Identifying Best Practices for Patient Dining

An Examination of What Drives Patient Satisfaction with Meals in Hospitals
What are the key practices that drive patient satisfaction with food and nutrition services? That is the question that Sodexo’s Food and Nutrition Brand Management set out to answer in 2008 with a major study of hospital food service departments around the country.

The study began by analyzing “top-quartile” food service departments to identify characteristics these “high performers” had in common. This analysis revealed 14 practices that are consistently present in “high performing” departments. These 14 practices can be found on SodexoNet under Common Denominators of High Performing Food & Nutrition Departments.

The logical conclusion of this analysis was that if lower performing units embraced some or all of these practices, their patient satisfaction scores and percentile rankings would rise accordingly.

The next step was to put this hypothesis to a test in a real world setting. A group of hospitals were chosen as Pilot Accounts to participate in a test based on their Press Ganey percentile rankings (all were below the 60th percentile). Other than their ranking similarities, these Pilot Accounts represented a broad cross section of the marketplace, ranging from 165 to 868 beds and 360 to 1,800 daily meals.

These Pilot Accounts were asked to initiate at least six of the practices identified in the analysis and track the results in terms of patient satisfaction with meals. The main focus of the test was to see what could be achieved in the first 90 days (October-December 2008), although the hospitals continued to track patient satisfaction results throughout 2009 as well.

During this initial phase the average change in percentile ranking for meals was +14%. Individual improvements ranged from 2 to 50 percentile points, providing valuable clues as to which characteristics are most associated with success. Those findings are described on the following pages.
Behavioral Training Works

Hospitality training (more precisely behavioral training) proved to be the number one driver of patient satisfaction in this study. All the Pilot Accounts that achieved significant gains had embraced Sodexo’s FOSS and CARES behavioral training as part of their patient satisfaction initiative.

Both Sodexo programs go well beyond traditional “hospitality” training. FOSS (Focus on Service Spirit) training teaches employees the fundamentals of customer service and is the precursor to CARES training. The CARES program takes customer service to another level by focusing on the behaviors critical for healthcare service workers — Compassion, Accountability, Respect, Enthusiasm and Service — behaviors that improve the hospital experience for patients, visitor and clinical staff alike.

As previous Sodexo studies have shown, engaged employees are the key to delivering satisfying service experiences. Such employees become an active, positive part of the hospital patient care team. And the way to develop employees with those characteristics is through behavioral training programs such as FOSS and CARES.

Personalize the Dining Experience

Pilot Accounts that implemented or already had some form of personalized patient dining all had significant gains in patient satisfaction.

Sodexo has two personalized patient dining programs: At Your Request-Room Service Dining® where patients order their meals over the phone from a restaurant-style menu and Expressly for You®, where a personal host or hostess takes the meal order at the patient’s bedside, assembles and delivers the meal and retrieves the tray.

By itself, personalizing the patient dining experience is a proven patient pleaser, but as this study shows, it really becomes a major driver when combined with FOSS and CARES training. This is illustrated in the charts at left.

A WINNING COMBINATION
For Driving Patient Satisfaction with Meals

On their own, Sodexo behavioral training (FOSS/CARES) and personalized patient dining are proven patient pleasers. But, as the data from these two Pilot Accounts illustrates, the combination of behavioral training and personal dining is an even more potent driver of patient satisfaction.

Hospital A and B differed only in the order in which they implemented behavioral training and At Your Request-Room Service Dining® (AYR). In both cases, the addition of the second initiative took patient satisfaction to a new level.

These two Food and Nutrition Departments had other things in common as well: both recognized and celebrated employee achievements, and both consistently used the Sodexo management tools available to them.

Celebrate Achievements

All successful Pilot Accounts put programs and processes in place to recognize, reward and thereby reinforce desired behaviors — from recognition at weekly huddles to major events such as CARES graduations and patient satisfaction “victory” celebrations.

Huddles are weekly meetings where the entire department comes together to share information such as upcoming issues, past week’s successes, employee birthdays and other significant events. Employees also share stories of CARES behavior they have witnessed or performed. Employees who demonstrate “above-and-beyond” CARES actions are nominated for awards. For example, at the Pilot Account with the greatest percentile increase in this study, seven employees received CARES awards in 2009.
Consistent use of Sodexo’s performance auditing tools was another practice top Pilot Accounts had in common. As this study demonstrates, these management tools are a highly effective way for departments to maintain the highest level of performance and patient satisfaction.

Achieving significant gains in patient satisfaction is hard, but maintaining those gains is even harder. It takes constant vigilance to keep the gains from slipping away.

As the Department Director of Food and Nutrition Services at one hospital put it, “We’re all going to make mistakes. What’s critical is to identify and fix those mistakes quickly and to keep them from coming back.”

The successful accounts work at it every day. If performance dips, they rethink what they are doing and make adjustments.

That is the bottom line. If Food and Nutrition Departments want to improve their patient satisfaction scores, they have to improve the collective mindset of their employees.

Many of the employees at these Pilot Accounts felt unappreciated and disrespected before this research initiative was launched. But, for those departments that underwent a shift to a culture that embraced and celebrated employee engagement and achievement, the picture changed dramatically.

These employees started to see themselves as important members of the patient care team. As one Department Director put it, “We are seen as one of the stellar departments in the hospital now. We all walk a little taller now.”

And it shows in the results.

These results further substantiate what Sodexo has shown throughout its unique Patient Experience initiative: creating a patient-centered culture is the key to driving positive outcomes for patients, visitors and staff alike.