



Customer Service in the NHS

making patient care the heart of everything

A White Paper



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SUMMARY

- In a survey of 337 NHS Chief Executives and Chairs, **100%** of NHS leaders concede that the NHS is not sufficiently customer focused at present.
- Of those, **65%** said that a significant change in customer focus is required.
- The public agrees – **93%** think it's important for the NHS to pay more attention to customer service.
- Areas cited for improvement include friendlier staff, easier appointment booking systems, clearer information about treatment and better bedside manner.¹
- NHS Next Stage Review states, "The skills for listening, understanding and responding to the needs of individual patients and supporting them to manage their health in a manner that is respectful of diversity and difference must, wherever possible, be incorporated into education and training programmes."
- **you:unlimited** have been helping companies excel in this area for the last 8 years.





BACKGROUND

Dr. Gill Morgan, Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation, which represents over 90% of NHS organisations, said:

"Customer focus is about doing everything we can to make the patient's experience as pleasant, straightforward and unstressful as possible...and in this age of rising expectations, customer focus has become a critical issue for all healthcare providers.

"The report shows that there is a great deal of good practice on excellent customer service - not only from the private and voluntary sectors, but also from within the NHS itself. We all need to learn from the best to deliver a first class, customer-focused NHS fit for the 21st century.

So the need to change is clear, but there is a cultural resistance to such a change within a lot of Trusts. Typically, criticisms of the approach to 'seeing patients as customers' centre around the use of business philosophies in the publicly funded NHS. "Giving an impression that the NHS is a business or market-led could encourage the charging of patients for treatments," as Karen Jennings of Unison suggested.

We also need to consider that what customer service means in a large public sector organisation is very different to what it means to a forward-thinking, co-operatively-owned company such as the John Lewis Partnership. Learning the difference between the two, and how to bridge the gap, is crucial.

On top of that, making any widespread changes in an organisation the size of the NHS is like trying to move a continent – a daunting task. However, if we stop thinking about the landmass and start thinking about how we can encourage each individual, one-by-one, to move themselves then it becomes a realistic and realizable goal.

Acknowledging such concerns and addressing them along the way is key to ensuring staff, new and established, successfully embrace this new way of thinking.

BACKGROUND - continued

The good news is that by working with your staff in this area, you would be aligning with 5 of the 6 principles for change outlined in the NHS Next Stage Review document. Those are:

- focused on quality
- patient centred
- flexible
- valuing people
- promoting life-long learning

The only principle which Customer Service training wouldn't impact would be 'clinically driven'. For each of the areas listed above, by undertaking a quality programme of training, you can make significant inroads in guiding your staff towards the vision of the future. I quote directly from the Next Stage Review document below:

Focused on quality: Education and training pathways must reflect both what clinicians expect and what is expected of them across the range of different providers. Quality-focused means being clear about the roles of professionals and then ensuring structured training [...] that offers the appropriate breadth and depth of knowledge and experience. Furthermore, they must support working with partners, such as social care.

Patient centred: The skills for listening, understanding and responding to the needs of individual patients and supporting them to manage their health in a manner that is respectful of diversity and difference must, wherever possible, be incorporated into education and training programmes and clinical practice.

Flexible: Healthcare is constantly in a state of development and change with increasing emphasis on health promotion, well-being and disease prevention and shifting patterns of care. Consequently, our approach both recognises the need to build in flexibility and reflects the importance we attach to continuous professional development (CPD) and life-long learning.



BACKGROUND - continued

Valuing people: This means designing education, training and career pathways that are sensitive to trainees' personal needs, and that acknowledge and appreciate the dedication and passion of those entering healthcare professions. The delivery of high quality education and training is an essential part of delivering high quality patient care.

Promoting life-long learning: Staff in all roles and settings need opportunities to continuously update the skills and techniques that are relevant to delivering high quality care through, for example, work-based learning, distance and e-learning, and further education.

As Foundation Trusts are reducing their waiting times and improving clinical outcomes, the way to increase the number of referrals to hospitals, and therefore improve your bottom line, is increasingly going to be about the quality of the service you offer to your patients. That's where we can help.

Working with a quality service provider has already made a difference for one NHS Trust. 96% of participants who undertook our Customer Service programme are already specifically applying what they learnt, making a difference day in, day out.

On the following page we outline some potential solutions.



SOLUTIONS

There are a number of ways the issue of Customer Service can be addressed. You can tell people they need to change. You can inspire them to change. You can incentivize them. All of these techniques can have some success, but unless people know what to do *and the benefits of doing so*, it will be impossible to truly embed a change in attitude and approach.

“We all need to learn from the best to deliver a first class, customer-focused NHS fit for the 21st century.”

So who do we mean by the best?

The best companies. The best individuals, externally and internally. The best-pleased customers. And, crucially, the best learning professionals, in order to facilitate learning and ensure change is implemented and maintained.

A great learning experience around Improving Customer Service should feature:

- An exploration of the benefits (to you, the individual) of great customer service
- Examples from diverse industries
- The opportunity to model behaviours
- Needs, Wants & Desires – what are they and what should you do about them
- An opportunity to draw on and share your own experiences
- Methods to establish rapport
- How to employ behavioural flexibility
- How to say no politely
- How to think like a listener



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

you:unlimited have been working with world-class organisations, and those that want to be, for the last eight years, helping them to give the best customer service possible.

More specifically, we're currently delivering a bespoke Customer Service programme as part of the staff induction programme for internal support and patient-facing staff at **Eastern and Coastal Kent NHS Trust** after successfully undertaking pilots in 2008. The programme is focused on improving confidence and competence when dealing with customers inside as well as outside of the organisation, resulting in real value for the team and their customers.

This programme:

- Is interactive and allows delegates to draw on their individual experiences
- Highlights the importance of maintaining the NHS community services' excellent reputation
- Focuses on delivering a great service both to external clients and fellow staff members
- Promotes an understanding of the importance of the 'patient experience'

As a result of the programme, participants can:

- Have a clear idea of the advantages to them providing a great service
- Appreciate how to balance their needs with those of their customers
- Apply the model of Needs/Want/Desires so they pitch at the right level for their customers
- Build rapport with people naturally so real understanding can be communicated
- Be flexible in their behaviour without changing their personality to allow for the range of people they come into contact with
- Recognise how they come across to others and the assumptions people make
- Take on different perspectives to deal with tough customers



"Getting the best outcomes from the care we give to patients is vital [...] We must think about the patient experience as a whole. It is about seeing things from the patient's point of view and treating them as we would expect to be treated ourselves. Caring as well as curing is not an optional extra -it is at the heart of good practice."
Dr. Gill Morgan

WHAT PEOPLE WHO'VE BEEN THROUGH THE PROGRAMME HAVE SAID:

"Excellent – the clear explanations and practical examples will enable me to adapt my approach to each situation."

"The approach and the interactive nature of the sessions really stood out for me."

"It really provided me with new ways of thinking. I'll be able to carry on with what I do but I'll be able to think about how people perceive me."

"A good lively presentation that provided useful strategies and clear benefits."

"Thought provoking – I really enjoyed it"

"Excellent, definitely the best saved 'til last"

All of the above quotes are from recent NHS Trust participants

NEXT STEPS

Building on the early success of the training at Eastern and Coastal Kent **you:unlimited** are currently in conversation with several other Trusts who would benefit from a pilot of similar material for staff and manager development.

If this is something that you would find useful, please let us know. You can:

- call me on 020 7407 0044,
- email me at simon@you-unltd.co.uk, or
- find out more at www.you-unltd.co.uk.

If you'd like personal referrals or would like to discuss any specific requirements that you might have, do drop me a line. Nothing we do is generic, we tailor all of our work to the demands of the group, so I'd love to talk to you about the change you'd like to see.



"What is striking from this report is that all the examples of excellent customer **focus** involve giving staff and the systems they work in more attention. Staff are of course also customers of the NHS and the same care needs to be extended to them as our more traditional customers - the patients. As we move towards a more customer-focused health service, staff will have a key role in redesigning systems to ensure they are customer focused."

Dr Gill Morgan

OBSERVATIONS

Some leaders of organisations who pursue excellence in customer focus were interviewed. Their observations are interesting:

"Our message is that customer service is a priority for our organisation and we are committed to it. The pay-off comes in greater success in user care, fewer complaints and better health outcomes in the longer term."

Nikki Richardson, *South Essex Partnership Foundation Trust*

"You have to see your organisation through the eyes of your customers, and match this to your organisation's vision of itself. Then you can spot the gaps between the two. You have to recognise that gaps do exist and that you need effective arrangements to put them right. What matters is the way you sort it out."

Simon Fowler, *Director of Customer Services, John Lewis Partnership*

"You have to measure your own performance in the eyes of your customer. It's pointless to look at internal measures. You have to think about what the customer is thinking: How was it for me? Good? Bad? Or indifferent?"

Adam Smith, *BT Global Services*

"Providing health services requires a personal interaction and the establishment of trust. Customers must feel that they have been treated with respect and as individuals. This is how customer focus feels."

Justin Ash, *Lloydspharmacy*

"The point is that as people become more aware of us and our services, they become more engaged in how the services are provided and run. So the process of customer-focus starts to be self-fulfilling."

Alwen Williams, *Tower Hamlets PCT*

ⁱ Reported at <http://www.nhsconfed.org/issues/mediacentre-listing.cfm/pressrelease/607>.