

Building the Brand It's Everyone's Responsibility

If you were to ask front-line managers at most healthcare organizations who has responsibility for their “brand,” their reply likely would be, “That sounds like something the Marketing Department handles.” The most strategic healthcare marketers and savvy front-line managers know, however, that the right answer to the question of who has responsibility for building the brand is “Everyone!”

Leaders at BJC HealthCare, the largest health system in St. Louis, MO, understood this imperative when they began planning for a new hospital in the fast-growing western suburbs of St. Charles County several years ago. The facility’s eventual advertising campaign—“A brand new hospital. A whole new approach.”—works so well because this philosophy was the underpinning for all aspects of operational planning, recruitment, staff training, and ongoing team development.

A Fresh Approach

“Build and operate a high-performance hospital that can sustain a differentiated experience for our employees, patients, and physicians” was the goal that defined the vision for Progress West HealthCare Center. Using the acronym P.E.T.S. (Processes, Environment, Technology, and Scripting/Service Delivery) to isolate the various components of plan development, leadership insisted that all aspects of this new venture be approached in a fresh, innovative way.

Yes, the new hospital features cheerful, light-filled private rooms where the emphasis is on patient and family comfort. Technology goes beyond just the latest diagnostic equipment to include touch screens in rooms that allow patients access to educational videos. And revamped operational processes focus on increasing caregivers’ time in patient rooms and improving coordination of care across the team.

But arguably the most important work Progress West pursued concentrated on the behaviors of front-line staff and how they would affect the patient experience. The wisdom of focusing time and effort in this area has been affirmed by the new HCAHPS survey, which highlights the importance of interpersonal communication skills and relationships in most of its questions.

Hiring for Fit, Training for Service

Progress West’s strategies for ensuring that staff behaviors support an exceptional patient experience start with “hiring for fit.” Candidates view a brief video that clearly explains the standards Progress West expects for interactions with patients, colleagues, and physicians. All candidates are interviewed by no fewer than three individuals or groups representing human resources, department managers, and peers. Interviews explore three areas equally: competence, cultural fit, and chemistry.

The process allows Progress West to identify and select new employees who truly understand and embrace the philosophy and specific practices that make the patient experience so exceptional. With the right people on board, employee development and training guarantee that staff have the specific communication skills they need to be successful in achieving Progress West’s four “Service Priorities:” Safety, Courtesy, Expertise, and Efficiency.

“While hiring the right people is an important first step, we understand that equipping our staff with the appropriate skills, especially in the area of interpersonal communication, is a critical investment in our success,” comments **Barbara McLaurine**, Manager of Marketing, Public Relations, and Physician Services for Progress West. “Our approach required a true partnership among leadership in human resources, operations,

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and marketing. Together, we structured a staff development program that would support our employees in creating a memorable patient experience by using the service priorities to guide their decisions and behaviors.”

Beyond Courtesy: CAREmunication

Tactically, training and ongoing support had to go beyond traditional customer service programs to address behaviors and practices that would meet or exceed goals in safety, expertise, and efficiency, not just courtesy. The “CAREmunication” program Progress West adopted provided all staff with a conceptual framework to achieve success in communication regardless of the situation. Specific skills in guaranteeing accuracy, building rapport and trust, overcoming communication barriers, tackling tough conversations, and handling patient complaints gave staff important tools to succeed in even the most challenging circumstances.

“The approach goes well beyond scripting to provide staff with skills they need to deliver on our Service Priorities,” notes McLaurine. “The training and ongoing support have given our team the framework and ‘language’ they need to dialogue constructively about the very real communication challenges they face every day.”

Proven Results

Since opening two years ago, the experience created by Progress West has exceeded even the high expectations set by the leadership team and BJC HealthCare. Patient satisfaction is in the highest decile, as measured by ongoing surveys administered by Professional Research Corporation. In addition, 85 percent of Progress West patients completing the HCAHPS survey indicated they would “definitely recommend” the hospital to family and friends. That percentage is the



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highest among metropolitan St. Louis area providers.

But the most gratifying results come in the form of feedback from individual patients and their families. “Every day, our staff members receive personal notes and individual expressions of sincere thanks from the families we serve,” says McLaurine. “More than anything, this helps us know that we are indeed creating a truly unique patient experience.” ○

Source

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