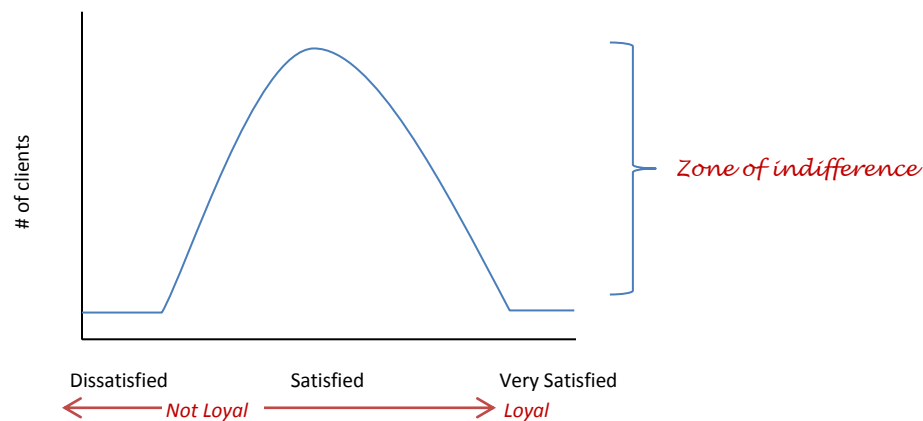




## Internal Marketing

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Let's start with a diagram of where the majority of your clients sit on the "loyalty scale", also known as client satisfaction, and why continuous internal marketing is critical to the future of your business.



Most of your clients fall into what is described as the *zone of indifference*. What that means is when a client comes to you and gets **what they expect to get**, they will be indifferent to your practice. If their experience is *less than what they expect*, they will be dissatisfied and may or may not return. However, if their experience was *more than they expected*, they will be very satisfied and on their way to becoming loyal clients.... If, and this is a big if..... *that exceptional experience is repeated at every single appointment*.

**Internal marketing is all about managing every single client experience by making it exceptional.**

In a service industry like healthcare the "product" is the veterinarian and the support staff and the culture that has become your practice. It is your culture that dictates your client experience.

How is a culture developed? Usually in one of two ways:

1. You design it by establishing service and quality of care expectations and then training, training, training.
2. It evolves by default.

Unfortunately, in most practices, the culture evolves naturally by default. I say unfortunately because that evolution is typically the result of the influence of the strongest personality on your staff. Notice that I did not say the most productive or professional or courteous person on your staff; or did I say the owner or practice manager. The *strongest personality* is generally accepted as the leader, even if that is not the role they hold.

Consider this: Have you ever had an employee who was technically competent but generally high maintenance with regard to interpersonal issues between other staff and even clients? You know the one, the person who will begin each sentence with “We think....” or “Everybody says....” or is the person who makes sure they get heard at every staff meeting, often dominating the conversation. But, because you valued their perceived technical competence over their “soft” skills you kept them around longer than you should have (or you still have them on staff). Finally, one day you had had enough and let them go. Remember the lightness that came over the entire practice? Everybody seemed to laugh a little more and get along better?

That’s the effect a strong and negative or unhappy personality will have on the culture of your practice. In fact, *it becomes the culture of your practice* without you even being aware of it. Your practice culture should never evolve by accident. And yet, I see it all the time.

**Your internal marketing is your practice culture and it is only as good as the weakest link.**

The next time you are struggling with whether or not to let a marginal employee go, especially if your concerns are about poor interpersonal skills, think about how that is affecting your ability to attract new clients and retain current ones. Is that the image you want for your business?

Allow only your very best staff to interact with clients, vendors, contract employees or guests... ever. That means every possible form of communication that could come from your clinic including: in person, on the phone, or by email. Remember that everybody is a potential client or can influence a potential client. A poor experience will go a long way while a good one barely makes a blip on the screen.. that’s why it’s important to assure every client experience is exceptional every time. Repetition is the key. An exceptional experience should never be a hit or miss proposition.

**Your clients will judge what they can’t see by what they can see.** The quality of your medicine will be determined by each client’s experience that is shaped first and foremost by the culture and then by the appearance of your practice that includes things like:

- Your landscaping. Is it neat and maintained?
- The outside appearance of your building. Do you need to repaint or patch?
- *Every little thing about your waiting room and exam rooms* including: the practice brochures (are they current and professional), client education handouts (do they all come from a supplier or have you developed your own brand); furniture; the magazines you have out; all the painted surfaces; are there any unpleasant odors?
- Are all staff professionally dressed and wearing name tags?

The most important and effective marketing you can do for your practice is to manage the client experience. Before you spend another dime on newspaper advertising, direct mail pieces or any other form of external marketing, make sure every client experience is exceptional. How will you know? Monitor how many times each day you or your staff hear a client say something like: “WOW, your staff is great. I can always count on that, no matter what.” If you aren’t hearing something like this every day, you are not doing enough. It is the only way to move clients from the zone of indifference to loyal customers. Loyal customers don’t leave, everyone else does.

Here are some tips to help develop or improve your internal marketing:

- Establish customer service expectations for all staff. *Talk about them at every staff meeting by making it a standing agenda item.* Share examples where things could have gone better.
- Have guests from other businesses attend staff meetings to discuss examples of exceptional customer service or have staff describe personal experiences of exceptional customer service. How can you incorporate those experiences into your practice?
- Discuss the “value chain” of a typical client experience from the initial phone call to check out after the visit. Find new and unexpected opportunities to exceed client expectations. Remember, the zone of indifference is populated by all those clients whose expectations were met. *You must exceed their expectations every time.*
- Make converting phone shoppers to clients a priority. Work on the conversion skills of the individuals who answer your phones.
- Improve your interviewing skills so you reduce the frequency of poor hiring decisions.
- Clean up the outside of your building.
- Imagine you are staging your building to sell and every client, vendor or guest who enters is a prospective buyer. Look around, would they buy what they see?