

# Medical Practice Mystery Shopping

**By Page S. Piland**

The healthcare industry has not been recognized as a leader in delivering high levels of customer service. The dermatology practice is slightly different than most other medical practices in this respect. Dermatologists, as a group recognized the importance of delivering quality service more quickly than many other types of medical practices. Two reasons for this are the evolution of services offered and the change in the demographics of the patients that this created.

One factor that comes to mind is the emergence and growth of aesthetic services within the dermatology practice. A benefit that aesthetic dermatology has brought to this field of medicine is that the patients tend to have higher expectations since they are typically paying cash for the services rendered. Many dermatologists with whom I have spoken didn't necessarily interpret this experience positively at first. Some were a little disillusioned at that time. However, in retrospect, the bar was raised in the area of meeting patient expectations and the industry as a whole has benefited from the experience of making an effort to exceed patient expectations.

Maintaining a high level of customer service is increasingly important in the face of relentless competition and a difficult economic environment. The challenge for physicians is in the fact that they spend the majority of the workday isolated with one patient at a time in one room at a time. One widely accepted method for evaluating the rest of the practice regarding the quality of the total patient experience is to utilize patient satisfaction surveys. Some practices use them every day, some use them periodically to 'spot check', and some practices are required to perform these surveys on all surgical patients in order to meet certification requirements.

Another very beneficial method of gathering patient experience information is to incorporate a medical practice mystery shopping program into your standard operating procedures. Hotels, restaurants, and retail businesses have used mystery shoppers for a very long time due to the high level of competition for the customer in their very specific marketplaces. Mystery shopping hasn't seemed as important in medicine until recently. One major reason was that the need wasn't really appreciated until patients were lured away by practices that were early adopters of improving their level of quality.

Mystery Shopping has also become more important as new information outlets for customers or patients have increased in prevalence and availability. It is much easier

today to provide your opinion on multiple social networks or websites. One example of this is Angie's List. According to their website, their Members submit 40,000 new reviews each month in multiple categories including dermatology. This type of information can be extraordinarily beneficial to practices that have earned the praise through their efforts and attention to customer service. On the flip side, it can be devastating if the patient's expectations are not met and they decide to vent their frustrations.

The value of medical mystery shopping lies in the information gathered. It enables physicians and the management team to measure and compare the true patient experience versus their expectations. When the mystery shopper has a positive experience, it reinforces the current strategy. When areas of opportunity for improvement are discovered, the medical practice can consider them and make the necessary changes in a timely manner.

High quality customer service can be achieved when a mystery shopper becomes part of your business improvement strategy. Some practices utilize family and friends while others bring in consultants and professional shoppers. There are many companies that specialize in mystery shopping and do a very good job of measuring and providing timely, accurate feedback. The key to success is to find a qualified shopper with experience in dermatology. Ideally, they will provide an anonymous, third-party assessment of the patient experience and report back with objective feedback.

The mystery shopping evaluation may take place in several different areas of your practice. The most obvious is for the shopper to make an actual appointment and visit your office anonymously. Two other important areas measured by the shopper's experience are during an interaction via telephone calls to your office and by visiting your website.

The patient experience evaluation should include objective observations from the shopper. It should provide you with snapshot of a very particular part of the day in your practice. Multiple evaluations at different times and days are also a good practice. This will assist in forming and understanding the big picture.

The shopper should provide data on areas which can be objectively measured with the understanding that many of the areas are purely subjective in nature. A few of these areas include:

**Objective**

- Was the telephone answered live or by an automated system?
- What was the amount of time spent in the reception area?
- Did the employees wear nametags?
- Was the shopper greeted when they approached the receptionist?
- Did the physician greet the shopper by name?

**Subjective**

- Was the person who answered the telephone courteous?
- Was the receptionist friendly and accommodating?
- Was the office clean and orderly?
- Did the physician spend an appropriate amount of time with the shopper?
- Was the medical staff genuinely interested in the reason for the appointment?
- Did the physician actively listen?

The most challenging part of the process is starting. It can often be difficult hearing that the patient's perception is not in line with your expectations of customer service. Many practices make the decision not to bring in a mystery shopper simply because it is out of their comfort zone. The benefits of acquiring first-hand feedback and avoiding missed opportunities should help encourage practices to be proactive and take this important step towards the improvement of patient satisfaction.

The success of the program relies upon how the physician and management respond to the information gathered. It is important to listen, respond, and then take appropriate action. Treat the information as a gift and refrain from taking it personally or to reacting punitively. When you use the information to make positive changes, you begin attaining the competitive advantage over your competition.



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