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# Establishing a Central Service/ Sterile Processing Department Public Relation Plan Through Awareness, Credibility and Trust

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain the importance of establishing communication channels with stakeholders
2. Describe the elements for effective public relations
3. Identify methods to raise awareness and build credibility

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**C**ENTRAL SERVICE/STERILE PROCESSING (CS/SP) LEADERS SHOULD ask how they would characterize their department's reputation amongst its stakeholders. "Stakeholder," in this case, is synonymous with "customer." A stakeholder represents all individuals affected by device processing and other services performed by the CS/SP department.

Executives know all too well the importance of their company's reputation. Firms with strong positive reputations attract better people because they are perceived as providing more value. Their customers are also more loyal and use a broader range of products and services. Most companies, however, do an inadequate job of managing their reputation in general and the risks to their reputation, in particular. They tend to focus their energy on handling threats to their reputation that have already surfaced. This is not risk management; it is crisis management – a reactive approach whose purpose is to limit the damage.

Over the years, device processing events that have played out in the news have called into question the quality of service being provided by CS/SP professionals. Departmental leaders should ask the following questions:

- What is the working environment in the department and healthcare organization?
- Are the work environment and customers being taken for granted?
- How do stakeholders view the CS/SP department (e.g., is the department criticized for non-conformities or is there an ongoing appreciation for the quality of products and services being delivered?)?
- Is the department's reputation held to the few errors made or does the

department have healthy, transparent communication with customers/stakeholders?

CS/SP leaders have a stake in the business of device processing and it is time for them to take notice.

## OBJECTIVE 1: EXPLAIN THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION CHANNELS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

In June 2017, the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI) unveiled the new standard, ANSI/AAMI ST90 *Processing of health care products – Quality management systems for processing in health care facilities*. The document is intended



for personnel in device processing areas, such as Sterile Processing, and specifies a minimum requirement for a quality management system (QMS) in a healthcare organization to effectively, efficiently and consistently process medical devices to prevent adverse patient events and non-manufacturer related device failures.<sup>1</sup> Section 8 of the standard speaks to measurement, analysis and improvement. One of the performance measurements of the QMS is the need to monitor information relating to customer perception as to whether the department has met customer requirements. There is flexibility to decide which methods will be used to collect this information; however, those methods must be established.

## MEETING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

CS/SP leaders should take time to identify all stakeholders and, more importantly, understand their expectations for the products and services their department provides. Customer satisfaction begins with transparent communication. There are aspects of advertising, marketing and public relations that contribute to customer satisfaction.

Marketing involves understanding who their customers and or stakeholders are and what specifications for products or services are expected. Put another way, marketing is a vehicle for convincing stakeholders that the right product is available for them.

Advertising is the process of making one's products and services known to the marketplace (in this case, the healthcare organization). For the CS/SP department, advertising essentially spreads the word about what the department has to offer.

Public relations and advertising are similar in concept: both are designed to raise awareness of the department or product in a positive manner. Another

similarity is that, in both cases, the department will often target its message toward a particular audience with particular interests (e.g., to surgeons, the surgical team, specific services, etc.).

## REPUTATION REALITY GAP

Effectively managing reputational risk begins with recognizing that reputation is a matter of perception. How do stakeholders perceive the CS/SP department and the work being done there? A department's overall reputation is a function of its reputation among its various stakeholders (e.g., customers, suppliers, employees, regulators, surveyors, nongovernmental organizations) in specific categories (e.g., product quality, employee relations, customer service, intellectual capital, financial performance and handling of environmental issues). Development of trust narrows the gap and encourages a better, more productive working team.

Changing beliefs and expectations of stakeholders are another major determinant of reputational risk. When expectations shift and the department's character stays the same, the reputation-reality gap widens and risks increase. Without transparent communication, one can easily miss the needs of stakeholders – and when this happens, perception of poor service becomes more likely and risks increase. Leaders should start with small wins to build success and trust with stakeholders; when achievements are communicated and realized, negative perception will gradually fade.

## REPAIR, REBUILD, RECUPERATE

Reputation is a fundamental quality of every business; what stakeholders believe about it, expect from it and say about it to others resonates and drills down to each department supporting the organization.

Reputation management can be condensed into three main tactics: repair,

rebuild and recuperate.

**Repair** – If the department requires reputation remediation, the first step is to repair some of the damage. This should be handled in a concerted, thoughtful and aggressive manner. Changing the reputation can be difficult, but it is not impossible.<sup>2</sup>

**Rebuild** – Once initial fires are dampened, the next step is to rebuild reputation. If a leader wants others to think differently about their department, then it is vital to inform key people what the department is doing to improve, and also ask for additional input, as needed.

**Recuperate** – Lastly, to overcome the negatives, it is important to optimize a regular response and constant monitoring to verify changes are continually improving. Don't make stakeholders guess the improvements that are trying to be made – tell them.<sup>2</sup>

## OBJECTIVE 2: DESCRIBE THE ELEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS

Though the conventional value of public relations within an organization is to build relationships with the media and industry influencer communities that generate favorable coverage, the CS/SP department will also benefit from public relations approaches within the healthcare organization.

How a department/service provider communicates with its stakeholders helps the department succeed on the reputation management continuum; this occurs by building awareness, growing credibility, solidifying trust and influencing audience behavior.

Key components of reputation management are credibility and trust. The better a department's reputation, the greater the number of satisfied



stakeholders. Reputations are often created by word-of-mouth praise or dissatisfaction. Leaders should aim to stay knowledgeable about what is being said about the department, when such conversations take place, and by whom.

A number of key activities comprise successful public relations, including developing solid positioning and messaging, targeting the right audiences and building relationships. Practicing public relations means following basic principles that develop a positive reputation for the department. Leaders should never deceive a stakeholder with any information being released. A lie will be uncovered and the resulting fallout from deceit can be worse than the issue one tried to cover. It is critical to present the facts in a way that sheds as much positive light on the department as possible.

Every piece of public relations material that comes from the facility should have contact information that includes contact name, phone number, email address and mailing address. Providing this information allows stakeholders to easily follow up on the information provided. Prior to releasing information, it is wise to target audiences that will likely have the greatest interest in the press release or marketing data. Including a pertinent photo or image with a press release can give stakeholder a visual cue that will either add emphasis to the message or clarify any potential confusion that the message may cause.

A public relations professional's best allies are journalists. Good media relations will not only get press releases printed in places where the stakeholder will see them, but they can also result in personal interviews that will gain the CS/SP department even more exposure. CS/SP leaders should understand all the public relations tools at their disposal and work closely with the facility's public

relations professionals to ensure messages are being disseminated most effectively (press releases, speeches, personal interviews, seminars, web broadcasts, and direct mail pieces are just some of the tools public relations professionals can use to reach the target audience). Timing of some public relations pieces can be scheduled for release well in advance.

*Note: Before any information is released, it should be thoroughly vetted and carefully fact checked for accuracy.*

### OBJECTIVE 3: IDENTIFY METHODS TO RAISE AWARENESS AND BUILD CREDIBILITY

Which communication vehicles exist and are available to promote the CS/SP team and the great work being done? What events are being planned for Central Service Week, GI Nurses and Associates Week and others? How is education provided to stakeholders and first-time patients and hospital visitors? Each of these questions should be assessed by CS/SP leaders.

One way to effectively communicate the importance of the CS/SP profession is by reaching out to the city's mayor to request a Day of Proclamation. Reaching out to the state's Governor during Central Service Week is another important way to promote the profession – and leaders can even write their state's congressman and representatives to further drive momentum for the profession, department and facility. *Note: IAHCSSM's Government Affairs Director sends IAHCSSM members action alerts via email to help them quickly and easily promote the profession with elected officials and local newspaper editors.*

### THIRD-PARTY PRAISE VS. SELF-PROMOTION

Kind words from a well-respected third-party source, such as an industry influencer, has a multiplying effect that is

superior to all other forms of marketing. Third-party praise can come in the way of industry recognition, such as awards presented by associations or publications. When media and industry influencers project a department's key messages (through an award, article, report, speech, blog post, tweet, etc.) that becomes the ultimate word-of-mouth marketing.

It is important to note that self-promotion through conversation and social media content sharing is not as effective as having third parties positively talk about the department or being willing to share content about the department with their social media networks.

Because reputation is perception, perception must be measured. This argues for the assessment of reputation in multiple areas -- in ways that are contextual, objective and, if possible, quantitative.

The following questions need to be addressed:

- What is the department's reputation in each area of product quality, financial performance and employee relations?
- How do these reputations compare with the reputations of other healthcare organizations in the region?

### CUSTOMER-BUILDING BASICS

Departmental leaders should never become complacent about the products and services being offered. The CS/SP department should operate like a business; a significant part of that business is customer loyalty and an ongoing desire to provide the very best products and services.

Great Sterile Processing departments can be a leverage for Human Resource recruitment efforts and help attract new professional personnel such as surgeons, physicians and nurses who can help increase the healthcare organization's



revenue stream. Of course, loyalty and word-of-mouth praise are reputation builders that also help attract experienced and talented device reprocessing technicians.

Implementing QMS requirements, such as ANSI/AAMI ST90, will help the CS/SP department reach the next level of customer satisfaction and improve the department's reputation.

Effective communication is also at the heart of exemplary customer service. Communication is defined as the exchange of information and understanding between two or more people or groups. Note the emphasis on exchange and understanding. Without understanding between sender and receiver concerning the message, there is no communication; therefore, communication must be logical, rational and persuasive.

There is strong relationship between good communication and successful quality implementation. Although communication has always been a key requirement of good management, it is even more important in the implementation of total quality management.

The essence of changing attitudes is to gain acceptance for the need to change; for this to happen it is essential to provide relevant information, convey good practices and generate interest, ideas and awareness through excellent communication practices. This change will require direct and clear communication from top management to all staff and employees. Everyone will need to know their roles in understanding processes and improving their performance. An excellent way to accomplish this first step is to issue a total quality message that clearly states top management's commitment to quality and outlines the role everyone must play; this can be in the form of a quality

policy or a specific statement about the department's intention to integrate quality into the business operations of device processing.<sup>3</sup>

### MANAGING REPUTATIONAL RISK

Understanding the factors that determine reputational risk enables a department to take action to address them. The primary challenge is focus – recognizing that reputational risk is a distinct category of risk and then giving an individual unambiguous responsibility for managing it. This person can then identify all the parts of the department whose activities can affect or pose risks to its overall reputation. From there, this dedicated person can work to enhance the coordination among the department's functions and units. Any improvements in decision making will undoubtedly result in a better-run department.

### CONCLUSION

Medical device processing requires attention to detail and the full immersion of one's concentration. Keeping all stakeholders current and up to date on information pertaining to their product and services (including changes to industry guidelines and recommended practice) is equally important of a leader's time.

Leaders must identify stakeholders, communicate with them regularly and document correspondence. Getting started is easy, but understanding and measuring agreed-upon metrics is a true commitment to quality and satisfaction. Continual improvement should be the fabric and culture of the department; when leaders take time to do it right, their team's reputation and customer satisfaction will result. ©

### REFERENCES

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