

Applying Satisfaction Results to Improve Lives

By Brad Shiverick

A primary goal of any senior care organization has to be high-quality resident care. Organizational leaders must ensure available resources are used effectively to meet this goal. Rather than view quality primarily in terms of clinical outcomes and regulatory compliance, senior care professionals increasingly are realizing the importance of customer satisfaction as a key component of quality. Defining quality as “the totality of service features and characteristics that meet or exceed customer needs and expectations” places the customer’s experience at the core.

The importance of measuring customer satisfaction has become widely accepted in recent years. The data help providers determine where they stand, what their strengths are and what areas present the greatest opportunity for improvement.

Gathering data is just the beginning. After the survey is administered, the results analyzed and the scores recorded, the real work begins. To make good use of survey results, the provider must understand what the information means and how to use it to drive improvements that benefit those who matter most—residents and their family members.

Define Your Goals

Before undertaking a customer satisfaction survey, take time to clarify what you want to accomplish. What information do you plan to gain from your customers? Do you just want to know about their overall satisfaction, or are you interested in identifying specific opportunities for improvement? What will you do with the survey results? Which of your client populations will you survey—employees, families, residents, clients? In the case of a skilled nursing facility, have you considered the best way to target both the long- and short-stay populations, whose needs, perceptions and ability to respond may be very different? For assisted living communities, do you have a good handle on the needs of residents with memory care needs, both those who have been with you long term and those who have just arrived?

Drive High Response Rates

Having high participation and high response rates is crucial to understanding the true story of satisfaction. Widely publicize the upcoming survey. Inform your staff; they play a big role in creating awareness of the upcoming survey. Take advantage of existing resources—newsletters, family council, resident council, bulletin boards and other opportunities for communication. Consider sending a letter to families alerting them to the process and letting them know how important it is. Once the surveys have been mailed, remind families to fill them out when they arrive. Let them know that their feedback is a critical part of the process for setting priorities for improvement.

Conduct the Survey

There are many different ways to survey residents. Ideally, every resident should participate. In practice, residents may have physical, functional and cognitive impairments that challenge their ability to respond. If they are able to respond to a paper

Required Survey Elements

To measure the consumer experience, integrate consumers’ voices and differentiate between residents’ and family members’ needs and expectations, it is recommended that consumer satisfaction instruments include assessment of satisfaction levels in the following areas. This is based upon findings from My InnerView’s 2007 *National Survey of Consumer and Workforce Satisfaction in Nursing Homes*:

- Competency of staff
- The extent to which staff demonstrate a caring attitude toward residents
- Respectfulness of staff toward residents
- Safety of facility
- Responsiveness of management
- Quality of life, service and care

survey, simple reminders to complete the survey may be all that is necessary. For residents whose ability to respond to a paper survey is limited, survey assistants can be used. In choosing survey assistants, ensure that these individuals are capable of assisting residents and gathering their honest and unbiased opinions. Survey assistants who do not work directly with these residents on a daily basis are often preferable. If family members or volunteers can fulfill that role, that is often the wisest course.

Confidentiality is important. Many times a resident (or family member) may be hesitant to have staff know how he or she responded. Affirm at the outset that survey responses will be confidential and that honest feedback is appreciated and valued. The goal of a customer satisfaction initiative is to improve

Surveying Discharged Residents

Conducting surveys of discharged skilled nursing residents is great opportunity.

There are, at any one time, about 1.5 million individuals in skilled nursing facilities across the country. The majority (80%) are the traditional long-term care resident with an average length of stay of approximately one year. At the same time, there are 2.5 million short-term stays of fewer than 30 days. This illustrates the shifting balance toward the short-term patient and highlights the importance of this population to the senior care profession.

A survey designed for those who have left the facility should focus on the specific needs of the short-stay patient, who is focused more often on healing and returning to the prior residential setting. Survey measures can include:

- **Quality of life**—including privacy concerns, respect and preferences
- **Quality of care**—including clinical care, attentiveness and care provided by staff
- **Quality of service**—including billing, administrative issues, cleanliness and meals
- **Rehabilitation and discharge**—including discharge goals and rehabilitation services
- **Overall satisfaction**—including recommendation of the facility to others

the care and services offered. Helping residents and family members understand that will often alleviate whatever fears they may have about providing the information.

Understand What the Survey Results Are Telling You

Administering the survey and collecting the results are important first steps. The most essential part of the process comes next: interpreting customers' voices and taking action based on what those voices are saying. With survey results in hand, begin to identify where to focus improvement activities. One way to focus efforts is to identify areas in which performance is lower than expected. Also, consider which areas influence global satisfaction measures such as "overall satisfaction" or "willingness to recommend the facility." Determine where your actions can have the greatest impact, and set priorities accordingly. Acknowledge that you will not be able to work on every opportunity at once. To be effective, a quality improvement initiative must be focused. Trying to do too much at once will limit the likelihood of success.

Once priorities for improvement are identified, confirmation is needed that the organization thoroughly understands the factors that contributed to its score. Usually, a satisfaction survey is able to identify a general area of service that may present an opportunity, but what is driving satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with that area of service might not be as clear. This is generally referred to as "actionable (or root) cause analysis"—finding the real cause of the problem and dealing with it rather than simply continuing to deal with the symptoms. Failing to spend enough time on this step in the process may result in a short-term fix that cannot be sustained.

Drill Down for Better Understanding

To understand the problem fully, gather more information. Go back to residents, families and staff. Ask for their input about what the survey results meant, and how the organization can do better. This is a great topic for a family council, resident council or staff meeting. Not only is information gathered, but customers see that you value their opinions and take the survey seriously. Actively involve staff, residents and families in this process. Identifying root causes of problems and determining possible solutions often rests with this important group of stakeholders.

Root-cause analysis does not have to be a complex exercise. If everyone involved asks “Why?” until there are no more “why” questions left to ask, what drove the survey results will become clear. The root cause is the fundamental reason for the failure or inefficiency of a process. Root causes are often structural elements that have to do with equipment or supplies, environment, policies and procedures, or a knowledge deficit. Once you have identified your highest priorities for improvement and have analyzed the root cause, addressing opportunities for improvement can begin.

Communicate

Return communication is vital. The provider has to respond to the customer about the survey results. The customer has invested time in replying to the survey in hopes of contributing to improvements at the organization. If communication is not initiated to share survey results, providers may have done more harm than good. Express gratitude to survey participants, and be clear that their voices have been heard, are deemed important, and that work on improvements has begun.

It is important to “close the loop” with customers in this way. If any have been involved in the organization’s investigation of opportunities for improvement, this is a great start. As improvements are made, customers will not only notice what is being done, but give credit for the organization’s efforts. By acting on customer input to make improvements, providers will increase their customers’ trust and loyalty.

Understand the Power of Narrative Comments

Most survey instruments include an opportunity for the customer to provide additional information in the form of narrative comments. These questions often take the form of: “Tell us what we do best,” “Tell us what we can do to improve” and “Do you have any other comments or suggestions?”

These open-ended questions represent an often-untapped treasure trove of information. When the respondent is asked specific questions about quality of care, quality of life and quality of service, he or she is likely to respond honestly—and that is valuable. But when you say “tell us what we do best” and so forth, you are asking the customer or employee

to tell you what they find to be the most important thing to them. When they respond with narrative comments, they are telling you what they *really* think. It is to your advantage to *really* listen.

By looking closely at comments, you can quickly and effectively celebrate compliments, learn more about areas that need improvement and address potential risks. A comment can reveal opportunities for improvement about individual aspects of service, such as meals and dining.

“Meals sometimes seem pretty ho hum. Breakfasts are good, but food is always served cold.”

Comments also tell you what you are doing well —what is highly satisfying to customers. These are the things that leaders need to be aware of in order to leverage them. Providers need to make sure that employees know these items are providing value to customers.

“Very nice birthday dinner we were invited to enjoy with her on the 86th birthday. A special table, a rose, place mats and birthday napkins to show she is special. Also

First Impressions Matter

Choice is an important aspect of service. Residents make a choice when they move into a senior-living community, and they want to continue to have a say in aspects of service that affect their lives. Understanding those expectations up front is a vital component of meeting and exceeding expectations down the road. A survey to measure customers’ expectations at move-in should include:

- The factors they considered in selecting the community, such as a friendly, caring staff, home-like surroundings, meals and dining, price, space and other service features
- The process of moving in, receiving the information they needed, the application procedures, the courtesy and helpfulness of staff
- Acclimating to their new surroundings, getting to know new neighbors and staff, information about services and schedules
- Overall satisfaction with the community

Don't Overlook Caregivers

A growing body of evidence supports the view that providers cannot achieve excellence without a satisfied, committed workforce. To support ongoing quality improvement efforts, providers must implement targeted strategies to deal with workforce satisfaction, especially among direct-care staff.

To implement such strategies, providers need to understand the important aspects of performance that drive workforce satisfaction. Each one represents an area that providers can monitor for organizational excellence:

- **Management**—including attentiveness and responsiveness demonstrated by managers
- **Supervision**—including respectfulness and communication by supervisors
- **Training**—including in-service education, orientation and training to deal with difficult situations
- **Work environment**—including safety, resources, fairness and communication
- **Global satisfaction**—including overall satisfaction as well as recommendation as a place to work and as a place to receive care

a piano recitation of 'Happy Birthday.' She felt special. Thanks."

In senior care, the staff members create the customer experience. The relationship that an employee has with a resident and his or her family is one of the most important aspects of service. Comments often illustrate just how important that relationship can be.

"The night Mother died, Mary sat and held her hand for hours before we got there. It was after her shift, but she wouldn't leave until the family arrived. I will never forget her."

Wouldn't it be a tragedy to overlook such a comment? Not every staff-related comment is this powerful, but the majority of times when employees are mentioned by name, it is because of some act of kindness or service they provided to the resident or family member. It is crucial that employees be recognized for their service.

Sustain the Gain

Continuous quality improvement can be thought of as a cycle. In this case, the cycle began with the collection of customer satisfaction data, followed by more information gathering, root-cause analysis and process improvement. Now it's time to make sure the improvement "sticks." Find ways to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions put in place. Were the desired results achieved? A great way to monitor this is to conduct ongoing satisfaction assessment of

your residents and their families. There are several ways to do this.

In addition to a formal, annual snapshot of customer satisfaction, providers also can gather valuable information informally by soliciting customer opinions during rounds and family council and care plan meetings. The cycle closes with the next annual survey. Providers now have the opportunity to see if the improvements have had the desired effect and, most importantly, if overall satisfaction and the rate at which customers would recommend the facility have improved. Improving these measures of global satisfaction is the ultimate goal of a customer satisfaction survey.

If successful in implementing and sustaining the improvements, your next satisfaction report should show improved scores in the areas in which you focused your quality improvement efforts. As you empower your organization to take action and provide the necessary resources for improvement efforts, a culture of excellence will emerge that demonstrates a commitment to quality at all levels of the organization.

Brad Shiverick is vice president of research for My InnerView (www.myinnerview.com), whose mission is to provide evidence-based management tools to help long-term care leaders better achieve their organizations' goals.

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