

Plan of Action for Improving the Patient Experience by Easing Waiting

Here's a five-point plan for increasing respect for our customers' time.

The Waiting List

1. Speed up the process.
2. Remove the term “waiting room” from all signs, literature and people’s vocabulary.
3. Provide diversions. Make the patient’s time feel like it’s going faster.
4. Adjust the customer’s expectations. Under-promise and over-deliver.
5. Institute scripts and script rehearsal so that staff members use magic—not tragic—words when communicating with patients about delays.

1. **Speed up the process.** Eliminate or reduce delays through process and technology improvements. Using quality improvement processes, eliminate redundancies, limit the number of different people a patient has to interact with, reduce the distances they have to travel, locate all supplies and equipment and forms at the caregivers’ fingertips. Eliminate obsolete steps: Hold a staff contest to find elements of the process that no longer serve a function. Acquire tools that work faster—faster computers, faster processing devices. Do flow analyses, and staff up at the logjam points. At its National Congress on Reducing Cycle Times and Delays, the Boston Institute for Healthcare Improvement shared terrific approaches. Bite the bullet and improve the process. It is not hopeless.
2. **Remove the term “waiting room” from all signs, literature and people’s vocabulary.** It sets up a negative expectation right from the start. How about calling it the Reception, Welcome or Hospitality area or some other creative, positive phrase that your employees suggest?

3. **Provide diversions.** Make the patient's time feel like it's going faster. Yesterday, as I sat waiting for an appointment, I asked fellow patients to brainstorm diversions with me. They suggested seek-and-find word games, brochures about the provider, a meet-the-staff bulletin board, Internet access, computer games, fish tanks and more. My personal favorite for an ER reception area is an electronic bulletin board like those in bars—with news or trivia or programmed with messages about how the ER works, the strengths of the organization, child safety, wellness tips and more. Inexpensive subscription services can make this very easy.
4. **Adjust the customer's expectations.** Under-promise and over-deliver. Discourage staff from predicting a wait length that is unrealistically short. Encourage staff to proactively shape the customer's expectations. Consider this: You call a bank for information and the banker says, "It will take some time to find the answer. I'll be back to you within 24 hours." Expecting it to take 24 hours, you probably won't get antsy until after those hours have passed. Let's say the banker gets back to you just four hours later; probably you will feel outright impressed! It's a Wow experience because you didn't expect the information so quickly. Now imagine that the banker says initially, "I'll get back to you within two hours," but then takes three hours before calling you back. You are probably annoyed at the banker's failure to keep the promise. It isn't the actual length of the wait that matters. It's what you've been led to expect about the length of the wait, and whether that prediction turns out to be fact or fiction. The moral: In our services, we should be adjusting customer expectations (downward if necessary), so we can meet or exceed them.
5. **Institute key message points (with rehearsal)** so that staff members use magic, not tragic, words when communicating with patients about delays. Develop and help people deliver in an authentic way great words of apology, explanation, empathy and appreciation.

[Click here for sample message points.](#)