

Strategic Healthcare Marketing: What Can We Learn from the Hospitality Industry?

Peter Kalina

MD, MBA, FACR, Mayo Clinic, USA

Abstract Many of the keys to success in creating value-based, patient-centered health care can be learned from the cornerstones of the hospitality industry. In both of these seemingly disparate marketplaces, stellar care and exceptional customer service helps establish loyalty. Guests at world-class hotels and resorts and patients at top-tier health care organizations share commonality. These include an expectation for professionalism, employee engagement, unrivalled quality controls and trusted safety. At a time when competition and choices abound in both spaces, consider that health care organizations can create a unique experience by modeling some of their key business goals around the hospitality industry. A clearly defined culture of delivering personalized service excellence and the highest quality should be obvious to customers (patients) and competitors alike. Your people are your culture, your competitive advantage. Great employees, especially at the front lines, are the face of the business; the brand ambassadors. Collaborate with teams to continuously improve, innovate and grow. Create new relationships and partnerships. Value-based, patient centered care means superb patient experiences, ease of access, unrivalled quality and the utmost in safety. An established culture of service and high standards creates customer trust in the hospitality “5-Star” category. By successfully executing the priorities exemplified by your organization’s culture, your patients will place their trust in you.

Keywords Healthcare, Marketing, Hospitality, Employees

1. Introduction

Travel & Leisure magazine recently unveiled its annual 2018 “Top 100 Hotels in the World” [1]. Although not a surprise to most, the prestigious Four Seasons had an astonishing seven properties on that highly regarded list, including the #1 ranked property in the world (Bali, Indonesia). No other hotel brand was even close. This information is confirmed by completely unscientific, but regularly consulted TripAdvisor [2] reviews (the industry gold standard?). The Four Season global brand identity, reputation, customer loyalty, preference and insistence are core strategies driving the business model of this hugely successful organization. Four Seasons leads the luxury hotel market with a brand epitomizing elegance and excellence. I concur with my own personal “5 star” ratings, having been fortunate to experience the Four Seasons in Vail, Colorado; Las Vegas, Nevada and Budapest, Hungary.

Unique locations, immaculate rooms, superb facilities and world-class restaurants are a given, and are expected. Even

these superlatives are not enough to differentiate a brand in this unabashedly premium price category. The distinguishing element is their legendary customer service; creating a truly customized guest experience, providing lasting memories. They create customers for life. A desire to create customers for life is also a driving force behind the strategies created and implemented by health care executives. How can hospitals adopt business models that create loyalty? Highly successful companies utilize cross-functional integrated collaboration between leadership, marketing and their employees. In a shared strategy; this collaboration is used to create, communicate and deliver to their target customer a message which resonates the company’s vision and their value proposition [3].

2. Discussion

Marketing plans are a concerted effort and mix of the “5 P’s” - price, product, promotion, place and people [4]. It can be easily argued that in essentially *any* industry, the most important component are the company’s people; their employees. This is especially true of those employees entrusted and empowered to engage their customers, armed with a clear and profound knowledge and understanding of the brand’s mission. Of the “5 P’s of marketing, the people are what make the difference. An organizations’ culture is defined by its people. They provide the competitive and

* Corresponding author:

kalina.peter@mayo.edu (Peter Kalina)

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strategic advantage. To build top performing teams; identify, recognize, attract, develop and organize the best talent. Align your organization's strategy with the skilled talent required to achieve it.

Success in the hospitality industry is about consistently outstanding customer service. This creates a reproducible, positive and memorable experience. Exceptional customer service means actively focusing on each and every customer interaction. It means that your proud employees will anticipate, meet and exceed the customer's functional and emotional needs and desires; as well as their unexpressed needs and wishes. A Four Seasons guest is surrounded by passionate, valued, empowered and seemingly genuinely happy employees that exude top-notch training, extending far beyond friendliness and efficiency.

These organizations take great care to hire the most talented "right people for the right job" who, following fine-tuned processes including rigorous on-going training, will deliver consistent, world-class service. Retention of these valuable resources is paramount, requiring motivation and commitment by both employees and management. This extends well beyond a competitive salary, to also include trust, honesty, respect and integrity.

Nurtured employees are motivated to succeed. They will look after the best interests of their guests, their company and hopefully even each other. Employees inspired by the brands purpose and aligned with their goals are "all-in," committed and motivated. The result is everyone functioning as a de facto member of the marketing team, guided by the brand's "why" to succeed in getting results and growing the business. Much like at Four Seasons, Marriott International is also committed to the concept that "if you take care of your employees, they will take care of your customers, and your business will take care of itself." [5]

Exceptional customer service is of tremendous value to a service organization's marketing objective. The effectiveness of word of mouth marketing starts with happy employees creating memorable, remarkable customer service leading to happy loyal guests. This in turn leads to the creation of even more new customers. The business grows.

"Wowed" guests should be on the *Four Season's* marketing payroll as they happily extol their virtues to everyone. Healthcare organizations should also realize that having happy employees on their payrolls represent a major force in their day-to-day marketing effort. In today's value-based healthcare paradigm, patient ("customer") satisfaction is front and center. The Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) instituted a framework describing the optimization of health system performance, stating that three mutually reinforcing dimensions must be simultaneously pursued. They promoted the "triple aim" construct of a) improving the patient care experience (quality and satisfaction), b) improving population health, and c) reducing costs [6]. A "quadruple aim" describes a fourth component: provider well-being.

Commit to a reputation of consistently treating people the way you would like to be treated. Don't just talk about your

culture – develop it, execute it, re-enforce it. Define your brand; what sets you apart, equated with consistent exceptional experiences expected by today's savvy healthcare consumer. Your competitive advantage, and the cornerstone of your brand, will ultimately be your employees and your culture. Ensure that your business decisions protect and strengthen that competitive market advantage position. Those critical decisions also guide the organization in executing its strategic priorities and building trust. Long term strategic and operational strategies and decisions must adapt and change in response to ephemeral external environmental challenges. A culture that prioritizes quality, service, and safety will remain steadfast, despite the inevitable ever-changing climate occurring in modern healthcare.

Organizations succeed because they have great individuals; ones that also work well together. Compassionate, interactive, supportive, patient, inspired, proud, personable, passionate, loyal team members that anticipate needs and exceed expectations help create high quality, memorable customer experiences, which help drive business growth [7]. Front line employees are the face of your business, and the key to ongoing and sustainable success. The Four Seasons is certainly not alone when it comes to hospitality success. At Marriott International, 53% of management started out as frontline employees [5]. Recruit, develop and retain the best talent; dedicated employees who aspire to greatness, going above and beyond – every day, for every patient. They build, maintain and strengthen your brand culture of service excellence. Collaborate with teams through energetic strategic conversations. A drive to continuously improve, capitalize on new opportunities, reinvent and innovate translates to sustainable growth. A commitment to employee engagement is an important aspect of how new ideas and innovations are delivered [5]. Expanding toward becoming a stable business ensures continued relevance. Extending beyond well-established long-term relationships means connecting with new partners to spark creativity and continuously set the bar higher. Develop high quality teams united around a common set of values. "Radical Inclusion" means building strong relationships, partnerships and teams that work collaboratively [8]. Leverage everyone's individual talents, insights and creativity.

3. Conclusions

Health care can learn valuable lessons from other industries, especially hospitality, and especially with regards to customer service. Health care and hospitality are both global, consumer-facing businesses. In both spaces, happy and engaged employees become brand ambassadors that help to achieve excellent outcomes by providing "5-star" service at every point of contact with customers (patients). While few patients would equate a hospital visit with a resort stay, we can all adapt some of these principles of delivering

exceptional service. Operate your organization in a manner consistent with how management operates the Four Seasons. If your employees are treated well, they will in turn help you achieve optimal patient satisfaction. What will inevitably follow for your patients are good outcomes. With a culture of unmistakable laser focus on delivering service of the highest standards that exceeds expectations, customers place their trust in “5-star resorts such as the Four Seasons brand. “Treat others the way they don’t even know they want to be treated” [7] is a business model that ensures your practice’s longevity during the inevitable ubiquitous transition to patient-centric, value-based health care systems. Value-based, patient-centered care means superb patient experiences, efficient operations, ease of access/scheduling, interpretive accuracy and management effectiveness, unrivalled quality, and the utmost in safety. Successfully and consistently execute the priorities exemplified by your healthcare organization’s culture, a culture that engages and inspires individuals to strive for excellence, to embrace wanting to contribute to high quality, and understand the importance of their interaction and engagement with patients [7]. By doing so, you add value to patient care, and your patients (and referring providers) will develop loyalty and will place and maintain their trust in you.

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