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## STAY OR STRAY: EIGHT PATIENT DEAL-BREAKERS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

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*Editor's Note: For additional tools and resources related to this topic, visit the **BSM Café** ([www.bsmcafe.com](http://www.bsmcafe.com)).*

Losing a patient due to poor customer service has the potential to impact the practice's bottom line far more than gaining a new patient. Because of this, physician-owners and administrators should always be on the lookout for opportunities to retain their current patients by improving the product they already have.

**Rather than focusing on growing market share, a practice's bottom line might be best-served by keeping its current clients satisfied and loyal.**

### Deal-Breakers

The following is a list of eight of the most common complaints—or "deal-breakers"—that lead patients to look elsewhere for care.

**Front office staff was incompetent.** Nearly every practice activity converges at the front desk, including most patient interactions. When these encounters are wrought with problems, patients become concerned about overall practice competency. "I trust you to look after my health, yet you are incapable of looking after something as simple as my chart (lab result, appointment, insurance, etc.)." Sounds harsh, yet these are the words of a coworker describing how she felt about her doctor's office after recently experiencing numerous difficulties with its front office staff.

**Physician/staff rushed me through the visit.** Patients will look for a different practice if they feel like the provider did not spend enough time with them. To better understand the intolerance of being hurried through a visit, consider the time a typical patient invests in being seen: The patient must book the appointment, take time away from regularly scheduled affairs, drive through traffic, fill out forms, and sit in the waiting room for an unknown amount of time. By the time they are sitting in the exam room, patients want to feel like they are receiving their fair share of staff time and attention.

**Long wait.** Patients are intolerant of long wait times. Long wait times are generally the result of a practice that is unable to stick to its schedule or uses a schedule that does not realistically reflect staffing capacity. Whatever the case, practices are going to lose patients if they are not able to effectively deal with these issues.

**Physician/staff did not listen.** Patients want providers and staff to listen to what they have to say. When patients don't feel heard, they will take their business elsewhere. Practices will benefit from a staff that is trained in the art of active listening. Nodding, eye contact, not interrupting—these are a few techniques that make patients feel heard.

**Physician was condescending.** Patients who complain about condescending providers say the clinician either "talked down" to them, or minimized their complaint in a way that made them feel like they were ignorant for coming in. As benign as it might seem, the statement "Oh, that's normal" is one of the main offenders.

**Unprofessional staff.** When staff members exhibit unprofessional behavior, patients do not feel their best interests are being served and are liable to lose confidence in the practice. Common examples include: poor grooming, inappropriate attire, gossiping, arguing with patients, and quarreling with other staff members within earshot of patients.

**Unfriendly staff.** Patients want to feel welcome and respected when they visit their doctor. If staff is indifferent or hostile, patients are likely to look for a more pleasant environment to receive care. Successful practices consistently focus on improving customer service skills because they know that next to excellent clinical outcomes, a respectful, friendly, and understanding staff is what inspires patients to return and creates a loyal patient following.

**Facility was unkempt, dirty, and/or outdated.** The physical condition of a practice reflects its quality of care, and offices that are unclean, messy, and/or outdated do not inspire patient confidence. Because of this, it is imperative that managers arrange for the replacement of the facility carpeting and paint on a regular basis and update furniture and artwork as needed. It is also essential that practices employ a recommended janitorial service whose work is impeccable and continue to gauge the necessity for additional service when business increases.

### Best Possible Position

To eliminate the "deal-breakers" that result in lost patients, practices must begin ironing out the kinks in current practice procedures while recommitting to a high level of customer service standards.



**About the author:** Heidi Pesterfield works in publication services for BSM Consulting, an internationally recognized health care consulting firm headquartered in Incline Village, Nevada and Scottsdale, Arizona. For more information about BSM Consulting or content/resources discussed in this article, please visit the **BSM Café** at [www.BSMCafe.com](http://www.BSMCafe.com).