



THERE IS MORE TO SATISFYING PATIENTS THAN REDUCING IOP

An artfully executed clinic experience shows patients you care.

BY JOHN BERDAHL, MD



Figuring out what your patients need is a matter of science; understanding what they want is more of an art. Above all else, patients want to know that you care about their comfort, the preservation of their visual function, and their general well-being from the moment they walk into the clinic to the moment they leave and beyond.

That is a tall order, but it is both necessary and achievable. It is necessary because, when patients discuss with family and friends how they were treated—or post it online to countless others—they tend to mention how they felt about their experience, as opposed to your recommended treatment plan or its efficacy. The goal is achievable because, clearly, you have your patients' best interest at heart, so all that remains is implementing a plan that effectively telegraphs that message.



AT A GLANCE

- Figuring out what your patients need is a matter of science; understanding what they want is more of an art. Above all else, patients want to know that you care about their comfort, the preservation of their visual function, and their general well-being.
- Conveying that you care depends on tangible and intangible elements.
- To make a patient's experience excellent, you must connect with him or her on an experiential level.

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THREE LEGS

At Vance Thompson Vision, we characterize our practice as a stool with three legs. Unless all three are firmly in place, the practice will be off balance and unsustainable. The first leg is an unwavering commitment to investing in the best technology, the second leg is our obligation always to do the right thing for the patient, and the third leg is our creation of an incredible experience for each patient.

Although they typically cannot judge ophthalmic technology, and although they may not be able to judge if their eye care team is doing the right thing for them, patients are experts at judging how they are spoken to by a receptionist, how they are handled by technicians, and certainly how they are treated by a physician. If they feel well treated, patients will project those positive feelings onto the other aspects of a practice. Conversely, if they feel they have been poorly treated or that the clinic does not provide a superior experience, they will project their negative feelings onto other aspects of the practice.

TANGIBLES AND INTANGIBLES

Conveying that you care depends on tangible and intangible elements. The former includes the cutting-edge



technology that is crucial to diagnosing, monitoring, and treating their glaucoma. Intangible elements comprise things like the short waiting time that a scheduler works to maintain, easy and sufficient parking, and what I refer to as “hygiene factors.” The last are things that patients expect: if they do not get them, they will be dissatisfied, but if they do, you will not get any kudos. Examples include a promptly answered phone, a reasonable walk from the car to the clinic, and a clean and inviting building. Hygiene factors are equivalent to a seat at the table; once there, your patients want a gourmet meal.

THE SOFTER SIDE

To make a patient’s experience excellent, you must connect with him or her on an experiential level. Do patients feel warmly received by your staff? Do your technicians smile and explain the reasons for each test? Do you thank patients for the trust they place in you? Does someone on your staff clearly communicate to patients who are scheduled for surgery what their deductible is, what their copay is, and any other potential fees for which they might be responsible? (A service such as pVerify [<https://www.pverify.com>] can help your schedulers provide that information in advance.) Does someone from your practice call patients on the day after surgery? Do you make your email address or cell phone number available to patients who need it (and know they will not abuse the privilege because you have always treated them respectfully and therefore expect treatment in kind)?

Testing can be exhausting, especially for elderly patients, so anything that you can do to make the appointment less sterile and more comfortable adds up to an exceptional experience. For example, we individualize the music played in each exam room (eg, Spotify or Pandora), and warm cookies and coffee are available to our patients throughout their visit (Figure).

TENDER BUT TOUGH

Showing that I care is not all about coddling patients. I let them know that we are essentially in a partnership. Following the recommended regimen, showing up for appointments, and being honest with me about how closely they are adhering to the plan are their job. Seeing them



Figure. Good coffee, warm cookies, and other “soft elements” go a long way to providing a virtuoso experience for our patients.

regularly, conducting a thorough examination, and slowing or halting glaucomatous progression are my job.

I explain that, if they have not been adhering to prescribed therapy, they need to let me know so that we can adjust the treatment plan. Perhaps they have trouble remembering their eye drops, paying for the medications, or refilling their prescriptions in a timely manner. It is important to give patients permission to be honest. They may be embarrassed to share this information or think that it does not make much difference.

I add that, if they do their part and I do my part, we will keep them sighted for life. Ultimately, caring is partly making them feel good and partly telling them what they need to hear.

LISTENING EARS

The final stroke in effectively conveying that you genuinely care about patients is listening to their complaints. If something is a concern of theirs, it should be a concern of yours, and you should address it. Oftentimes, they just need a little reassurance. ■

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