An Active Learning Approach to Teaching Service at One College of Pharmacy

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The intent was to teach the concepts of service and include an interactive assignment to view service from the customer perspective. Concurrent with text and lectures, students were "mystery shoppers" in a pharmacy, bookstore and department store shopping for a fictitious 75-80 year old grandparent. Data was collected to assess each shopping experience environment. An essay focused on the pharmacy scenario, the five service components, and the design of an ideal pharmacy. Subjective essay choices indicated the most assured service was provided in pharmacies; most reliable, responsive, and empathetic in department stores; and best tangibles were offered by bookstores. Descriptions for an ideal pharmacy incorporated all components of service. The "mystery shopper" exercise illuminated service more vividly than text and lectures alone. Where service can be improved in a pharmacy was highlighted when compared to a bookstore or department store.

INTRODUCTION

In an American Pharmaceutical Association(1) commentary about the 1973 Dichter Institute report a statement was made that “Pharmacists are losing face because they sell tangibles while all the other members of the health care team sell service.” The response for this statement was simply:

What to do? Sell service. But in order to sell service to the consumer, one must first communicate the value of service to the consumer... The Dichter Institute researchers say that the most important remedy for the pharmacist’s slumping respect is estab-

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lishing a rapport with one's patients so that the value of comprehensive pharmaceutical service can be communicated(1).

As patients look for personal attention in a world becoming too impersonal, offering services with a personal relationship will keep patients or customers returning to a pharmacy and keep health care professionals seeking consultation. Maintaining personal relationships between pharmacists and patients or customers is important for the future well-being of the profession. Rebuilding the practice to include service provision begins by raising awareness within the profession—and in the classroom.

Quality service is dependent on being available to a patient or customer at any given moment and on responding to his or her needs. It depends on well-trained employees, at every level in the organization who are focused on that patient or customer. In order to succeed in caring for patients, the service philosophy must be transmitted, embraced, and acted upon by every member of the organization. Thus, there is clearly a need to emphasize the provision of quality service within the pharmacy curriculum.

In considering how to teach service concepts to our third year pharmacy students, two questions came to mind: (i) How do we illustrate service concepts, and (ii) What can the illustration teach pharmacy students? Through this reporting of our first experience in teaching quality service concepts in the pharmacy management course, we will address these questions. Thus, our objective is to describe one method which can be used to illustrate the components of quality service.

BACKGROUND

The level of quality service provided by pharmacists today is the result of forces that have evolved over a period of decades. Customer loyalty was inspired in locally owned and operated pharmacies where customer service was well understood and routinely provided by all employees. One by one those pharmacies have been replaced by impersonal corporate entities and customer-oriented policies have eroded in favor of tight control of expenses and bottom-line profitability. Consequently, the pharmacy of today is quite different from the family-owned business of yesterday.

As patients and customers become more conscious of their rights to quality service, they demand better of their health care providers. Research by Sheth and Mittal(2) showed that more than 90 percent of the variance in consumer switching propensity could be explained by the quality of service received; patient loyalty and service quality were strongly correlated. While both the quality of curing and the quality of caring matters, an improvement in the quality of caring is likely to pay off better than a similar improvement in the quality of curing(2). This indicates a need for investments by organizations in creating a service culture where patients and customers come first.

In comparing the quality of care provided to patient and customer satisfaction, satisfaction increases with the amount of social courtesy and services extended. New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center found they had been "focused on giving excellent patient care without the added piece that these (patient and visitors) were also our customers."(3) Through a partnership with The Pierre Hotel, the hospital and medical center improved their reputation for service by empowering employees and paying attention to its facilities. Quality service is therefore significant in the health care industry because it plays a key role in determining which agencies will flourish and which ones will fail.

Lack of trust or agreement may result from a difference between the beliefs of patients or customers and pharmacists about the medical problem. Contributing factors to a lack of trust may include: (i) the extent to which patients' and customers' expectations were unmet, and (ii) a lack of warmth in the pharmacist-patient/customer relationship(4). The evolution of trust, or the perception that the pharmacist cares and is willing and able to help, is essential to the generation and maintenance of cooperation. Cooperation requires the pharmacist and patient or customer work together to achieve similar goals or objectives and that there is agreement on what role each plays in the efforts towards these shared goals. In knowing how best to provide quality service and to satisfy needs of patients and customers, an accurate mutuality of perception develops around these shared goals.

The key to quality service success is giving patients and customers what they want. The Disney slogan is "You don't build it for yourself. You know what the people want and you build it for them." East Jefferson General Hospital reviewed Disney's preoccupation with understanding its guests' expectations and concluded the following: (i) expectations that are met will result in a satisfied customer who will return; (ii) expectations that are exceeded result in a customer who has been "wowed" and will rave about our services to others; (iii) expectations that are not met result in a customer who is disillusioned and may not come back for future care; and (iv) every contact between a customer and the organization, whether it is with an employee or with the physical plant - is a chance to meet or exceed expectations(6).

The basic product in the provision of service is the "moment of truth,"(7) defined when the customer comes in contact with an organization and forms an impression of quality. Thousands of moments of truth occur every day in pharmacy practice and it is essential at each that moment for an employee to reliably meet and execute each patient and customer's unique expectation. For each patient and customer, the employee is the organization; patient and customer perceptions of that interaction drive satisfaction with the organization. Thus, a focus on how and where patients and customers interact with the pharmacists, or the employees who actually create or deliver the things patients and customers value, is necessary for quality service provision.

Patients and customers assess service by comparing the service they receive (outcomes) with the service they desire (expectation)(8). A pharmacy organization can achieve a strong reputation for quality service only when it consistently meets expectations. The literature identifies the principal dimensions customers use to judge service: (i) tangibles, the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials; (ii) reliability, the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; (iii) responsiveness, the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service; (iv) assurance, the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence; and (v) empathy, the provision of caring, individualized attention to customers(8-10).

Knowing what patients and customers expect is only part of the challenge; a big part is actually meeting those expectations. When an organization is careless in performing the service, when it makes mistakes, when it does not do what it said it would do, patients and customers lose confidence in the organization's reliability; they lose confidence in the organization's wherewithal to do what it promises to do dependably and
accurately(9). To best meet service expectations in pharmacy practice, three things are needed: (i) define service quality from the patient and customer’s standpoint, (ii) identify the criteria patients and customers use to judge quality, and (iii) outline potential organizational shortfalls that cause poor service.

METHODS

Teaching Service

Presenting the foregone background and philosophy of service in the didactic style seemed, to these authors, a less than optimal teaching strategy. Thus, it was decided to teach quality service provision through an active learning process combined with conventional methods. Consideration was given such that the active learning experience reinforced the theoretical coursework.

Reflection is considered essential for transforming experiential education into learning(11). Since students begin to develop professional identity and commitment when they start performing the roles and work associated with pharmacy practice, it was decided to place them in the role of the customer for a change in perspective. These authors felt role-playing activities were necessary for gaining a sense of knowledge specific to the provision of service in order to relate how employees interact with patients or customers. Especially at the beginning of a relationship with the first interaction or “moment of truth” happening when a patient or customer enters the pharmacy with his or her perceptions of quality service.

In the revised all PharmD curriculum, Pharmacy Practice Management is mandatory in the third year. With an emphasis on management, leadership, economics, and organizations, these authors felt it was only logical to add quality service to the syllabus. Our first teaching experience is described below. In designing the didactic portion, it was decided to use a combination of textbook (Albrecht, K. and Zemke, R., Service America! Doing Business in the New Economy, 1985), lectures, readings, discussions, and vignettes all focused on service encounters. Our belief was that relating the service concepts of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and environment to the related principles of pharmaceutical care would provide a context for pharmaceutical service conceptually different from the traditional “merchandizing” view. The chosen text focused on examples of service from the perspective of organizational commitment which is consistent with the presentation of pharmaceutical care practice in our curriculum. The lectures, discussions, and service vignettes continued this theme of organizational and personal commitment to service as adapted to the context of pharmacy practice.

Service Assignment

The active learning component of quality service was a mystery shopper exercise (Appendix A) to a pharmacy, a bookstore, and a department store. This was assigned on the first day of class as an introduction to different styles of service. The intent was to incorporate the three field experience findings, or personal vignettes, with the lectures and discussions on quality service provision over the remaining class periods. Students could complete the situations in any order but were encouraged to not use the same store for more than one experience, i.e., the pharmacy department at Wal-mart and Wal-mart as the department store.

The field experience was designed to compare department stores with known reputations for quality service(12) to the service environments in bookstores and in retail pharmacy settings. The imaginary active grandparent on medication was chosen so the pharmacy situation would potentially be more complicated and need the assistance of a pharmacist; the image was to be maintained in the other two situations. Students did not have to actually purchase any product to complete the assignment.

A standard form (Appendix B) was used to collect specific information regarding each of the three service encounters in relation to experiencing each environment and thus highlighting the five components of quality service without leading the students to draw component-specific conclusions. The form was designed by utilizing questions selected from actual mystery shopper programs received from a national training and consulting firm specializing in areas of service quality, customer retention, and continuous performance improvement(13). The intent was for students to draw conclusions about components of service experienced externally by shoppers, i.e., their patients and customers, rather than service training experienced internally by employees, i.e., themselves. Responses from the forms were entered into an SPSS database with “yes” responses tallied as a percent of total responses by item and site, for comparisons.

The service assignment concluded, in the third of four weeks before the data collection forms had been turned in, with eleven essay questions (Appendix C). The first section focused each student’s attention on his or her pharmacy experience only. The second section asked each student to identify one site in response to a description of each quality service component. The third section asked each student to pull together everything from the textbook, lectures, readings, discussions, and mystery shopper experiences in order to describe the type of quality service he or she would wish to offer patients and customers as a pharmacist. The intent of the last question was to actually apply the understanding each student gained through this service teaching. Essay Questions 1-5 were subjectively graded; Questions 6-10 were entered into an SPSS database for tallying by item and site; Question 11 was subjectively graded and word/concept similarities grouped under the five components of quality service.

RESULTS

Sixty-one students from the third year pharmacy class completed the service assignment; 45 (74 percent) females and 16 (26 percent) males. The frequency of the day of the week when the shopping encounter occurred increased midweek through the weekend with 89 percent of the pharmacies, 95 percent of the bookstores, and 98 percent of the department stores being visited during the afternoon and evening hours. Of the pharmacy encounters, 87 percent were chain or grocery locations (Target, Walgreens, Snyders, Cub, Kmart); of the bookstores, 67 percent were in one chain (Barnes and Noble) and 21 percent in others (B. Dalton, Borders, Waldenbooks); and of the department stores, 74 percent were recognized department stores (Dayton’s Nordstrom, Wal-mart, J.C. Penney, Target, Herberger’s Kohl’s, Macy’s, Mervyn’s) rather than specialty department stores.

“Mystery Shopper” Points to Ponder

Student discoveries from the mystery shopping encounters were graphically summarized and presented to the class. Questions that surfaced in light of the student findings and experiences with the assignment provided fuel for discussions revolving around quality service issues for pharmacy practice.

Comments indicated students had to approach the pharmacy counter or bookstore service counter before being greet
Table I. Perception of the shopping encounter situations offering the most reliability, most responsiveness, most assurance, most empathy, best tangibles, and overall quality service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service component</th>
<th>Pharmacy</th>
<th>Bookstore</th>
<th>Department store</th>
<th>Pharmacy and bookstore and/or department store</th>
<th>Bookstore and department store</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality service</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Summary of “Mystery Shopper” essay Question 11 indicating student descriptions of their components for ideal quality pharmacy service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Tangibles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accurate dispensing process</td>
<td>Focus on individual</td>
<td>Up-to-date reference materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate, well-trained staff</td>
<td>Listening skills</td>
<td>Professional attire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving skills</td>
<td>Show caring and concern</td>
<td>Pharmacist more visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timely prescription filling</td>
<td>Acknowledge family members</td>
<td>Clean and organized area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain customer feedback</td>
<td>Ask questions</td>
<td>Comfortable seating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide timely information</td>
<td>Follow-up with customer</td>
<td>Quality merchandise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reliability
- Accurate dispensing process
- Adequate, well-trained staff
- Problem-solving skills
- Timely prescription filling
- Obtain customer feedback
- Provide timely information

Responsiveness
- Customer-centered practice
- Approach customer in aisle
- Meet pharmacist first

Assurance
- Equal care for customers
- Respect all customers
- Confidently provide information
- Develop trust relationships
- Good interpersonal skills
- Focus on pharmaceutical services
- Disease state knowledge

Comments also indicated a technician or clerk transferred the student to a pharmacist. Therefore, the class wondered: Is it in the best interest of the patient or customer to interact with a technician or clerk before the pharmacist or should the pharmacist be the first contact? All employees contribute to the quality service perceived by the patient or customer but do pharmacists need to take a special interest in those patients or customers in the over-the-counter medication aisles of the pharmacy?

Other comments identified the pharmacist as working alone when this occurred. Questions arising from this included the following: Is it okay for a pharmacist to take a telephone call while working with a patient or customer? Should the patient or customer come second to the telephone at any time and/or allow the telephone to be an acceptable interruption?

Further comments determined seating was not evident in department stores or pharmacies but was highly evident and comfortable in Barnes and Noble and Borders bookstores. Questions were as follows: Is there a clear view from the pharmacy counter to the over-the-counter medication aisles in order to watch for opportunities to provide quality service? Is seating available near the pharmacist and is it comfortable? Are the aisles clean and free of boxes with adequate width to accommodate walking aids or wheelchairs? Also, merchandise in the pharmacy was placed too low on shelves according to written comments. Questions for discussion included: Are products too low or too high on a shelf for patients or customers to reach? Is there too much of a variety in products?

Written information was seldom provided to the students according to their encounter documentation. Discussion regarding this was: Are special needs of the family taken into consideration when offering suggestions? Is the choice of language appropriate for the patient or customer to understand and reconfirm? Are written information pieces attractive and readable and do they offer further contact with the pharmacist or site?

Uniforms were often commented on as adding to the professional stature of the employee. But, in contrast, is empathy, that knowing understanding of the situation and a concern for what happens, displayed well enough in a pharmacy to the patient and customer?

Essay Points to Ponder

Single choice answers to essay Questions 6-10 (Appendix C) are presented in Table I. Each essay question denoted one component of quality service provision. While the intent was to have each student subjectively select the best of his or her three shopping encounters, a number of students answered with a
combination. Based on these students mystery shopping encounters, the department store was most reliable, responsive, and empathetic; the pharmacy provided the most assurance; and the bookstore had the best tangibles. These five essay questions were then combined into a set to determine which shopping encounter provided overall quality service (Table I), which was the department store.

The following questions were parts of the class discussions with relation to essay Questions 6-10: Where should pharmacist and pharmacies rate in providing quality service compared to bookstores and department stores? Can a better job of providing quality service be done? Can the standards be raised within all practice sites? Will quality service become a trademark of the profession built on the principles of customer service and adding the philosophies of pharmaceutical care? If quality service does not happen, where will the patients or customer go for medications?

Essay Question 11 asked each student to describe his or her ideal for providing quality service in a pharmacy setting of their choice: 51 chose to describe a retail setting, six chose a clinic setting, two chose a hospital setting, and one chose a home care setting. The extracted descriptions for providing quality service from the each student’s essay were organized according to the five quality service components (Table II). It was expected the students would develop a quality service commitment towards their work and that of their patients or customers if allowed to describe a pharmacy setting with which they were most comfortable with. Additionally, during this process, many students identified quality service goals from which to determine their personal professional standards and the necessary changes in pharmacy practice to achieve these goals.

LIMITATIONS
Perhaps matching a pharmacy with a bookstore and a department store was trying to match locations with dissimilar philosophies. Perhaps the assignment situations were geared more towards a pharmacy interaction than a bookstore or a department store interaction. Or perhaps the students made up the information based on previous experiences. Whatever the limitations of the service assignment, the goal attained by this teaching experience was to utilize a combination of methods to bring an awareness of quality service to students who will soon be practicing pharmacy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS
Through an active learning assignment our third year students discovered that employees in pharmacies, while providing quality service with assurance, compared less favorably to bookstores and department stores in having employees who provide responsible, reliable, and empathetic service. Overall, employees in pharmacies seemed to provide good service but as society becomes more automated and subject to control by technology, people will desire even more personal relatedness. With an eye on quality service, pharmacists are in excellent positions to fulfill what the patient or customer desires for good health.

When students had an opportunity to reflect on their practice experiences from the position of the customer, they demonstrated an understanding of the quality service concepts as evidenced in the essay answers. While not particularly enthused about the mystery shopping assignment at the time of its introduction, based on end of the quarter course evaluations students felt it was an excellent eye-opening experience to look at pharmacy from the patient or customer’s quality service perspective. It was also expected the students would come to appreciate the aspects of quality service and begin thinking about the manner in which they would be comfortable practicing pharmacy.

Acknowledgements. The authors wish to acknowledge the Class of 1999 at the College of Pharmacy who were the first to receive this instruction and assignment and Kristin Anderson of Performance Research Associates, Inc. for her assistance early in our course development process.


References

APPENDIX A. "MYSTERY SHOPPER" EXERCISE
You have a 75-80 year old grandparent on medications but in relatively good health with an active lifestyle for whom you are shopping. Create an image of this person in your mind prior to participating in the following situations:

Situation 1. The pharmacy
Grandparent has a cold
Stand in the over-the-counter medication aisle and wait for help
Approach the pharmacist/pharmacy counter and ask for help

Situation 2. The bookstore (B. Dalton, Barnes and Noble, Waldenbooks or Borders)
Grandparent has a birthday
Stand in the book aisle and wait for help
Approach an employee/service counter and ask for help

Situation 3. - The department store (Nordstrom, Wal-mart, Home Depot or other)
Grandparent has a birthday
Stand in the department and wait for help
Approach an employee/sales counter and ask for help

The intent is to incorporate a field experience with the lectures/discussion on service management. The concept of service management or service marketing has a number of corollaries with the concepts of pharmacy practice, i.e., reliable, responsive, assured, empathetic, and tangible.

A standard form (attached) is to be used to record the expe
riences in each of the three situations described above. Forms will be turned in as part of the assignment and experiences will be shared in a small group discussion environment.

APPENDIX B. "MYSTERY SHOPPER" DATA FORM

Date: __________________
Day: Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday
Time: __________ AM/PM
Store: ____________________ Situation Number: __________
Title of Primary Contact: ___________________
Student Name: ____________________

Greeting
Was the greeting prompt? Yes No
Was the greeting appropriate? Yes No
Was the employee:
pleasant? Yes No
knowledgeable? Yes No
efficient? Yes No
courteous? Yes No

From the time you entered the store, how long before you were approached? __________
Comments:

Transferring
Were you transferred to another employee? Yes No
Were you told the name of the employee you were being transferred to? Yes No
Was the employee you were transferred to able to help you? Yes No
Comments:

Vocal Quality
Was the employee’s vocal volume appropriate, easy to hear? Yes No
Did the employee speak at an easily understood rate? Yes No
Did the employee enunciate well so that he/she was easily understood regardless of accent? Yes No
Did the employee exhibit any negative behaviors, such as drinking, gum chewing, eating? Yes No
Did the employee answer a telephone call during your interaction? Yes No
Comments:

Store
Was there a clearly posted sign for the department/product you were looking for? Yes No
Was the department size adequate for the capacity of the customers? Yes No
Was the store generally clean and free of debris, including at the entrance and exit? Yes No
Was the seating comfortable? Yes No
Was the temperature comfortable? Yes No
Was the lighting adequate? Yes No
Was the merchandise:
located conveniently? Yes No
adequately stocked? Yes No
of good quality? Yes No
offer a variety of choices? Yes No
Comments:

Finding and Giving Information
Was the employee able to discuss your situation with you? Yes No
Did the employee ask any of the following questions:
What type of special needs does your grandparent have? Yes No
What type of product if your grandparent looking for? Yes No
What are the family concerns? Yes No
Did the employee explain the benefits offered by a product? Yes No
Did the employee use unexplained jargon? Yes No
If given written information, was it readable and attractive? Yes No
Comments:

Caring and Concern
Did the employee sound as if he/she understood the situation? Yes No
Did the employee seem to be empathetic to your situation and concerns? Yes No
Did the employee act professionally? Yes No
Comments:

APPENDIX C. "MYSTERY SHOPPER" ESSAY QUESTIONS

The following questions are based on Chapters 4-7 in *Service America!: Doing Business in the New Economy* and can be answered in a paragraph or two.

1. Describe the service you experienced at the pharmacy mystery shopper site.
2. Describe the role(s) of the employee(s) you interacted with at the pharmacy mystery shopper site.
3. Describe the “customer-friendly” service you experienced at the pharmacy mystery shopper site.
4. Describe the attitude the employee(s) displayed while providing you service at the pharmacy mystery shopper site.
5. Describe how service was marketed to the customers at the pharmacy mystery shopper site.

The following questions can be answered in a few words.

6. Which mystery shopper site had the best ability to provide what was promised to you, dependably and accurately?
7. Which mystery shopper site was the most willing to help you promptly?
8. Which mystery shopper site employee(s) showed you the most knowledge and courtesy and had the ability to convey trust, competence, and confidence?
9. Which mystery shopper site showed you the highest degree of caring and individual attention?
10. Which mystery shopper site had the best physical facilities, equipment, and employee appearances?

The following question can be answered in a page or two.

11. Questions 6-10 above describe the five factors of quality service: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Based on your three different mystery shopper service encounters, describe your idea for providing quality service as a pharmacist at a pharmacy practice location of your choice, i.e., clinic, hospital, retail, managed care.