

The Word of Mouth Paradox

Word-of-mouth recommendations are frequently credited with being the most effective type of advertising. That all sounds pretty positive – so why the word Paradox in the title? Because a study done in 2011 by American Express documents that people tell twice as many people about bad experiences than good ones. And, experience indicates that good service needs to be truly exceptional before customers will say anything about you at all.

To improve these odds a pharmacy owner would be well advised to “engineer” positive word-of-mouth. Hopefully some of the ideas below will help you implement policies and procedures that will generate positive “buzz”.

To start, it might help to figuratively step outside your pharmacy and reflect on your experience at another small retail business; say, the dry cleaners. When you arrive the clerk smiles and greets you by name. The clerk then takes your clothes, gives you a will-call ticket and tells you your clothes will be ready in two days.

Two days later you return and apologize to the clerk for losing your ticket. The clerk assures you there is no problem and asks for your phone number, gives you your clothes all neatly wrapped in a protective plastic bag and wishes you a nice day.

The cleaners did a great job, right? But, the question is: are you eager to tell the next person you see about what a great cleaners you use? Or, if next week a new cleaners opens up near you offering 50% off your first order are you likely to give them a try?

Thus we return to the word Paradox. Good service continuously provided becomes expected and no longer impresses. Thus, the good service you have trained your staff to provide becomes a detriment to customer referrals as it is now normal and expected.

You are likely to generate positive word-of-mouth when you do something exceptional – like come in after hours and fill a prescriptions. But, remember you generate even more comments from patients when something bad happens, like when you don't have enough medication on hand to completely fill a full prescription. The trick is to have a plan for turning the unusual; good and bad, into positive word of mouth. Here are some effective techniques I have seen used.

Mike Burns, RPh. and owner of AuBurn Pharmacies in Gannet, Kansas has produced customer referral cards his staff gives to patients when they appear to be pleased. The card is designed to be given by the patient to someone they know. It allows a current patient to give their friend a gift card worth \$20 off the

friend's new or transferred prescription. And, when redeemed the current patient also gets a \$20 benefit. Burns has used it for years and credits it with helping his small chain grow.



As I talk with pharmacists using the Prescribe Wellness program I often hear them express how many positive comments they get by using the software firm's Happy Birthday outbound call feature. The service enables the pharmacy owner to pre-record a birthday message in his/her own voice. The system then calls a current patient on their birthday with a warm birthday greeting.

Apologizing and making-good when things go wrong is perhaps the most impressive thing a business can do to earn referrals. Years ago I designed a simple “apology” post card gift certificate. It was most often used when the pharmacy did not have enough medication to completely fill a prescription. As this occurred the pharmacist spoke with the patient and explained the problem, apologized and indicated the rest of the medication would arrive tomorrow and invited them to return as soon as possible.

At the end of the day the pharmacy staff addressed the apology post card and mailed it to the patient. The card would arrive a few days later giving the patient an unexpected positive experience. Then, when the certificate was redeemed the staff was trained to provide a little extra TLC. The three apologies for one inconvenience resulted in providing service above and beyond and gave current patients a reason to talk about the special treatment they got to their neighbors, friends and co-workers.

If you are looking for other ways to engineer positive word-of-mouth you may want to check out this blog: www.wordofmouth.org or, you can visit the web site for the Word of Mouth Marketing Association – yes, there is an association for that: www.womma.org.

Bruce Kneeland and Robyn Amberg have years of experience in helping pharmacies do more and be better. If you have any comments on this article or desire to share an idea for a future article they can be reached at: RobynAmberg@KneelandServices.com

