



PUTTING ON THE RITZ

He who gives great service gets great returns.

Elbert Hubbard, 19th century American writer

Patients are no different from other people—they recognize good service when they see it. To find ways of going the extra mile for your patients, you have only to observe your own nonmedical experiences. In your daily life, you are probably surrounded by excellent examples of outstanding customer service. You know when you have received good service from a hotel, a restaurant, your attorney, or your pharmaceutical representative. You can take many of these instances of good service and translate them to your medical practice.

Learning from Ritz Carlton



Let me give you an example of finding an application of customer service that I incorporated into my office procedure. I only stay at the Ritz Carlton in New York City for special occasions. As I was checking in for the third time, the receptionist looked at her computer and said, “I see, Dr. Baum, that you like a room with a view, that you prefer the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* delivered to your room in the morning, and that both you and your wife prefer feather pillows.” That was impressive, but she went even further: “Since we don’t have a room with a view of Central Park, we have upgraded you to the concierge floor, and you and your wife can have breakfast, afternoon tea, and dessert

in the evening. This comes with complimentary drinks and champagne." When we arrived in the room, there was a lovely fruit and cheese plate and a bucket of cold champagne. Now that is what I call exceeding customer expectations.

The story gets even better. I was visiting a Ritz Carlton in Washington, D.C., and the receptionist again was able to describe my profile and saw that all the amenities that I had requested during past visits to the New York City Ritz Carlton were made available to me at a hotel where I had previously never stayed.

Both receptionists, of course, had access to all the hotel's transactions stored in the company's database. That technology has become commonplace in many businesses and companies. We have all become accustomed to being included in the databases of our service providers—from our car mechanic to the grocery stores. However, the concept is still not universally applied when it comes to medicine. People should be able to expect the same degree of attentiveness from their healthcare providers. The more we know about our patients' likes, dislikes, hobbies, families, work, and leisure, the more likely they are to feel that they are special. Patients respond positively when they realize that we see them as complete people, not just as organ systems, diseases, or diagnoses.

I was so impressed by the Ritz Carlton and how I felt about the hotel and the service I received that I tried to think of a way to use this technique in my practice. My office systems are computerized, but we did not have the hardware, software, or staff to duplicate their method. So, I devised a noncomputerized system to achieve the same effect. I created a half-page form to be placed in the front of each patient's chart under the demographic information (see Exhibit 5-1). This form contains the following information:

1. Patient's name
2. Patient's birth date
3. Medical diagnoses
4. Names of the patient's other physicians
5. Patient's medications
6. Date the prescriptions were last filled
7. Name and telephone number of the patient's pharmacy
8. Personal information
9. E-mail address

My staff and I fill in the appropriate information as it is obtained. Using our "vital statistics" system, a conversation between my office nurse and Mrs. Smith, who wants her Dental A prescription refilled, might go like this: "Mrs. Smith, your last prescription was filled one month ago. Are you still using Walgreen's Pharmacy on Main Street? I know their number. I will check with Dr. Baum and call the prescription in for you. . . . Isn't next week your birthday? I hope you have a nice day. . . . How's your new granddaughter? Please call us if there is anything else we can do for you, Mrs. Smith. Good-bye."

Exhibit 5-1 Vital Statistics Form

Name _____	
Date of Birth _____	
Physicians _____	

Pharmacy # _____	
Allergies _____	

Diagnosis _____	

Medications _____	
Date: _____	
Date: _____	
Date: _____	
Date: _____	
Other Healthcare Providers _____	

Personal Information _____	

Since my office has been using this system, the response from our patients has been excellent. The staff is also very positive about this project—they enjoy the feedback they get from the patients.

Now that we have an electronic medical record, we have created a box for each patient's homepage where we can enter what I refer to as "social progress" notes. This information is usually entered by the staff, and I review it for a few seconds before entering the room. I then discuss some aspect of the patient's nonmedical life prior to discussing their medical condition.

How Personal Information Notes Are Used

There is no better way to let your patients know that you care about their total well-being than to keep and use personal information notes.

You cannot treat patients as if they are machines, or just organs, cardiovascular systems, or GI tracts, and expect them to come back to your practice. And yet, sometimes, when I am in a hurry and launch immediately into a patient's medical problem, I find myself feeling almost like an auto mechanic who asks, "What's wrong with your car?" When I do that, I shortchange the patient. In addition, I miss out on much of the enjoyment of being a physician. Let's face it, that enjoyment is part of the reason we became physicians in the first place. Contrary to our bad press, we do not do what we do just for the money. Doctors could work the same amount of hours as financial analysts, stockbrokers, or insurance salespeople and earn just as much money. There are other attractions to practicing medicine—the satisfaction, the gratification, and what I call the "warm fuzzies" that let you know you are doing a good job.

Many patients will share feelings and inner thoughts with their physicians that they will not share with friends or even their spouses. To hurry into a patient's complaints before showing that you are interested in the patient is to miss out on one of medicine's greatest experiences.

If you do not engage them in conversation, your patients may feel that you perceive them as sets of symptoms and not whole people. One of the best ways to lay the groundwork and make your patients feel comfortable is to develop the habit of discussing nonmedical topics in the first 30 to 60 seconds of each patient visit. My rule of thumb for new patients is to spend at least 2 minutes talking about nonmedical topics before launching into a discussion of their chief complaint. Showing an interest in them—beyond your interest in their medical problems or symptoms—is a great way to make patients feel comfortable.

I happen to be an extrovert and I am curious about people, so asking questions comes naturally to me. If you are not a born conversationalist, there are still lots of ways for you to engage your patients in conversation and thus glean interesting facts about them. Patients will feel more rapport with you if they can find common areas of interest. That puts you and the patients on an equal footing and makes them feel comfortable in your presence.

If you are interested in honing your conversational skills, I recommend the book *How to Work a Room*.¹

I use a variety of icebreakers to begin a conversation. I start with the handshake. If a person has a strong handshake or appears trim, I make a comment such as, "Wow, you have a really firm grip. Do you lift weights?" or "Are you a jogger?"

I might ask about the patient's hobbies. If I know someone who shares one of the hobbies the patient lists, I will mention that fact. If the patient is a child, I might ask if he or she saw a new animated film or other current children's movie release.

I look at the patient's address on the chart. Perhaps I know someone in his or her neighborhood. I look at the patient's occupation. In the case of patients who are retired, I ask

how they are enjoying their retirement or what they are doing in their spare time. I ask about their previous occupation or about their grandchildren. (You can never go wrong inquiring about grandchildren!)

You cannot possibly remember all the details you gather about your patients' lives unless they are friends or have been patients for many years. Make sure that you and your staff write these details down in the personal information portion of the vital statistics form. Do not leave anything out, no matter how trivial it seems. During or after the visits, I record notes about my patients' families, hobbies, work, vacations, and, of course, their children.

We keep these notes in each patient's chart, and I quickly review the information before I walk into the examining room. I ask the patient a few questions based on what I have read on the vital statistics sheet. Interestingly enough, I have never had a patient notice that my questions are derived from these notes! Even if they did, I cannot imagine anyone objecting that I show enough interest in their nonmedical history to write it down.

I also refer to the personal information notes when I speak to a patient on the phone, and I ask my staff to do the same. For example, we use the notes when making appointments for patients or refilling prescriptions (as the example near the beginning of this chapter illustrates).

My patients really appreciate my interest in them. I have also found the icebreaker approach useful when I see new patients, who are frequently anxious or nervous about their first visit. When I ask about a patient's work or family, I can feel the patient relax. I frequently hear a sigh of relief, which is a signal that I can proceed with taking the medical history.

My staff and I have learned to value the personal information notes. They provide a wonderful way to let our patients know that we care more about them than their diagnoses, medications, and internal organs. Because our patients know we care, they pass the good word along to their family members and friends.

Lessons Learned from the Container Store

Examples of excellent customer service are everywhere, and you can apply what you see to your own practice. For example, I visited the Container Store in Austin, Texas, looking for computer cable covers for my daughter's computer. I asked a clerk who was stocking the shelves where I might find the cable covers. The clerk asked, "May I show you where they are located?" She took me to the section where I found the tubes and then she walked me to each area of the store to locate the remainder of the items on my "to do" list. This was a wow experience for me. It is no wonder that this is one of America's most successful retail chains, because it has employees who delight in helping customers solve problems and who are given the freedom and confidence to do so.

At my office, we decided to learn from the Container Store and provide every employee the freedom and confidence to do whatever is right and in the best interest of the patients. Now when a patient or a visitor asks a staff member, "How do I find Dr. Halsted's office?" the employee will often walk the person to that office. This is just one way of spreading the news that our practice is user-friendly and service-oriented.

The Bottom Line

If the Ritz Carlton maximizes use of their computers to help enhance each guest's visit to their hotel and make them feel special, then certainly we in the medical profession can maximize service by attending to the extra details while we deliver the highest quality health care. Pinpoint the techniques that work in other businesses and translate them to your practice. The results will almost certainly be a pleasant surprise. You, too, can put on the Ritz!

NOTE

1. Roane, S, *How to Work a Room, Revised Edition: Your Essential Guide to Savvy Socializing* (New York: Collins), 2007.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Ford, L, McNair, D, Perry, B, *Exceptional Customer Service: Going Beyond Your Good Service to Exceed the Customer's Expectation* (Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corporation), 2001.

Friberg, K, Friberg J, *NUTS! Southwest Airlines' Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success* (Austin, Texas: Bard Press), 1996.

Gittel, JH, *The Southwest Airlines Way* (Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill), 2005.

Spector, R, McCarthy, PD, *The Nordstrom Way to Customer Service Excellence: A Handbook For Implementing Great Service in Your Organization* (New York: John Wiley & Sons), 2005.

YOUR RECEPTION AREA IS YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

Perfection is not attainable. But if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.

Vince Lombardi, Coach, Green Bay Packers

When your patients hear the words "waiting room," what do they picture? Do they think of long delays, of being bored or anxious in a haphazardly arranged room? Do they think of losing valuable work time or money?

Put yourself in your patients' shoes. While waiting to see your physician, you most likely feel worried about something—otherwise you probably would not have made the appointment. You may be in pain and you probably fear the worst about your symptoms.

How you organize your office reception area can do a lot to allay your patients' doubts and fears. Your aim should be to make your patients feel relaxed and comfortable. After the initial telephone call, your reception area is a patient's first contact with you and your practice.

Patients often form judgments about the physician and the entire practice the moment they walk through the front door. By understanding that your reception area is an important part of the image you present, you can use it to give patients a warm, positive feeling. Remember, you do not get a second chance to make a first impression.

Wouldn't it be nice if your reception area made a positive first impression? In this chapter, I provide 25 suggestions that you can implement easily and inexpensively to improve your reception area and the image that you present.

At the end of this chapter, I have listed resources that can be helpful in redesigning your office space. Exhibit 6-1 contains a checklist you can use to evaluate your present reception area. The best way to begin your survey is to walk into your own reception area and ask yourself, "If the doctor were delayed, would I be comfortable waiting here for 30 to 45 minutes?" If the answer is no or even maybe, try implementing a few of the following suggestions.

Exhibit 6-1 Reception Area Evaluation Checklist

You can photocopy this checklist or bring along a clipboard for making notes as you do your survey.

1. Enter your office as a patient would.
Is the suite number prominently displayed? Yes ☐ No ☐
Is the door easy to open? Yes ☐ No ☐
Is the path to the reception desk apparent? Yes ☐ No ☐
Is the office wheelchair-accessible? Yes ☐ No ☐
2. Still pretending you are a patient, walk up to the reception desk to notify the staff of your presence.
Is it clear how patients should sign in? Yes ☐ No ☐
Is the sign-in sheet HIPAA compliant? Yes ☐ No ☐
3. Once you have signed in, turn around and look at the reception area itself.
Does the room appear cluttered? Yes ☐ No ☐
Comfortable? Yes ☐ No ☐
Is it easy to find a seat? Yes ☐ No ☐
4. Imagine the receptionist has told you the wait will be about 15 minutes.
Are the available magazines current and nicely displayed? Yes ☐ No ☐
5. As you sit down to read, notice whether music or video soundtracks are playing.
Is the volume acceptable? Yes ☐ No ☐
6. Notice the temperature in the room.
Is it too cool? Yes ☐ No ☐ Too warm? Yes ☐ No ☐
7. Are pleasant distractions offered? Yes ☐ No ☐

Avoid Negative Perceptions

Do not call your reception area the "waiting room." To most patients, "waiting room" suggests the location where they cool their heels waiting for the doctor to get around to seeing them. It is no wonder, then, that most patients see waiting rooms as uncomfortable places. You can avoid any negative perception by using "reception room" or "reception area." The word *reception* conveys a much more inviting feeling than the word *waiting*. When you designate a room as the reception area, you are saying, "This is where we receive our patients. We provide them with pleasant distractions where they can relax and perhaps even enjoy themselves as we make every effort to see them in a timely fashion." A reception area is a place where patients can be comfortable, learn about your services, and be educated about their health. You would be surprised at the difference that using "reception area" instead of "waiting room" can make.

If you are currently designating the reception area as a waiting room, the name will need to be changed. This will require some effort from you and your staff. To help your staff remember, you can post a sign on the door leading from the inner office to the reception room. That way, staff members will see it when they open the door to get the next patient. Also, staff members should gently correct each other whenever the old name is used. Remember that people need ample time to change a habit. One classic study demonstrated this fascinating quirk of human nature.¹ A group of researchers took wastebaskets that had been on the left side of work desks and placed them on the right side. They found that most people continued to throw their wastepaper to the left for as long as 3 weeks thereafter, so do not expect everyone to be able to substitute the new name in a single day.

Reconfigure Your Reception Area

A list of resources to help you redesign your reception and office areas is provided at the end of the chapter. Short of hiring an interior designer, you can put the following suggestions into practice immediately.

Make your reception room into a living room. It should have the relaxed appearance of your living room at home. If space permits, try arranging the chairs (or couches) randomly rather than placing them along the perimeter of the room as in a bus or train station. Figures 6-1 and 6-2 should give you an idea of the difference between inviting and non-inviting furniture arrangements.



Figure 6-1 An example of an inappropriate arrangement of furniture in a reception area.

Source: Photo courtesy of Ashley Merlin (www.ashleymerlin.com).



Figure 6-2 An example of a pleasing arrangement of furniture in a reception area.

Source: Photo courtesy of Ashley Martin (www.ashleymartin.com)

Pay attention to lighting. The room will have a softer appearance if you light it with table lamps that provide indirect lighting instead of overhead fluorescent light fixtures.

Provide attractive objects in the reception area. A patient's senses will be stimulated positively when there are attractive objects in the room. Many physicians have appreciated that an aquarium is a pleasant distraction for patients of all ages. People seem to relax when they sit and watch fish swimming in an aquarium. Keep in mind, though, that an aquarium and potted plants require a significant amount of maintenance, especially a saltwater aquarium. The old dictum still holds true: Never go to a doctor who has dead plants or dead fish!

Display an arrangement of cut flowers. Fresh-cut flowers placed on a table in the reception area are not only pleasing, but they are also a low-maintenance distraction. Most florists have delivery services and will provide a nice arrangement every Monday that will usually last until the end of the week. However, make sure one staff person is responsible for checking the arrangement and discarding yellowing or brown flowers. I usually give the flowers to a patient on Friday afternoon when I know the flowers have reached their peak level of freshness. This is very appreciated by the recipients and is far better than throwing away expensive flowers. The florist can also provide attractive floral settings keyed to the colors and plants associated with various holidays, such as Valentine's Day, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, and Christmas.

Get rid of the "doctor's office smell." Many offices have those familiar and unpleasant medicinal smells. An attractive bowl of potpourri provides a pleasant aroma. The smell creates a nice atmosphere and avoids the negative effect of unpleasant odors. The potpourri

aroma can be enhanced with special scented drops when the fragrance diminishes. Bowls of potpourri can also be used in the restrooms and examination rooms for the same purpose.

Provide Distractions

Provide easy and entertaining puzzles. Your patients will feel more relaxed if they have something to look at or do in the reception area. I provide games and puzzles in varying degrees of difficulty; from finger puzzles to Rubik's Cubes. I look for puzzles that don't have pieces that can be lost or that would be a hazard to young children. I have provided a few resources for these puzzles at the end of the chapter.

Bring in examples of your collections. If you are comfortable with the idea, why not display memorabilia or artifacts from your hobbies or recreational activities? This shows your patients that you have other interests. For example, you might mount your stamp collection in picture frames and hang the frames along the wall. If you are an ophthalmologist, you might consider a wall arrangement containing antique eyeglasses. I have a belt buckle collection, and I rotate a few of my belt buckles in a locked Plexiglas case. These serve as a great conversation piece among the patients. (See Figure 6-3 for a photo of my belt buckle collection.)



Figure 6-3 Belt buckle collection.

Source: Photo courtesy of Ashley Martin (www.ashleymartin.com).

Of course, you need to be conscious of your patient base when deciding which collections to display. If you are a pediatrician, small items in glass cases would not be appropriate. You also need to take some care in choosing the displays and their locations. Be mindful of the traffic patterns that such displays would create.

One San Francisco dentist, Tom Kuhn, DDS, who is a yo-yo champion and designer of custom yo-yos, displays antique and uniquely painted yo-yos in a glass case along the side wall of his office reception area, located in a remodeled Victorian house. This makes for a great conversation piece, and if Dr. Kuhn has time between patients, he has been known to delight people with a demonstration!

Play soothing music. Pleasant auditory distraction is easy to accomplish with one of the "easy listening" or "smooth jazz" stations that are popular in most metropolitan areas. You can also purchase a compact disc player that accepts five or six discs and plays them in a random or prerecorded fashion. Record companies such as Windham Hill Records distribute especially pleasing CDs of guitar and piano jazz, as well as composite soundtracks of forest or rainfall sounds. These CDs are available at <http://www.windhamhillrecords.com>. Their titles are available at all large chain music stores, as well as many small independent stores. You can also obtain Windham Hill titles at <http://www.amazon.com/music>. If you have teenagers among your patients, you can provide them with portable CD, iPod, or MP3 players (with headphones, of course, so they do not distract others in the reception area).

Consider using the reception area as a screening room. The TV can be used to promote you and your practice. If you have been on TV or have had a seminar videotaped, you can play the tape periodically on the TV in the reception room. There are companies that will install a television with a DVD player so that patients can watch short programs interspersed with advertisements—about nutrition, parenting, exercise, heart disease, and stress management. Sponsored by pharmaceutical companies, these programs are produced by Cable News Network (CNN) and are free to physician offices.

Probably the most popular is AccentHealth, which is produced by CNN's Emmy Award-winning health unit. AccentHealth is an exclusive television network that reaches 11.7 million health-conscious viewers every month, in 11,200 doctors' waiting rooms nationwide.

Programming, produced by CNN and hosted by CNN's Dr. Sanjay Gupta and Robin Meade, is delivered on a 32" flat panel monitor and features a wide range of healthy lifestyle topics—everything from diet and exercise to disease prevention and useful news on the latest health breakthroughs. Dr. Sanjay Gupta is a practicing neurosurgeon in Atlanta, Georgia, an assistant professor of neurosurgery at Emory University, and associate chief of the neurosurgery service at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta. In addition to his media presence on CNN, he is also the best-selling author of *Chasing Life*, which appeared on the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Robin Meade is the lead news anchor for CNN Headline News' morning show *Morning Express with Robin Meade*. AccentHealth programs, seen by nearly 10 million viewers per month, focus on healthy lifestyles, including topics such as nutrition, coping with colds and flu, and preparing healthy snacks for kids. Health trivia questions keep them enlightened and entertained.

AccentHealth can be reached toll-free at (800)791-8756, and maintains a Web site at <http://www.accenthealth.com>.

The fully integrated system using tapes on a loop requires no set-up time by you or your staff. AccentHealth supplies the DVD player, the television monitor, complete installation of the system, maintenance, and service. A new program containing the latest developments in health and medicine is installed each month, and the system turns on and off automatically according to your office hours. AccentHealth is available to primary care physicians, pediatricians, and obstetrician-gynecologists. In order to qualify for the program, you must have a practice with two or more full-time physicians and see a minimum of 250 patients per week. The average patient wait time must be less than 60 minutes, and patient visits must occur infrequently throughout the month, so that they do not see the same program more than once.

Results from a national survey of patients who watch AccentHealth programming revealed that 96% reported that having such a system in the reception area made the time go more quickly. Nearly 100% said that the programming provided useful, health-related information. This kind of program clearly demonstrates that you are concerned about your patients' overall health and satisfaction. It provides value-added health information that patients genuinely appreciate.

I have some words of caution about using a television in your reception area. If you are not careful about volume levels, the television can actually become an irritant to some patients. I think it is best to place the TV in a corner of the room (or in alcove or separate room, if you have one) so that no one is forced to look at or listen to it.

Provide a Variety of Reading Materials

Subscribe to health-related magazines. Most medical offices provide magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Reader's Digest*, *People*, and *National Geographic*. Today's patients are very interested in their health and more knowledgeable about health and wellness than ever before. You can encourage this trend by providing them with health-related magazines and periodicals. Since I started providing health-related reading material in the reception area, most of my patients prefer reading the health magazines to the conventional publications. The following is a suggested list of national health magazines, including subscription information:

- **Health**, a bimonthly magazine published by Times Publishing Ventures of San Francisco, CA, deals with health and medical issues, with special sections on food, family, sports, drugs, and the mind. Call (800)274-2522 for subscription information. E-mail: editors@health.com
- **Men's Health** carries articles with a "male" slant on physical and emotional health issues. It is published quarterly by Rodale Press and is worth subscribing to if you have a large number of male patients. Call (800)666-2303 for subscription information; they also maintain a Web site at <http://www.menshealth.com>.

Of course, you need to be conscious of your patient base when deciding which collections to display. If you are a pediatrician, small items in glass cases would not be appropriate. You also need to take some care in choosing the displays and their locations. Be mindful of the traffic patterns that such displays would create.

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- *Health*, a bimonthly magazine from San Francisco, CA, deals with health, family, sports, drugs, and the more. E-mail: editors@health.com
- *Men's Health* carries articles on health issues. It is published quarterly. It has a large number of male patients who also maintain a Web site.

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- *Shape*, published by Weider Publishing, is a monthly magazine about women's health and fitness issues. Call (800)526-8440 for subscription information; they also maintain a Web site at <http://www.shapemag.com>.
- *Natural Health, the Guide to Well-Being*, is published 10 times a year by Weider Publishing, the publishers of *Shape*; call (800)526-8440 for subscription information.
- *Psychology Today*, published by Sussex Publishers, can also make for engrossing reading; call (800)234-8361 for subscription information or go to the Web site: <http://www.psychologytoday.com>.
- *Parents*, published by USA Publishing, offers readable and helpful articles for families with children; call (800)727-3682 for subscription information or go to the Web site: <http://www.parents.com>.
- WebMD publishes a free monthly magazine that contains excellent articles and also allows you to download a daily newsletter on topics that you select and that are pertinent to your patients. Go to https://pref.health.webmd.com/WebMD/WebMDSelection_MiniForm.asp?e=#.

Provide a few health or medical newsletters. Newsletters are designed to be read quickly and easily. Providing these kinds of reading materials also reinforces your concern for your patients' health. One of the best-known and best-written newsletters is the *Mayo Clinic Health Letter* ((800)333-9037; or online at <http://healthletter.mayoclinic.com>). It contains timely articles about advances in disease treatment, diagnostic technology, and general issues in medicine. A more radical approach to food safety and nutritional guidelines is presented in *Nutrition Action*, a health letter published by the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C. (<http://www.cspinet.org>). Another newsletter that is appreciated by patients interested in nutrition and wellness is Dr. Andrew Weil's *Self Healing—Creating Natural Health for Your Body and Mind* ((800)523-3296; <http://www.drweil.com>).

I have also included the "You" series (*You, On a Diet*; *You, Staying Young*; *You, The Owners Manual*; etc.) by Drs. Michael Roizen and Mehmet Oz. These are *New York Times* best sellers and provide easy-to-read practical information on healthy aging, staying young, and nutrition. Go to <http://www.amazon.com/You-Staying-Owners-Extending-Warranty/dp/0743569385>.

Assemble your own medical notebook. You may want to inform your patients of a particular area of interest in your practice or within your specialty by providing reading material on this subject in the reception room. For example, I am interested in infertility, impotence, and incontinence. Those in orthopedics often have an interest in sports medicine, while pediatricians are necessarily concerned with parenting issues. You can clip newspaper and magazine articles relating to these interests and place them in a notebook in plastic protective covers with the subject matter clearly written on the outside of the notebook. To avoid patients taking these sheets, we place a note on the binder offering to make copies of articles for the patients. Since I started collecting these articles, I have noticed that not only are my staff on the lookout for these articles, but patients also bring or send in pertinent articles on these specific subjects.

Assemble a notebook corner. Health, nutrition, sports medicine, smoking cessation are of interest with general medical information. Publish general health-related articles. Useful articles for your notebook.

Do not forget to supply. you can provide your patient demographics and socioeconomic daily newspapers such as *USA Today*.

Find unusual reading material. and Roebuck catalogue to patients. It is amazing how example of unusual yet interesting.

Guide Your Patients

Steer patients through the Internet. continues to climb, and patients continue to climb. You can help by making copies of useful material that is accurate as well as insert them into topic-specific material that patients can go to. In addition, if the Web site is that site and feel confident. Additional Resources at

More About You

Put the spotlight on you. patients can see your medical area where you can discuss suggest you provide an recommendation that, in the education courses. The patient you are doing today to is also important that you education courses so that to

Introduce your staff. and his or her staff. I s

Assemble a notebook containing general medical information. Subjects such as wellness, nutrition, sports medicine, sexually transmitted diseases, cancer prevention, and smoking cessation are of interest to nearly all patients. You can provide another notebook with general medical information. Almost all magazines and newspapers now contain several health-related articles. You will be amazed that your staff will be helpful in finding useful articles for your notebook, and even your patients will be contributors.

Do not forget to supply daily newspapers. In addition to the regular reading material, you can provide your patients with a copy of the daily local newspaper. Depending on the demographics and socioeconomics of patients in your practice, you might consider other daily newspapers such as *USA Today* or the *Wall Street Journal*.

Find unusual reading material. For instance, try adding reproductions of the old Sears and Roebuck catalogue to your library of reading material, especially if you have elderly patients. It is amazing how many of my patients enjoy looking at these. This is just one example of unusual yet interesting reading material. You or your staff may discover others.

Guide Your Patients to Internet Sites

Steer patients through the Internet. The number of patients with Internet access continues to climb, and patients are increasingly seeking health and medical information on the Internet. You can help your patients access valid and appropriate medical information by making copies of useful and accurate articles found on the Internet. I download material that is accurate as well as useful, and then place these pages in plastic cover sheets and insert them into topic-specific notebooks. I also place a note in the front of each book indicating that patients can get copies of any of the pages by asking the receptionist or nurse. In addition, if the Web site address is clearly displayed, this will encourage patients to visit that site and feel confident that it contains good content and useful information. (See Additional Resources at the end of the chapter for a list of useful Web sites.)

More About You and Your Staff

Put the spotlight on yourself. It is nice to display your diplomas on the wall so your patients can see your medical background. However, most offices do not provide a single area where you can display your credentials for all of your patients to see. That is why I suggest you provide an up-to-date curriculum vitae (CV) in the reception room. I also recommend that, in the notebook containing your CV, you list your continuing medical education courses. The patients not only want to know where you were yesterday but what you are doing today to stay current with the fast-paced changes occurring in medicine. It is also important that your staff be thoroughly familiar with your CV and continuing education courses so that they can answer patients' questions.

Introduce your staff. All new patients are interested in knowing about the doctor and his or her staff. I suggest that you provide a captioned picture of each staff member.

The caption might include a description of the staff member's job and training as well as interesting nonmedical information about his or her family and hobbies. This information can be placed in a notebook in the reception area. These notebooks can help new patients identify you and your staff and feel more comfortable about you before the first meeting. Jackie Aucoin is our patient coordinator and has been with my office since 1981. She is the "go to" person for the entire staff and is often the highlight of every patient's visit to our office. She has 6 children, 11 grandchildren, and 8 great-grandchildren. Her grandchildren and great-grandchildren are her hobbies and she spends every spare minute she has at Disneyland. Our notebook includes pictures of Jackie and her extended family, which patients seem to enjoy.

Put up a bulletin board. A reception room bulletin board can be an effective way to market your practice. On this bulletin board you can inform the patients of any talks, programs, or support groups that you are going to participate in or have recently participated in. It is also a means of informing your patients of your community or nonmedical involvement. The bulletin board can also convey information about your staff and their accomplishments, hobbies, or interests. I also provide a joke for the day or a quotation on health, wellness, success, or motivation. Jokes and quotations are available in calendar form at most bookstores. (Also available via the Internet at <http://www.ajokeaday.com> and http://jokes.comedycentral.com/joke_of_day.aspx.) Another suggestion is to place healthy and nutritious recipes on the bulletin board and offer to provide copies. These can be obtained from most women's magazines or from the dietitian in your hospital. This is also a good place to post your Web site and e-mail addresses.

Show patients your byline. Patients are impressed by articles written in local magazines and newspapers by or about their physician. Many patients enjoy seeing their physician's name in print, even if articles that appear in medical journals may be too technical for most readers. Such publications make patients feel that they are in the hands of an expert. If the articles appear in lay magazines or newspapers, then it is nice to provide copies of these articles for the patients.

Make use of your accolades—advertise the thank-yous. Almost all physicians receive glowing or complimentary letters from their patients. These are often discarded or placed in the patients' charts. Thank-you notes, placed in a nice scrapbook, can add favorably to the patients' perception of the physician and the office. According to local, state, and national medical societies (including the American Medical Association) that I have contacted, there is no problem with violating patient confidentiality if you are sure to obtain the patient's permission for placing letters or notes in your reception area scrapbook.

These "fan" letters can be especially helpful as a pre-introduction for new patients, who may be feeling rather anxious about being examined by a new doctor. If they happen to peruse your notebook containing enthusiastic notes from your previous satisfied patients, this could reduce the anxiety they might be feeling. They might say to themselves, "Wow, I am seeing an expert. If I have to go to the hospital, he'll take good care of me and he'll even come to see me on his day off. I am glad I chose this doctor." This book of thank-yous, which I title *The Warm Fuzzy Book*, is the most-read book in my reception area.

Patients have asked me, "What do I have to do to get into that book?" My response is always the same: "All you have to do is write me a letter!" *The Warm Fuzzy Book* actually perpetuates itself.

Other Touches

Always notify patients if there is a delay. If you are delayed, for whatever reason, it is a nice gesture for your office staff to tell waiting patients of the delay and give them an estimate of when you will be returning to the office. Patients should be given an opportunity to reschedule their appointments or to leave and come back when you are expected. If a patient elects to stay, ask your office staff to offer the patient and his or her family coffee, tea, or soft drinks. If you have a DVD player in the office and there are children in the reception room, your staff should play an appropriate DVD for them until you return to the office. (See Chapter 3 for more tips on handling delays.)

Let patients make necessary phone calls. I think it is nice to provide your patients with a courtesy phone in the reception area. Ideally this should be a separate line from your business phones. You can block patients from making long-distance calls by simply calling your telephone company and requesting this service, which usually comes with a small monthly charge (in my area, BellSouth charges \$4.50 a month).

Display your office mission statement. Many businesses and medical offices express their goals and purpose in a mission statement or pledge. Our office pledge was created by the staff and states, "This office is committed to: (1) excellence, (2) the best health care for our patients, and (3) the persistent attention to little details because we think they make a big difference." This pledge is displayed in the reception area, the office, and in the employee lounge. I think a mission statement or pledge is important for the patients to see as soon as they enter the office. It informs the patients of what they can expect from the doctor and his or her staff, and it sets the tone for a productive relationship.

Provide a suggestion box. If you follow this recommendation, make sure you check the box daily and answer all comments, positive or negative, immediately. If you implement any of your patients' suggestions, be sure to let them know with a written thank-you note. You will be amazed at how some of your existing patients can improve the service that you deliver to all of your patients.

The Bottom Line

Remember, the reception area is the first area your patients will see when they enter your office. When you make the reception area a relaxed and comfortable place, you set the stage for a more pleasant doctor-patient relationship.

NOTE

1. Maliz, M, *Psychocybernetics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 152-53.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For information regarding the following sourcebooks, originally published by Medical Economics Books—*Designing and Building Your Professional Office*, 2nd ed., and *Remodeling Your Professional Office*—call the current distributor at (800)MED-SHOP ((800)-633-7467), or contact them via their Web site at <http://www.medicalbookstore.com>.

Another valuable sourcebook is Malkin, J, *Medical and Dental Space Planning: A Comprehensive Guide to Design, Equipment, and Clinical Procedures* (New York: John Wiley and Sons), 2002.

Schwartz, M, *Designing and Building Your Professional Office* (Los Angeles: Practice Management Information Corp., 1989).

Resources for Puzzles:

<http://www.puzzles.com/products/elephantspinout.htm>

<http://www.geocities.com/jaapsch/puzzles/spinout.htm>

<http://www.puzzlemaster.ca/>

Credible Web sites to provide your patients:

General Health:

The Cleveland Clinic Health Information Center, <http://www.clevelandclinic.org/health>

healthfinder, <http://www.healthfinder.gov>

Developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, healthfinder links to carefully selected information and Web sites from over 1,500 health-related organizations.

Mayo Clinic, <http://www.mayoclinic.com>

MayoClinic.com offers a wealth of easy-to-understand health and medical information. In addition to diseases and conditions, the site has a number of healthy living guides and helpful resources.

Medem, http://medem.com/MedLB/medlib_entry.cfm

This Web site has patient information provided by major medical societies. A full range of patient information from simple health information to advanced resources is provided with a complexity indicator to guide your choice.

MedicineNet.com, <http://www.medicinenet.com>

MedicineNet.com is owned and operated by WebMD and is part of the WebMD Network. The Web site provides easy-to-read, in-depth, authoritative medical information for consumers through its user-friendly, interactive Web site.

MedlinePlus, <http://www.medlineplus.gov>

MedlinePlus offers over 18,000 links to accurate and current medical information on the Internet that has been evaluated by the National Library of Medicine.

Senior Health:

Administration on Aging Elders & Families, <http://www.aoa.gov/eldfam/eldfam.asp>

The Department of Health and Human Services/Administration on Aging Web site is designed to assist older people and their families or caregivers to quickly obtain information on a variety of aging-related topics and government-sponsored programs.

CDC's Health Aging, <http://www.cdc.gov/aging>

This Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site has statistics and research information, and a copy of the latest State of Aging and Health in America report.

Women's Health:

Noah: Women's Health, <http://www.noah-health.org/en/healthy/women>

The Women's Health pages cover normal conditions such as puberty, pregnancy, and menopause as well as diseases and concerns such as endometriosis, women's cancers, and STDs.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Office of Women's Health (OWH), <http://www.fda.gov/womens>

The FDA's Office of Women's Health Web site provides information about medical devices, cosmetics, and drugs; current health news; and information about research on women's health issues.

Men's Health:

American Academy of Family Physicians—Men's Health, <http://familydoctor.org/men.xml>

The American Academy of Family Physicians offers information about a wide range of topics of interest to men, including STDs, prostate health, reproductive issues, and fatherhood. Information is available in English and Spanish.

Urology Health (American Urological Association), <http://urologyhealth.org>

This site provides information on a wide variety of urological conditions affecting men. It also has information about female and pediatric urological disorders.