Barriers to Entry or Exit: Which Ones Are You Building?

Here’s how to attract new patients and retain current ones.

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Think of your practice as if it were a castle. The goal is to get as many patients as possible into your castle. This also includes getting doctors to refer to your practice and/or insurance companies to include you on their panels. So regardless of your target market, by lowering the drawbridge for easier entry, you are likely to attract more business to your medical practice. Continuing this metaphor, we want to raise the drawbridge to prevent people from exiting. If it is easy for patients to enter the castle, and they have a positive experience within the walls, and it is easier to continue to live there than to go elsewhere, then the castle is well-designed.

Therefore, it is important to think of barriers in both directions: barriers preventing access to your practice, which are to be minimized, and barriers to exit the practice, for which you should strive. This article will describe how to make your castle a fortress by removing barriers to entry and constructing barriers to exit the practice.

BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Before the Patient Arrives...

Poor Initial Contact

Most doctors don’t answer their own phones. So the first impression new patients and referring physicians get from your practice rests on the shoulders of your receptionist. If the phone is answered by a harried, stressed-out person whose first words are, “Doctor’s office, please hold,” all he or she may hear in return is...
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“click.” This is a true barrier to entry that may result in the caller hanging up and calling a competitor. This is easily remedied by scripting the greeting for all incoming calls. “Good morning, you’ve reached Medical Associates, my name is Elizabeth. How may I help you?”

Can’t Get an Appointment for Weeks

What message do you send a potential patient who calls for an appointment and is told “nothing is available for three weeks?” If a woman with an acute onset of new symptoms (even ones the doctor or staff member thinks are minor) calls for an appointment, you can be sure she will be calling a competitor in a nanosecond if you don’t plan to see her within the next 24 hours. You will have lost an opportunity for a new patient because you don’t have a provision for seeing new patients with urgencies or emergencies. Leaving open slots for emergencies or utilizing scheduling templates available in most physician computer software will go a long way to help capture that new business.

No Website

If you are still depending on your Yellow Pages ad to let patients know where you are located and what your telephone number is, you are practicing in the era of leeches, ledger cards, and rotary phones! Patients are going to the Internet in large numbers and are looking there for health-related information. If you are not on the Web, you are missing out on a great opportunity to attract and interact with your existing patients as well as attract new patients.

Hospital with a Poor Reputation

Have you checked the reputation of the hospital where you admit your patients? The quality of the hospital can easily be checked on the website of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services at www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov. Now you can compare your hospital with other hospitals in the community with three clicks of a mouse. And all of your patients will check. If your hospital is deficient in quality measures, this is generating a barrier for entry not only for your hospital but also for your practice.

As an aside, you must participate in hospital with other hospitals in the very near future, doctors will be compensated based on metrics that judge the quality of the services they provide to their patients. One measure of quality is patient satisfaction. You must start measuring your practice-based metrics so you will be in a position to favorably compare with your competitors—for patients and for dollars.

Getting There

• Location of Office in an Undesirable Part of Town—In real estate, the key to sales success is location, location, and location. The location of your office is also important and can serve as a barrier to entry if the office is situated in a less than desirable area.

• Bad Signage—How do patients arrive at your practice? Are there well-marked signs on the building? Is it clear to patients entering the building how to locate your practice once inside the building? Are there directions on your Web site that describe how to find the practice? These are important questions that each doctor and practice has to answer because your patients are asking these questions on a regular basis.

• Paying for Parking—Does your programs or you will suffer the consequences of diminished patient volume and lower income.

Poor Online Ratings

Have you seen your scores on Healthgrades.com? Your patients have. You must monitor your own online profile to see what patients see when they Google you. In the very near future, doctors will be compensated based on metrics that judge the quality of the services they provide to their patients. One measure of quality is patient satisfaction. You must start measuring your practice-based metrics so you will be in a position to favorably compare with your competitors—both for patients and for dollars.

Not only is it the law that you must provide handicapped access to your practice, but it is good for business as well.

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Once the Patient Arrives...

Lukewarm Greeting

The doctor is almost certainly not the first person whom your patients meet when they walk in your door. In fact, it is likely that they have spoken with at least one or two people in your office more than once, and will now meet at least two people before ever setting eyes on the doctor. Make sure that patients are greeted as if they are old friends, and that the receptionist has been expecting them and is happy to see them. If your staff has done the right things on the phone, patients will actually be ex-

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You Are in a Rush
Have you conducted patient satisfaction surveys? If so, what are patients saying about the doctors in the practice? Do the doctors appear to be always in a hurry? Do the doctors answer all of the patients’ questions? Do the doctors stand during the entire patient encounter with their hand on the doorknob? If any of your patients answer yes to these questions, you are creating a barrier to entry.

Unpleasant Reception Area
It has been said that patients should not go to a doctor who has dead fish in his or her aquarium or dead plants in the pots! The same applies to the reading material in the reception area. Magazines that are more than a year old do not indicate a practice that is current, fresh, or going to be helpful. We suggest that you regularly purge your reception area and exam rooms of magazines and print materials that are more than three months old. A nice gesture if you see a patient reading a magazine that is a few months old is to offer to give it to him or her. It is an easy way to keep the old magazines out of the office.

It is also critical that your reception area looks and smells clean, and that the furniture and fixtures are in good repair. Your reception area should look more like a living room than an office.

Outdated Equipment
If your exam tables have plastic that is torn or rusted legs or stirrups, you are sending a terrible message to your patients. The same applies to your equipment. Using equipment that is less than state-of-the-art may indicate that the doctor is not up to date with his or her clinical skills.

Dirty Restroom
What goes through your mind when you are on an airplane and pull down the tray on the back of the seat in front of you and find coffee stains and dried food from the previous passengers on the tray? You just might be concerned about how the airline conducts maintenance and repairs on the planes’ engines. The same thoughts go through your patients’ mind when they go into the restroom and find a full wastebasket, paper towels on the floor, and no toilet paper. This is a reflection on your practice’s hygiene and sends a message that may be a barrier to entry to your practice.

Give patients easy access to your practice and you will have devoted and loyal patients.

The patient may be there, but you will fail to “close the sale.” And the patient will seek care elsewhere. Like any other skills, interpersonal skills can be learned.

BARRIERS TO PREVENT EXIT
Let’s get back to our metaphor of the castle. Are you creating such an incredibly positive experience for patients that they would never think of leaving the practice? This is the kind of defense you want to have so that patients would never think of exiting the practice. Let’s look at some examples.

Signs Clearly Marking the Practice
Make sure that the signs identifying your practice are clearly visible to any patient looking for your office. This includes the building, the directory inside the building, and next to the front door of the office.

Robust Website and Use of Social Media
If your Website is more than an online version of your brochure and allows the patients an opportunity to interact with the doctor and the practice, you will have built a barrier to exit. Patients are expecting their doctor and practice to have an Internet presence. They are expecting to be able to obtain information on their medical problems with up-to-date educational material. They expect that they can have their prescriptions refilled with an online request. These electronic interactions are desirable, and some will soon be mandated by law, so now is the time to get started.

E-Mail
These days, most patients have an e-mail address and would like to communicate with their doctors using this technology. Patients are just as busy as physicians and are not interested in playing phone tag with their doctor. If they have simple questions, they would like to be able to have them answered without having to make an appointment. This topic is complex, however, with significant privacy and malpractice implications, so be sure to check with your IT consultant and/or legal counsel before agreeing to e-mail with patients.

Patient Record Access Portal
Patients want to have copies or access to their medical records. We live in a very mobile society, and patients do not always stay in one location. If they are away from their physicians, they want to be able to show their healthcare information to a new provider or an emergency department doctor, or just have the security of knowing that they own their data and records. The day is gone where patients have to beg for copies of their records or pay $1.50 per page to have them copied and mailed. Providing a patient portal makes your practice special and creates one more obstacle for the patient to leave your practice.

Same-Day or Next-Day Appointment
When patients have a medical complaint, in their opinion it is something that needs immediate attention. If you are able to accommodate

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INTERNAL MARKETING

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emergencies and urgencies the same day a patient calls the office to request an appointment, you will have constructed a barrier to exit. This also applies to any new patient who calls the office for an appointment. You will endear yourself to this new patient, and he or she won’t look for an excuse to leave your practice. Give patients easy access to your practice and you will have devoted and loyal patients.

Welcoming Receptionist

The first introduction to your practice is the receptionist. The receptionist provides the only opportunity to create a positive first impression. If the receptionist is a happy person who likes his or her job and makes the patient excited and enthusiastic about coming to the practice, you will have a nice blockade for exiting the practice. If there is no glass partition or frosted window between the reception area and the back office, you will create a patients-first atmosphere in your practice.

Short Wait Times

Patients have a short fuse when it comes to waiting for their medical care. Anything longer than 15 minutes is unacceptable today. The best way to get a handle on the wait times is to do a time and motion study, and record the time the patient was to be in the office, the time in the reception area and the exam room, and the time that the patient waited to see the physician. If a patient’s wait time is longer than 15 minutes, you will have demonstrated a lack of respect for his or her time, and you will have built a bridge rather than a barrier to exiting the practice.

Post-Discharge Phone Calls

Seldom do patients receive a call from the doctor or practice after they have had a procedure or after discharge from the hospital. Every patient who has a procedure or is leaving the hospital has a question(s) about medications, the dressings, the dos and don’ts, and their follow-up appointment. The practice that calls the patient at home demonstrates the extra attention that its patients are receiving and is building a huge barrier to exit. And a side benefit to you is that this process dramatically reduces the volume of incoming phone calls from patients.

State-of-the-Art Technology

Patients who see that the practice has an electronic medical records system and uses electronic blood pressure cuffs and thermometers will assume that the clinical skills of the doctor are also in the 21st century.

Paid Parking

It is such a nice perk to offer to pay for patients’ parking or offer a discount stamp for the parking lot in or near your office building. It’s one more barrier to exit.

One-Stop Shopping

Patients who come to the office and are able to get their lab testing and imaging performed in the same place will be thankful for this service. It takes so much extra time to go to the off-site laboratory or imaging facility. You will really hit a home run with your patients if their workup can be conducted on their first visit.

Insurance Assistance

Insurance forms can be very confusing. Offices with staff members who help patients with their paperwork and spend time explaining the insurance process have another arrow in their barrier-to-exit quiver.

Translators

We live in a multicultural and multilingual society. If you have patients who speak languages other than English and have an onsite translator, you will be able to endear yourself to these patients, and they will often send their friends and family members to your practice. This is especially true in communities with large immigrant populations. Spanish, Korean, and Russian communities are particularly close-knit, and are grateful for healthcare providers who speak their languages.

Unique Services

Have you looked at the services, procedures, or technologies that are offered by your competitors? Are you differentiating your practice from that of your competitors?

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Bottom Line: Barriers can be positive or negative. Negative barriers are obstacles to enter the practice. Make every effort to identify and remove them. A positive barrier is a fence that prevents patients from leaving. Build and strengthen these barriers to exit. If you look at your practice as a castle and eliminate the negative barriers and fortify the positive ones, you will be on your way to having a very successful practice. PM

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