

## Are You Really Listening to Your Patients?

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One of the more common mistakes health care marketers make is to develop messages based on what they want to say, not what the patient needs to hear. Even when the marketer thinks they know what the patient is looking for, they may still miss the mark if they don't understand how their audience defines the issue.

This point was driven home recently at a Puget Sound American Marketing Association luncheon presentation on "Healthcare Messages That Resonate on Quality". Each table was asked to discuss how we define quality in healthcare, and then saw research findings that showed we had all missed the correct answer.

Our table quickly defined quality as a positive outcome of treatment. When you are sick, the doctor diagnoses your problem and prescribes a cure that works. Problem solved. Except neither the patients nor the healthcare professionals who responded to a national study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation defined quality as just a positive outcome.

To the patient, quality is also about their personal experience during the process of setting the appointment, visiting the doctor's office, and having time with their doctor to ask questions and understand their health condition. Of course, they want a positive outcome, but if the experience is sub-par, so is their perception of the quality of the provider.

To the healthcare professional, quality is tied to a well-functioning system that is efficient and responsive to their needs. They list a number of items that contribute to, or detract from, their perception of quality, like clean facilities, modern technology, patient support, and a coordinated and responsive staff.

The key thing for marketers to understand is that patients and providers will define quality, or anything, in their own terms, not yours. It's up to you to listen to not just what they say, but what they mean and why they feel that way. Then you

can look for ways to meet your audience on a common wavelength.

The finding that quality is more than a positive outcome opens many message areas for healthcare marketers. For example, to the women in the study, the doctor's role is not just to provide treatment but also to help them understand their condition and make good decisions on how they can improve the outcome. Patients look at spending time with their doctor as a sign that the doctor respects them and is directly related to their perception of the quality of the care they receive.

Since patients want to take an active role in their own care, providing them with information and tools to better manage their health will improve their perception of the quality of the care you give. Hospitals and other healthcare organizations can promote their actions to help doctors & nurses provide better care and have closer relationships with their patients as a way to improve the perception of the quality of care they provide.

A marketing mentor once told me that in marketing "perception is reality". To be an effective healthcare marketer, the more you listen to and understand the patient's perception, the better your reality will be.

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