

# How Hospitals Talk to Patients: Creating Clear Signage for a Positive Patient Experience

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As it becomes increasingly more important for hospitals to create a positive patient experience, facility managers are recognizing the importance that strong signage plays in making patients feel welcome.

The best hospitals and healthcare providers have always prioritized quality, safety and the patient experience. However, the emergence of the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey brings these three issues to the center of attention for all healthcare leaders. Medicare medical reimbursements to hospitals are now tied directly to the quality of the patient experience. Architectural communication solutions are available to assist hospital leaders with creating solutions that will increase patient satisfaction scores.

Patients' satisfaction with the quality and service provided by the healthcare organization directly affect the bottom line. Part of the Affordable Care Act ties Medicare reimbursement to the hospitals with Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey scores. Under the value-based purchasing program, hospitals could be financially penalized for low HCAHPS scores. As a result, hospitals are being forced to focus on greater transparency with their patients, provide positive experiences and elevate their facilities to be more marketable.

## First Impression

Beginning and ending points in a patient interaction are crucial. Psychological research, most notably by memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus, has proven that the first and last item in any list are by far the most easily remembered. The first and last moments of a customer interaction are what a customer is likely to hold in memory as the permanent snapshot that encompasses the whole event.

Signage is one of the first things that people encounter when visiting a hospital. They are asking themselves "Where do I need to go, and how do I get there?" Visitors and patients are generally under anxiety from the beginning of their visit, and getting lost can further that anxiety and create less-than-favorable experiences. Lost patients also increase the burden on the staff to provide direction. If the staff seems irritated to be interrupted, if even for a half second, the patient will remember that experience as a negative and may provide negative survey feedback.

In 1992, authors Paul Arthur and Romedi Passini wrote in the book *Wayfinding: People, Signs and Architecture*, "in a [hospital] facility of some 800 beds, no less than 8,000 hours of professional time are lost in redirecting patients and visitors to their destinations." If the patient spends excessive time seeking a parking spot, walking to the entry point and then gets confused by unclear signage, then that will be remembered as a negative experience.

## Clear Communication

Many of the survey questions relate to how well the hospital staff communicated with the patient and family. This can be a challenge given the broad demographics of patients. One key to success is tailoring the communication style to each of the following generations, as classified by Dr. Rhoda Weiss, PhD, a national healthcare consultant, speaker, author and editor of *Marketing Health Services Magazine*:

- People living during WWII era are the "direct me" generation.
- Baby Boomers are the "engage me" generation.
- Gen X is the "educate me" generation.
- Millennials are the "connect me" generation.

Opportunities exist throughout the process to educate patients and families about their experience. While the communication tools vary across the demographics, easily understood tools include verbal and written communication. A simple solution is providing written communication on dry erase boards in patient rooms, which should re-emphasize the verbal communication from the doctor or nurse to the patient and family. Dry erase boards with emoticons that describe how the patient currently is feeling engage the patient further with the treatment staff. Another opportunity to display information and engage the patient with the hospital staff exists with the environmental services staff. The environmental services employee should discuss the frequency of cleaning requested by the patient and the times of the day. Again, a sign posting the name of the employee, cleaning schedule and patient requests is a way to elevate the patient's experience.

## **Tech Tools**

HCAHPS scores will provide some detailed information about where the pain points are with the patient's experience. Hospital operations also may take a proactive approach and invest in a Patient Flow Management system or queuing product. These systems collect information for managers and executives to make metric-based decisions to allocate staff during peak visit times, review service times by departments, establish service goals for a patient quality driven culture and clearly communicate with patients. In addition, the use of a push-button satisfaction device prior to exiting the facility provides instant feedback to the organization. Staff has the opportunity to engage the patient, prior to leaving, if the patient responds with negative feedback. Engaging the patient regarding their negative experience may negate negative feedback on the HCAHPS survey.

Pre-arrival communication tools through printed media and web-based interactive tools are effective means for educating patients about their experience.

Wayfinding brochures provide patients with the knowledge of where they are going prior to arrival. Additional pre-arrival tools include broadcast wait times for the emergency room and clinics, web-based interactive wayfinding maps, and mobile apps with wait-times and pre-arrival check-in capabilities.

While patients are waiting for service, digital signage displays may provide educational videos about post-care resources. Digital signage may also provide wait-times, a visual queue and other key performance indicators about the hospital. The patients are captive audiences and the hospital has the opportunity to market their service about "how great they are" and distribute the message that quality of care is important to their facility. Additional information may be communicated about the value the hospital places on the patient experience, future state of the healthcare system and other hospital-driven marketing information to reinforce their brand.

## **Architectural Solutions**

Architectural communication solutions affect operations throughout the hospital and any of these key functions plays a role in the overall patient experience and hospital efficiency.

Effective architectural communication solutions will incorporate many types of signs that work in conjunction to clearly communicate to patients, visitors and staff.

- *Modular Signage:* Modular signs are easy to update by the hospital or through web portals directly with the manufacturer. Components may be updated as the facility undergoes change. A clean and updated sign system presents a positive image for the hospital's brand and directs patients and visitors to their destinations.
- *Patient Room Signage:* Dry erase marker board systems clearly communicate information within patient rooms and are easy to update. *Patient alert signage* informs attending physicians and nurses of the patient's condition by exposing sliding messages. The use of *patient alert signage* reduces the potential for errors, falls and infections. Newly designed signs with tamper-resistant concealed alert messages are easy to clean and reduce the risk of the spread of infectious diseases.
- *Digital Signage:* Patient Flow Management systems and digital displays create a dynamic digital experience and provide the metrics for the hospital to make informed decisions. Digital signage is easy to update and can be maintained in-house and customized to the hospital's requirements.

Displays may be tied directly into emergency messaging systems for instantaneous broadcasting of important messages.

- *Exterior Signage*: This style is effective for getting people on campus and to the proper parking area for arriving patients and visitors.
- *Website Integration*: Patients and visitors have the ability to find their destinations prior to arrival, view current wait-times and determine their way prior to the site visit.
- *Wayfinding Brochures*: Printed media is an effective way to communicate with the *direct me* and *engage me* generations. Brochures may be sent by clinics prior to arrival to assist in proper wayfinding to the campus and destination.

Critical Medicare reimbursement funds are directly tied to patient satisfaction, and the investment in an architectural communication system translates into:

- Operational efficiency – reduction in operating costs, increased margins, and timely patient throughput;
- Improved communication – patients, staff and visitors are communicated with many formats to insure, reinforce and build desired outcomes; and
- Environmental stewardship – modular signage reduces waste destined for landfills and the components may be recycled; recycled content also is present in components.

The scope of products previously outlined, as a whole, is a turnkey solution that, when implemented, will have the most significant impact on patient satisfaction. Individual product lines implemented as standalone solutions also will contribute to the patient experience, and initially may be solutions for hospitals that are not able to invest in an overhaul of the existing architectural communication solutions. Hospitals cannot afford to not improve the patient experience.