

Customer Service Opportunities in Access Management

LAWRENCE V. COVINGTON, President of Unibased Systems Architecture Inc., says “hospitals exist to serve physicians and patients,” so customer service is just as important in the healthcare industry.

Please tell us about Unibased Systems Architecture Inc.

We are the No. 1 KLAS rated software vendor in enterprise scheduling, with a product that supports an enterprise access management approach to customer service. Our approach is to provide an integrated solution that front-ends the medical necessity checking and insurance authorization processes with a resource management approach to scheduling. Adding the OR module, we can provide a complete patient itinerary across both surgical and diagnostic departments on an enterprise basis. It's a great customer service.

Just who do you define as the customer in healthcare?

Hospitals exist to serve physicians and patients. No matter how the market is viewed, physicians and patients are the ultimate “buyer” components, without whom there would be no market. Disease will not disappear, but how, when, and where physicians apply their skills and patients receive their treatment will change, based upon the hospital's ability to meet the customer service demands of their customers.

How would you define customer service, and what makes it unique in healthcare?

Key elements of customer service programs have always been prompt service, quality of service (which is linked to product quality), competitive costs, follow-up and evaluation, anticipative customer alerts, and convenience. For some industries, including healthcare, customer safety is also a critical component.

Here is what is unique about healthcare: Almost all industries assign key executives to customer service. Within the provider portion of the healthcare market, it is difficult to find an executive with the overall responsibility of “customer service”; in other words, responsible for all of the aforementioned elements. For example, surgeons requiring higher levels of service from current facilities searched for an alternative, found financial support and opened their own surgery centers. Apparently, there wasn't a hospital executive sensitive to their needs. Both the surgeon and their customers (the patients) have found better alternatives to the “status quo,” and the result created a competitive threat to the hospitals.

Because we are focused on financial management, please share your thoughts on customer service and its impact on revenue.

Patient flow and volume obviously connect to revenue in healthcare. Physician referrals also directly correlate to revenue. Properly managed customer service programs have a profound influence on referrals and patient volumes. As a company with a focus on maximizing throughput and improving patient flow, let me share

some real examples associated with the key elements of customer service:

First and foremost is prompt service. A good scheduling system will allow the physician and patient to rapidly set up an appointment, conflict-free, so that the services will be provided quickly and on time, at a convenient location.

Next is quality of service. A good pre-registration component will ensure a through triage approach so that all clinical aspects of the service or services are considered prior to the time of arrival, that facilities and supplies are available, and the procedures are arranged in the correct order when multiple services are required. Optimum utilization of resources, which include labor, facilities and supplies, will ensure lower costs to the patient and higher margins to the provider. Again, a good scheduling approach will optimize the use of resources and when combined with customer convenience, allow for more volume per unit of time.

Alerts are another important area. A good registration system should provide the data to allow reminder notices to be sent to patients, such as notices regarding routine periodic tests and examinations. In addition, tracking milestones such as pre-admission testing, insurance coverage verification and calculation of the patient portion of the costs should all be automatic alerts. This will avoid disappointments, cancellations and loss of revenue.

Convenience is perhaps the most important element for revenue growth. It's a combination of all of the above. Convenience is the right day, right location, and correct time for the physician and patient. However, it is also the right time of day to schedule services and the right medium to make the appointment. The Internet offers considerably more options than a call center, and that is the reason for our latest focus on physician access – but a call center will work also.

Now let's focus on customer service from the viewpoint of the patient. What do you see as important to providing a high level of patient customer service?

Avoiding customer frustrations is a key objective of any customer service program, but this requires some planning detail. All of us have experienced the telephone wait of the computerized response on the 1-800 line. How often have you just hung up the receiver? Add to this the personal insecurities of a patient who is ill, perhaps seriously ill. Long waits can be disastrous.

A computer system that supports the simple task of scheduling an appointment cannot be the cause of wait time. The system must be very responsive and intuitive to the hospital scheduler, who has the physician's office staff or the patient on the other end of the line.



Lawrence V. Covington is President and Chief Architect and Designer of Unibased Systems Architecture Inc.'s products such as Resource Management System (RMS) and periOperative Resource Management System (ORMS). Prior to joining Unibased, Larry was President and CEO of Graycross Professional Services Inc., a software productivity tools developer which merged with USA; Corporate Vice President with McDonnell Douglas Corporation; President and CEO of Informational Resources Electronics Corporation, a firm that he founded; was active as a logistics and communications specialist with the U.S. Navy.