Patients judge your medical practice by more than the quality of the clinical care they receive. Regardless of whether they seek care for prevention, the onset of an acute condition and/or the management of a chronic disease, your patients are your “customers.” Their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their experience in your office depends on many more factors than a brief interaction with a clinician.

Some of the factors are the ease of making appointments, wait times, the courtesy and respect shown to them by administrative and clinical staff, the convenience of parking, the physical appearance of the office, the clarity of patient education material, the ease of referrals to other physicians and services and post-visit communications.

Here are practical tips for using a patient satisfaction survey to obtain patient feedback that can help you meet patient expectations on an ongoing basis.

**Plan Your Strategy: Start with Why**

Start by asking yourself an important question: “Why does our practice want to survey patient satisfaction?” Let your response guide your strategy.

For example, one of our Triangle clients is a primary care practice that currently has three locations and plans to expand. It cares about patient satisfaction because it’s mission driven.

Unlike practices with an outdated or vague purpose for being, this practice knows where it’s headed. It strives to: provide the convenience of urgent care, the customer focus of the hospitality industry and operational efficiency.

As each patient leaves the office, he/she takes a few minutes to use the in-office computer to respond to an online patient satisfaction survey. The results help the practice stay on target.

Your strategy with patient satisfaction might be different if you were a new practice in town. Assuming you have differentiated yourself from competitors in your specialty, you might want to ask questions related to that goal. Since your staff is new, you might want to ask more questions about workforce than you will after your practice has been up and running for a while.

What about patient satisfaction if your practice is owned by a larger health care system? We think the surveys are particularly important in these situations, given that both your practice and the larger system of which you are a part need to understand the way in which patients perceive the experience.

Here’s an example. Often the larger system dictates the way in which the phone system at individual physician practices will work. When patients have difficulties telephoning the practice, the practice itself may not have the option of improving the situation because the decision belongs to the system.

**Seek a Variety of Opinions**

Also consider: From whom are you seeking feedback on your practice?

It’s gratifying to hear from patients who have had a positive experience, but you also need feedback from patients whose expectations have not been met. Sometimes the very act of asking for feedback and immediately following up diffuses a negative experience.

**Pick Your Moment**

Timing is important. The best time to ask for patient feedback is as each patient leaves your office or shortly thereafter, when the office experience is fresh in mind.

Consider placing a computer in your office so patients can take a short survey before they leave. or, if you prefer to have patients take the survey after they leave your practice, facilitation participation by providing specific instructions both electronically and on paper. Be sure to provide a phone number to call if questions arise.

**Decide What Questions to Ask**

You have two options in determining what questions to ask on your survey. You can develop the questions yourself, or you can use questions that have already been developed by a reliable external source.
For example, The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid (CMS) has developed a CAHPS (Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems) Visit Survey and a CAHPS 12-Month Survey that asks patients to report on their experiences with a clinician and office staff during a 12-month period.

One advantage of using questions developed by an external source is that you may be able to “kill two birds with one stone.”

For example, if you are a Patient Centered Medical Home (PCMH) practice, you can meet NCQA (National Committee for Quality Assurance) reporting requirements by using the online CAHPS survey. Some specialty societies endorse the use of particular patient satisfaction surveys as a way to satisfy maintenance of board certification requirements.

**Keep Survey Questions Simple**

If you develop your own survey questions, keep the language plain and simple.

Patients prefer multiple choice or rating questions that allow them to rank an aspect of your service from 1 (Not acceptable) to 5 (Exceeded expectations). Although you can offer patients the opportunity to write specific comments, avoid questions that require long, written explanations.

**Remember to Translate**

If your practice provides care to non-English-speaking patients, make sure that the patient satisfaction survey is available in languages that patients understand.

The CAHPS surveys mentioned above are available in English and Spanish, and you can get help in translating the surveys into other languages. If you develop your own survey questions, collaborate with interpreters in your community.

**Test Your Patient Satisfaction Survey**

If you develop your own patient satisfaction survey, test your instrument with friends and colleagues to make sure they can understand and respond to every question. Make changes before administering the survey to patients.

**Consider Outsourcing to a Company that Specializes in Patient Surveys**

The most effective way to use patient satisfaction surveys is to integrate them into practice operations and administer them on an ongoing basis. The task takes time, and you may want to minimize staff time spent on this task by outsourcing the survey function to an external company.

For example, Dr. Score, (drscore.com), founded in 2003, is a leading provider of online surveys for medical practices and outpatient clinics throughout the United States. The company serves practices of all sizes, ranging from solo practice providers to one of the largest health care groups in the country. You have a choice of the type of package you purchase, and if you’re not sure what you want, you can start with the free basic option.

Although not dedicated to the health care sector, SurveyMonkey (surveymonkey.com) offers similar services. Still another option is Avatar International L.L.C. (avatarsolutions.com), which has partnered with the American Academy of Family Practice (AAFP). The office staff gives each patient an access code for the online survey. Survey results are available in real-time, and there is a comparison with other practices throughout the country.

**Review the Results Regularly**

It’s one thing to conduct a patient satisfaction survey. It’s another to regularly review the results about your practice and make appropriate improvements.

If you have opted to work with an external survey company, you’ll have access not only to results about your own practice, but also to benchmark information from other medical practices throughout the country. Use both kinds of information to identify problems and make changes.