

Can gift cards help improve patient satisfaction?

By Lizz Wheeler

A Need To Be Concerned

Hospitals and other health care providers have plenty to be concerned about these days. From increased competition for patients among regional and nationally-regarded hospitals, to competition for Medicare reimbursement dollars tied to patient satisfaction measures, the emphasis on keeping patients happy as well as healthy has never been more important.

And it shows, according to the latest research. The American Medical Association reported in April that patient satisfaction with the health care system has been on a steady incline in recent years, reaching a 20-year high this year.

Creating A Welcoming Environment

For hospitals, this trend is important because beginning this year, as part of the new Affordable Care Act, nearly \$1 billion in Medicare payments to hospitals is being based in part on patient satisfaction, determined by a 27-question government survey administered to patients. Hospitals with high scores will receive bonus payments. Those with low ones will lose money. The money at stake represents 1% of overall Medicare payments.

So, while it is a hospital's first and foremost duty to treat the patient, their ailments, and put them on a path to recovery, it's also important to insure that they are treated with utmost courtesy and respect. That includes respect for their time, their feelings, and their questions. We all know this does not always happen, and many of us have experienced inconvenient and uncomfortable situations – from a long wait time, an unprofessional staff, to a perceived (or real) lack of concern on the part of a doctor or other provider.

With this in mind, should patients receive some sort of non-litigated, non-arbitrated compensation for a poor health care experience? In some cases, it's already happening, and is being encouraged.

Leaving The Right Impression

A gift card compensation or reward plan can go a long way to make patients feel a little better after a less-than-satisfying experience. Whether offered by a hospital on-the-spot, or delivered after completion of a patient satisfaction survey, putting such a plan in place can help improve patient satisfaction, and resulting survey scores.

For example, in a January 2012 report by Dr. Pamela Wible on the website KevinMD.com, she writes that doctors are finding creative ways to make amends with irritated patients. She reports one doctor in Fairport, N.Y. passes out five-dollar bills to everyone in the waiting room when he is



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running behind schedule. Another physician in Bellevue, Wash. gives out Starbucks cards, and another in California offers movie theater gift cards.

Plan Your Program

When designing a compensation plan involving gift cards, it's important to consider how the program will be administered, with responsible parties for decision-making (when a gift card is to be offered), card brand selection, and fulfillment procedures clearly identified. Many gift card companies offer complete fulfillment and custom branding services, taking much of the workload off of already-pressed hospital staffers.

Also consider what types or brands of gift cards to offer. As a hospital / health care facility, there are many appropriate options available, including grocery chains selling healthy, organic products, pharmacies, and even fuel retailers if a patient has to drive a long distance to her appointment.

Quality patient care is always a hospital's first responsibility, but as we are seeing by the emergence of huge marketing campaigns and government influence, paying attention to the entire patient experience is becoming more and more important. Creative compensation is another way to show that the nation's health care system is getting better, and truly cares.

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