue.

### 2. What is your advice to hospitals in India on creating brand value with regards to patient retention while maintaining integrity?

The best way is to focus on 'bedside manners', which include friendly employees, physical space and atmosphere. In other words, if hospitals can adopt and integrate the culture of the hospitality industry, it will make a difference in both acquiring new patients and retaining the existing ones. This is clearly demonstrated by hospitals in Thailand, where medical tourism is a booming business.

### 3. What are the hospitals abroad doing differently in this regard?

Leading hospitals and clinics, such as the Mayo Clinic or the Cleveland Clinic, are deploying a patient-centric information system. It makes them both efficient and effective. In many ways, they represent 'lean operations' and process-driven delivery.

### 4. What is a common mistake hospitals make in terms of branding and marketing initiatives that could turn patients off?

The most common mistake is to over promise and under deliver. You inflate patient expectations through exaggerated claims and testimonials; while at the same time, you do not invest in improving the quality of delivery. This results in negative experiences of the patients, even though as a hospital you are good enough.

In all service industries, customers like to reduce choices and prefer to be in a relationship. The 'hospital hopping' occurs because the hospital is unable or unwilling to offer a superior service at a reasonable price in a patient-friendly manner. Unfortunately, with aggressive marketing in a competitive market, patients do manifest shopping behaviour.



Encouraging patients to give feedback and providing them proper guidance helps create a positive impression



Ratan Jalan, founder, Medium Healthcare Consulting



John Punnoose, managing partner, Oyster Healthcare



Vijay Gupta, director, marketing, Hinduja Hospital

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conflict is key to how it makes the patient (or even the relatives) feel. Hinduja Hospital, for instance, has customer service people in special uniforms strategically placed in areas with high patient footfalls. “The idea is to be proactive in seeking feedback, guide and address concerns before they become complaints,” says Gupta. There are various points of contact for patients to air their woes — website, boxes at various places where customers can fill up the feedback forms.

Jaslak Hospital too has a strong grievance redressal system in place. “Whenever patients take discharge, especially against medical advice, we ask for feedback and there’s a team to ensure that suggestions are implemented and issues addressed,” informs Col RR Pulgaonkar, CEO, Jaslak Hospital.

**Conveying care:** With patients and relatives coming to hospitals in an aggrieved state of mind, many hospital have specially trained their staff to put the patients and relatives at ease. Gupta informs that Hinduja Hospital has taken a number of steps in this direction. It has a team of customer service people in place that visits in-patients, ensuring they are comfortable.

American Healthcare consultant Rhoda Weiss, PhD, advises hospitals to strive for strong first impressions, and attention to detail when communicating with patients. Another prescription is to even make patients laugh when appropriate.

Many hospitals have now taken to organising health camps, such as diabetes management camps or post cardiac surgery rehab to make patients aware of the risks. Although some critics might call this cross-selling, it conveys that the hospital cares about the patient.

**Shorter waiting times:** What makes a visit to a hospital painful, besides the unpleasantness of the ailment itself, is the long waiting hours — waiting for their time with the doctor and also waiting for the arrival of results.

This is especially true for OPDs. Addressing this, Jaslak Hospital has taken the initiative to intimate patients about their test results as soon as they arrive via SMS. “We are constantly looking at ways to cut down waiting times, and offer faster turn-around,” informs Col Pulgaonkar.

Hinduja Hospital has started a Short Stay Service (SSS) wing, with dedicated customer services team, admission and discharge counters and OTs. This ‘Hospital within a Hospital’ concept ensures quick and a seamless experience for a better patient experience.

Some Indian hospitals and clinics are already allowing patients to book appointments

### WHAT PUTS PATIENTS OFF

Hospitals aiming for ‘repeat customers’ should avoid:

- **Overbilling:** Experts point out that in 92 per cent of cases, overbilling is what puts patients off. To avoid any doubt, Jalan suggests that a hospital attach the actual bill along with the original estimate.
- **Waste of time:** One of the prime reasons patients refrain from going to the same hospital is the amount of time wasted in waiting for the doctors. Patients are even wary of hospitals that extend the hospital stay. It also makes more economic sense for the hospital to reduce the average length of stay as the revenue from beds is maximised in the first few days.
- **Lack of hygiene:** The ambience and look and feel has to be of a certain standard. Gone are the days when hospitals smelled like hospitals—today’s guests prefer place that look sanitised and smell pleasant.
- **Opaque dealings:** Prescribing tests or procedures without consulting or explaining the meaning is a pejorative practice. Experts recommend maintaining transparency in dealings by making the patient a part and parcel of the process from start to end.
- **Inconsiderate attitude:** This is reflected through many things, such as uncommunicative or rude staff, poor designed or improper facilities and bad attitude of doctors.

online, where patients can select the time slot of their convenience.

**Convenience factor:** There many things that hospitals are already doing to enhance convenience — be it offering cashless facilities for insured patients, reminders for appointments or suggesting preventative tests. While Jaslak Hospital enables patients to consult doctors over the phone in case of doubts, Hinduja offers Care@home, where, once a patient gets discharged, she can call up the hospital for sample collection, physiotherapy, nursing and even doctor visit (in some cases). Recently, it started organising webinars, “Since you can’t come to a hospital or read complicated patient material, you can visit our webcasts and get updated or informed,” informs Gupta. Retaining patients is all about engagement, at the right time, right place and right mode.

Col Pulgaonkar sums it up well: The basic quality of care and the experience should be so compelling and comforting that the patient should not feel like going anywhere else. 