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# 'Chief experience officer' can win patients for hospitals

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Anthony Cirillo](#) Guest columnist

According to Fast Company magazine, one of the hottest jobs in the country is the experience designer. Most can be found in the retail industry, where they're charged with creating the essence of a store. Their work goes far beyond just the appearance of a place; they create consumer experiences.

People are not exactly flocking to hospitals and physicians to have a great experience. In fact, many patients do not expect one -- long waits and messed-up bills come to mind.

But administrators should care about the patient experience. It's the overall experience that will determine if consumers come back and talk favorably about a hospital with others.

There have been attempts by health-care organizations to address the experience. Often these have been squeaky-wheel initiatives. The intentions are good, but the tasks are usually left to work teams whose jobs don't leave much free time to give the effort enough attention.

Compounding this is that health-care organizations work in silos. The consumer might be there for an outpatient test, a physician visit, a surgery. All are separate and disjointed experiences.

What hospitals need is what I call a chief experience officer -- an individual with the power to oversee the consistent delivery of the experience to the customer. Here's how a hospital should pursue this:

- Diagnose the need. Before you hire, be clear as an organization that the experiential aspect of the business is vitally important. If the chief executive is intent on instituting changes and will hold all accountable, then an experience officer can help as a change agent. If not, reconsider.
- Obtain buy-in. If you have been actively fostering a culture of great experience, creating a position for a chief experience officer will be smooth. There will be naysayers, but look at the big picture. The education and expectations of consumers are increasing. While considering quality and satisfaction data when making choices, consumers also look at experiences. They talk to others. And they go online for information. Hospital and physician experiences, like Amazon book reviews, will start to be documented in narratives on the Internet.

This is the brave new world of health-care selection.

- Define the position and competencies. This person must be able to work across the enterprise. That means being able to build relationships from the CEO to the maintenance man. This person must be able to leave his ego at the door and make others own and take credit for the experience that he helps guide.
- Start small. A commitment to this position doesn't mean that everything can be done in six months, a year or even two years. While you may start in one area of operation, what you do there is a benchmark for what is to come. Don't lose sight of the end goal.

No one is rushing to the hospital for an experience. But consider this: Blue Cross and Blue Shield of South Carolina just added Bumrungrad Hospital in Thailand to its network. Members can save a lot of money on care there. The facility is like a five-star hotel, offering services that define an experience. It all starts with a concierge assigned to the patient. That makes a statement.

But clearly there are organizations that will not make this a priority until they experience a pain point so great that they cannot ignore it. If you work for an organization that doesn't want to embrace this mind set, adopt it for your own function. If that is still hard, adopt the principles for yourself for career enhancement.

As I consult in the area of marketing, I often tell hospital marketers to look at their output in a different light, about how it creates an experience. Go to the cancer services page of Mid-Columbia Medical Center's Web site and see if you are not moved by the images there ([www.celilo.org/default.aspx](http://www.celilo.org/default.aspx)). The images on that page tell a story. They are soothing. They say this is a place where the patient will experience a different kind of care.

So perhaps your organization and your function do not have experience high on the list of priorities. But you as an individual can. Just as organizations have brands, so do people. What experience do you deliver?

Creating an experience does not have to be an enterprise initiative. Starting with each individual and then transforming a function can be steps that slowly change a culture resistant to the concept to one that will embrace it.

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