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New York State Continuing Education Mail-In Course

Handling Difficult Patients: Turning Negatives Into Positives

By Laurie Badone

This course will review the single component that can make or break a practice—customer service. How hard-to-please patients are handled can have a direct effect on the bottom line of a practice or business. In fact, studies have shown that 96 percent of patients dissatisfied with the service they get do not complain, they simply find a different source for the service. Unfortunately, unhappy customers will usually pass on the information about their less than satisfactory experience to between 10 and 20 other people, greatly reducing the chances of those prospective patients ever coming through the door. Eliminating difficult patients is not possible, but this course will show how their dissatisfaction can be handled in a positive manner.

What Makes Patients Difficult?

There are numerous reasons why patients become difficult to satisfy. The reasons include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Inability to communicate their needs to the eyecare professional
- A professional unwilling to understand and accept their needs
- Fear
- Bad experience in the past
- Having to wait for service
- Feeling ignored or overlooked
- Receiving no apology for inconveniences they believed they suffered.

Recognizing why patients are being difficult is usually the first step in solving the problem. Specific cases of typical situations follow, along with examples of appropriate ways the same unhappy patient can end up impressed with outstanding service. So, how do you handle these difficult patients? Here are several difficult situations and ways you can respond to them.

***This course is worth one (1)
New York State Continuing
Education Basic Ophthalmic
Dispensing/Business
Management credit.***

Case 1: The Intimidator

Scenario: A 50-year-old male patient has been examined and found to be presbyopic. He selected a new frame prior to the exam, and it turns out to be too small for a progressive lens. He is only willing to purchase one pair of eyewear and insists on using this frame. He becomes agitated over a suggestion to look at other, more appropriate frames.

Response: This type of patient tries to get his way by repeatedly insisting on what he wants. Taking an argumentative approach only further agitates him. Remember that in this situation, you are the authority, and you have his best interests at heart. Also remember that none of this is personal, and there may be other reasons for the patient's adverse reaction. When speaking to the patient, use his name repeatedly as a way to personalize your service.

Ask the patient to sit while you remain in a non-aggressive position. To do that, stand with arms at your side or take notes on a notepad. Be sure to look directly at the patient while he is speaking. By leaning slightly toward the patient, he will get the sense that you are being more attentive. Avoid being distracted by anything else that is going on in the room. Make certain you focus on what the patient is saying without trying to formulate an answer while he is speaking.

When he finishes expressing his complaint, repeat or

paraphrase what he just said. Use words such as, “If I understand you correctly...” or “What I hear you say is...” when restating the patient’s comments back to them. After restating the patient’s complaint, you should state the pertinent facts tactfully, but also forcefully.

In response to the above scenario, for example, you can say, “I understand you really like the style of this frame, but the proper lenses for your prescription cannot be made for this size frame.” Be clear in explaining why the lenses will not work in the frame the patient has selected.

Sketching out a diagram on a notepad will help him better understand. Be prepared to offer alternatives. It could be a second pair or simply a different frame style. Don’t let yourself be drawn into an argument by this type of difficult customer.

Offer to go with him to the frame display and help choose a more suitable choice in a style close to the one he liked. Become an active participant in the solution, but let the patient make the final choice. Stand up to the patient in a non-threatening way, and you will diffuse the situation while providing him what he requires. Remember that you are an authority in this situation.

Case 2: Unrealistic Expectations

Scenario: This female patient has ordered a rimless mount with AR-coated progressive lenses and insists on getting them back the same day. She says that if you can’t do this, she will find someone who can and now requests her money back.

Responses: Unrealistic patients are demanding, forceful, and often want things no one can provide. Unrealistic patients fall into two categories. The first type knows exactly what he or she wants and will negotiate to get it. The second type is one who is dissatisfied, but doesn’t know what he or she should ask for.

When patients make an unrealistic demand.

This first type of dissatisfied patient could be the patient in the scenario outlined above. In this situation, you can’t meet her expectation, so it is up to you to negotiate a workable solution. Some options can include offering rush service, which will get the lenses back in two days rather than the normal five days, explaining that there may be an additional charge for expedited service. It is important to explain why certain lenses cannot be provided the same day.

When patients don’t know what to ask for. Here’s how to deal with this second type of unrealistic patient—one who is dissatisfied, but doesn’t know what to ask for. These patients will tell you over and over that they are not pleased and are frustrated, but they don’t have a possible solution in mind. Listen carefully to what they say, and then try and manage

their demands. In dealing with unrealistic demands, follow the plan that can lead to a workable solution.

First, listen and determine if the request is unrealistic. If they want something beyond what you are empowered to provide, seek the help of a manager or supervisor who has authority to deal with the request. If you conclude a patient’s request is totally unrealistic, there are ways to help diffuse the situation.

Diffusing the situation. Here are a couple of ways to try and diffuse the situation. One way is to begin by acknowledging that the customer is dissatisfied. This is where you begin by repeating their requests and then adding, “I know you are frustrated” or “I understand that you are angry.” Keep in mind that while you acknowledge a patient’s emotional state, you must not let your own emotions become involved. The patient’s frustration is not with you; she is frustrated over the situation. You should empathize, and one way is to say something like, “I understand that you’re frustrated that your new glasses can’t be ready today because you’d like to wear them to your dinner meeting later this evening.”

Another way to diffuse the situation is to explain to the patient why their expectations are unrealistic. It helps to explain that trying to meet her expectation will result in consequences. For example, in trying to fabricate progressive lenses in one day, the AR coating would have to be eliminated. She would, therefore, lose the benefits of AR, leaving her with no help for driving at night or working at her computer.

Also, it always helps to offer alternatives. For example, you could suggest the patient purchase a pair of ready-made readers to use until her progressive eyewear is completed. In offering an alternative, you are providing a short-term solution to the problem, and this is usually enough to diffuse the situation.

In this scenario, be sure to conclude by assuring the patient that you will do all you can to ensure she gets her new eyewear as quickly as possible without compromising quality. Then, make sure you follow through on your promise.

Case 3: The Ambiguous Patient

Scenario: You spend a lengthy period of time helping the patient pick out a frame and lenses. He can’t seem to make up his mind about either of these and finally ask which one you like best. You offer your opinion, and two days following delivery of the eyewear, the patient is back complaining about not liking the new eyewear and asking to speak with the doctor.

Response: Ambiguous patients avoid responsibility for their own decisions by asking others to make decisions for them. Then, if someone disagrees with their choice or they have reason to regret their

decision, they blame it all on the one they asked to help make the decision. They are usually more hostile with dispensers than with the doctor.

When you suspect that you are dealing with this type of patient, support the opinions you offer with facts. For example, explain why the frame you are suggesting is good for his face shape. Explain the benefits provided by each of the different lenses that can be used for a prescription.

Another useful thing to remember about ambiguous patients is that problems can often be solved before the doctor gets involved. How? By simply letting the patients get it off their chests. Reassure them regarding their decision by restating the facts you gave them when they selected the eyewear. This way, if they still insist on talking to the doctor, the discussion is less likely to be confrontational because they will have already blown off most of their steam in their interaction with you.

Case 4: The Rambler Patient

Scenario: It is a busy Saturday at the dispensary. Every staff member is with a patient, and more are waiting to be seen. Your patient has a problem with his glasses, but as he starts explaining the problem, he interrupts himself by saying, "That reminds me, let me tell you about the great vacation I just went on..."

Response: You don't want to be abrupt or rude, but you need to help keep this "rambler" patient focus so his problem can be resolved. One of the keys in dealing with rambler patients is to listen carefully. They may be boring you with details of their latest vacation, but they are also providing a clue as to why they came to see you.

It is also important to acknowledge the subject of the conversation, even if it does not apply to their problem. You might say, "It sounds like you had a good time." This way you are meeting the patient's psychological needs while letting them know you are listening. Quickly, before they have a chance to start rambling again, ask a series of open-ended and close-ended questions about the problem that brought them into the office today. Here's how to do it.

Open-ended question. Once you have acknowledged the patient's conversation, follow up with an open-ended question about his problem. This could be, "how may we help you today?" or "You mentioned that you had a problem with your glasses on vacation; what happened?" After you get his question answered, the customer may start to ramble again. When he stops to take a breath, again acknowledge what he is talking about, but interject another open-ended question about the problem. This time it might be, "What exactly were you doing when you noticed the problem with your glasses?"

Close-ended question. After asking the second open-ended question, immediately follow up with a close-ended question that can be answered with one word, like "yes" or "no." An example would be, "did you try to have the glasses fixed while you were away?" This keeps the interaction on track and focused on resolving the problem. You may have to let him wander occasionally in the conversation, but the trick is to quickly get him back to the subject at hand. Once you determine the exact problem, try to offer a resolution as quickly as possible to limit further rambling. This way, you effectively service the patient while also freeing yourself to help others who are waiting.

Key to Good Service

Good service begins with a good attitude. People with a good attitude toward a job are better able to manage complaints and problems. This is because your attitude is reflected in everything you do and is quickly apparent to every patient with whom you deal. You may say all the right things, but how you say it can be as important as what you say.

Your body language can sometimes reflect a bad attitude. For example, listening to a patient's problem while standing very straight with arms folded in front of you comes across as a defensive posture. Right away, the patient will think you are not open to what he is saying, and this can make him argumentative.

On the other hand, sitting with your elbow on the table and your head resting on one palm leads the patient to conclude you are bored and disinterested. (See *Listening Skills* sidebar on page 11.) Instead,

Listening Skills

Knowing how to be a good listener is a key to handling unhappy patients. Here's how customer satisfaction guru Dr. Donald Slowik explains the difference.

Effective Listening Traits

Interested	Patient
Caring	Attending
Non-emotional	Responsive
Non-distracted	Sensitive
Other-centered	Understanding
Empathetic	Alert
Non-interrupting	

Ineffective Listening Traits

Disinterested	Impatient
Uncaring	Inattentive
Emotional	Non-responsive
Distracted	Insensitive
Self-centered	Quick to judge
Apathetic	Bored
Interrupting	

Source: Upset Citizens & Customers: How to Deal with the Angry, Difficult Demanding Public

follow the basic rules for good customer service and make sure you're knowledgeable about the topic under debate, always try to see the patient's perspective, and, finally, always respond appropriately. (See *Customer Service Strategies* sidebar below.)

Finally, after a situation is resolved, be certain that you take time to clear your mind and regain your cool. Handling difficult patients can be very stressful. You need to make sure you maintain a calm, positive attitude for the rest of the patients you see that day. This might even require withdrawing to the back of the dispensary for a few minutes to take a quick break.

Take care of yourself so you will be better able to service the next patients, and keep them coming back for the great service they expect from you.

Bibliography

Case, Gary and Rhodes-Baum, Patrice. *How to Handle Difficult Customers*. Colorado Springs, CO: Help Desk Institute, 1994.

Slowik, Dr. Donald W. *Upset Citizens and Customers: How to Deal with the Angry, Difficult, Demanding Public (2nd ed.)*. Evergreen, CO: Evergreen Press, 2000.

Customer Service Strategies

Here are three basic rules to providing good customer service:

1. Know your stuff. You need to be knowledgeable and up-to-date on the latest ophthalmic frames and lenses. This is basic to providing proper assistance to the patient.
2. Look at the situation from the other side. Imagine the situation with the tables reversed and you are the one who received poor service.
3. Respond with appropriate behavior. In many situations, how you act is far more important than whether patients get what they want. Make an honest and sincere attempt to help patients and make sure they know you were trying to help them. Do this and they are far more likely to go away with a positive impression of both you and your business.

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1. When a dissatisfied patient becomes agitated because of a recommendation you make, you should:
 - a. Defend your recommendation firmly.
 - b. Explain to the patient why what he or she wants is all wrong.
 - c. Repeat the patient's concern and clearly explain the reason for what you recommended.
 - d. Make every attempt to win the argument.
2. What do you do when you can't provide eyewear the same day and a patient wants his or her money back?
 - a. Steer the patient to a one-hour place in the mall across the street.
 - b. Explain that there can be no refunds.
 - c. Explain the technology involved for the Rx and why additional time is required.
 - d. Tell the patient that there's no way he or she will find anyone to fill the Rx the same day.
3. What can be done with patients who want AR-coated progressive lenses in one day?
 - a. Suggest ready-made readers to wear while progressive lenses are being processed.
 - b. Explain that you use a high quality lab, offering state-of-art processing and technology and why it's worthwhile to wait for the lenses to be compelled to perfection.
 - c. Offer to have the lenses ready the next day without AR coating.
 - d. Any of the above.
4. What do recent studies reveal most patients do when dissatisfied with service?
 - a. Complain directly to the doctor.
 - b. Complain later by letter or e-mail.
 - c. Do not complain but find another source for the service.
 - d. Tell the dispenser about their dissatisfaction.
5. According to the same survey, dissatisfied customers will tell how many people about their unsatisfactory experience?
 - a. More than 100.
 - b. Between 5 and 10.
 - c. At least two to three other people.
 - d. Between 10 and 20.
6. Why are some patients difficult to satisfy?
 - a. They are unable to communicate their needs.
 - b. They have had a bad experience in the past.
 - c. They are feeling ignored or overlooked.
 - d. Any of the above.
7. What is an "intimidator" type of patient?
 - a. A patient who repeatedly insists on getting his or her own way.
 - b. A patient who is very shy and doesn't talk.
 - c. A patient who constantly asks for advice.
 - d. A patient who wants to talk about his or her personal life.
8. Once a difficult situation is resolved, it can be helpful to:
 - a. Simply carry on with the next patient.
 - b. Take the rest of the day off.
 - c. Document the patient's record.
 - d. Take a few minutes in the back so you can maintain a calm and positive attitude for the rest of the day.
9. It helps to use the patient's name repeatedly during dispensing as a way to:
 - a. display that you two are good friends.
 - b. Emphasize that you have a personal relationship with the patient.
 - c. Enable the patient to recognize your memory skills.
 - d. Make sure the patient doesn't think you're talking to the wrong person.
10. How do you handle a patient who is dissatisfied but doesn't know what it takes to become satisfied?
 - a. Get the doctor involved immediately.
 - b. Tell the patient you can't help if you don't know what he or she wants.
 - c. Explain to the patient that you only have limited authority.
 - d. Listen carefully to what he or she says and try to manage his or her demands.
11. Characteristics of effective listening include:
 - a. Ending a conversation quickly so you can go onto other work.
 - b. Showing care and consideration for the patient's complaint.
 - c. Trying to get the point across that the patient doesn't understand your business.
 - d. Making sure the patient is aware that he or she is interrupting your regular routine.
12. The "ambiguous" patient:
 - a. Avoids responsibility for his or her own decisions by asking others to make them.
 - b. Is a patient who often regrets a decision after he or she makes it.
 - c. Is often more hostile with the dispenser than with the doctor.
 - d. All of the above.
13. When you get a patient who is a "rambler," you need to:
 - a. Listen to details about his or her personal life without interrupting.
 - b. Spend whatever time it requires for him or her to get to the point.
 - c. Ask open-ended and close-ended questions to keep him or her focused on the problem.
 - d. Tell the patient you don't have time to listen to anything but details about the problem.
14. What is the most important component in good service?
 - a. A good attitude on your part.
 - b. Popular brand-name products.
 - c. Useful product warranties.
 - d. A nicely decorated office.
15. What is the best body language to use that will reflect to the patient that you have a good attitude?
 - a. Stand straight when talking to the patient with arms folded in front of you.
 - b. Lean forward lightly toward the patient while maintaining direct eye contact with him or her.
 - c. Lean your elbow on the counter to display a relaxed casual attitude.
 - d. Lean back in your chair and avoid direct eye contact with the patient.

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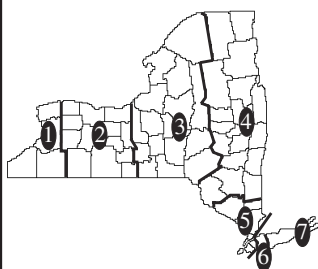
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