

CUSTOMERS' ASSESSMENTS OF QUALITY AND VALUE, DECISIONS ABOUT WHAT AND WHERE TO BUY, AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO OTHERS ARE ALL INFLUENCED BY EMOTIONS. BUT TOO OFTEN COMPANIES DON'T ADEQUATELY ANTICIPATE THOSE EMOTIONS AND THEREFORE CAN'T MITIGATE NEGATIVE ONES IN THE DESIGN OF THEIR OFFERINGS.

This is especially true for *high-emotion services*—those that trigger strong feelings before the service even begins. Services relating to major life events such as birth, marriage, illness, and death fall into this category, as do airline travel, car and computer repair, and home buying, selling, and renovation. High-emotion services may elicit intense feelings for the following reasons:

Lack of familiarity with the service being delivered. When family members must quickly arrange a loved one's funeral, their grief is often compounded by uncertainty surrounding expenses and options.

Lack of control over the performance of the service. Complaints about auto repair shops regularly top lists published by the Consumer Federation of America.

Major consequences if things go wrong. Legal services for a divorce can have a huge effect on a client's finances, child custody, and self-esteem.

Complexity that makes the service a black box and gives its provider the upper hand. When a computer technician tells a customer that “the laptop’s motherboard is fried,” the customer usually has no way to judge either the diagnosis or the suggested repair.

Long duration across a series of events. A wedding commonly involves extended planning, a rehearsal dinner, the main ceremony, and some combination of reception, meal, and party—plenty of opportunities for conflict and pitfalls.

Satisfying anxious or overwrought customers who are contending with these issues is a challenge for service providers. Drawing from our collective experience studying, designing, and providing services, we have identified four guidelines that can help positively influence expectations and perceptions of quality and value, enhancing customers’ satisfaction and loyalty. Managers should identify emotional triggers, respond early to intense emotions, enhance

Idea in Brief

THE CHALLENGE
Many services—including funeral services, airline travel, car and computer repair, and car and computer selling, and home buying—can trigger strong emotions. But the companies that provide them often fall short in anticipating and mitigating their customers’ anxieties and fears.

customers’ control, and hire and rigorously train people who can communicate respectfully.

A Traumatic Journey

We chose cancer care to illustrate the application of these guidelines, for an obvious reason: Few services involve more-intense emotions. A cancer diagnosis is life changing. It immediately raises the specter of death, typically involves long treatment cycles and multiple clinicians, and often heralds acute short- and long-term physical and emotional side effects of the treatments themselves. The foundation of excellent cancer care is and always will be the quality of the diagnosis, the treatment plan, and the clinical services. But compassionate, sensitive delivery matters a great deal in shaping the reputation of a care organization and distinguishing it from competitors. In addition, a portion of Medicare reimbursements to hospitals is now tied to customer satisfaction ratings.

One of us (Len Berry) is conducting an ongoing study of how to improve the service journey that adult cancer patients and their families take from diagnosis through treatment, recovery, and in some cases end-of-life care. So far, the research has involved interviews with more than 350 cancer patients, family members, oncologists, surgeons, oncology nurses, nonclinical staffers, and leaders of health care organizations, primarily at 10 highly reputed cancer centers in nine U.S. states. For example, Bellin Health Systems, based in Green Bay, Wisconsin, was rated the safest hospital in America by *Consumer Reports* in 2013; Mayo Clinic attracts patients from all over the world to its three main sites in Minnesota, Arizona, and Florida, owing to its reputation for clinical quality; and Intermountain Healthcare, based in Salt Lake City, is a trailblazer in using analytics to minimize unwanted clinical variation across physicians and delivery sites.

THE SOLUTION

Identify emotional triggers during the customer’s experience. Develop tactics for responding quickly when intense emotions arise. Enhance customers’ control over the service. Hire and rigorously train people who can respectfully communicate with customers and strengthen their confidence.

THE PAYOFF

By designing services to defuse customers’ intense negative feelings and influence their expectations and perceptions of quality and value, companies can enhance satisfaction and loyalty. It is a powerful way to differentiate offerings—one that competitors can’t easily replicate.

The institutions studied are known for their service quality as well. Their delivery of high-emotion services was a primary factor in their selection for the study.

Consider Bellin Health. For most of its 100-plus years, Bellin’s cancer services were limited primarily to surgery at its main hospital; patients received outpatient care from other providers. But by the early 2000s competition was intensifying, oncology admissions to the hospital were declining, the surgeons were frustrated by the lack of timely, coordinated outpatient care, and patients were asking why they couldn’t receive all their treatment at Bellin. During an effort to create a comprehensive cancer center, the board of directors instructed the steering team (led by one of us, Jody Wilmet) not to merely duplicate what the competition was doing but to differentiate patient care. The team decided to meet that challenge by designing high-quality services that would also address the emotional needs of patients and their families.

The cancer center, which opened in 2008, surpassed its five-year growth and revenue targets in just two years, and nearly 100% of patients (who are just two years, and) say they are “highly likely” to regularly surveyed) say they are “highly likely” to recommend its medical and radiation oncology services. Bellin achieved these results in large part by following the four guidelines for succeeding in highly emotional contexts. Let’s look at each one in turn.

1 Identify Emotional Triggers

The initial emotional trigger is a need for the service, and a company’s underperformance can heighten negative emotions such as anger and fear. But emotions also present opportunities to exceed customers’ expectations. Identifying the aspects of a service that are most likely to intensify negative emotions is a key step in developing a strategy to minimize