



Everything Speaks

■ LOU ELLEN HORWITZ, MA

I bet you have a really good-looking waiting room—comfortable chairs, recent magazines, maybe even a television.

I was in an urgent care center about a year ago, with a fine waiting room. Good signage, nice chairs, little area for the kids with toys. But step through the door toward the exam rooms, and there was equipment in the hallways, clinical stations covered with papers, handwritten labels taped on cabinets....

About two months ago, I called another center at about 11 in the morning. I got a recorded message with no way to talk to a person or leave a message. It turns out they didn't open until 3 p.m.; the message said that, but I didn't hear it.

Finally, a few days ago I answered an incoming call from a member to our office. The first thing that member said to me was, "Thanks for taking my call."

Have our collective expectations gotten so low that a member is now surprised when someone at their association will talk to them immediately?

All of these examples are about one thing: Everything you do, everything you say, everything you *don't* say, what your clinic looks like, how your staff behaves, the collection of signs on your wall about what insurance you accept and don't...*all* of that says something. Everything speaks. Some of it is obvious, but most of it is completely under our radar.

Don't stop reading and start looking around your clinic, though. You won't see most of it. Sure, that faded sign with the tattered Scotch tape may scream out at you to be refreshed, but what you most likely need is an outside opinion.

Happily, although there are expert "mystery shoppers" out there, you can gain a tremendous amount of perspective from bringing in free consultants (also known as friends). You will need to pick your most honest friend if you are looking for genuine, unabashed feedback. Tell them what you are trying to accomplish: to see your clinic through the customer's eyes.



Lou Ellen Horwitz is executive director of the Urgent Care Association of America. She may be contacted at lorwitz@ucaoa.org.

It is probably best that you aren't there for the visit, so you will learn what you really need to know. What is the experience of visiting your clinic *saying*?

Then comes the fun part of acting on what you learn. Odds are you will have some "low-hanging fruit" that you can deal with easily, and some more challenging aspects that will take considerable effort. Some things will be regulatory and unchangeable, but they are still worth examining in their presentation.

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This is a great time for a staff-wide effort, as well. When you know what is being "said" by your clinic that you want to change, get the people who are closest to the patient involved. They will help you come up with the best answers.

We've been talking about this concept in our own office, and it's been an interesting experience for us. I hope it will be for you, too, and that it will help each of your clinics continue to improve the urgent care experience for the community you all serve. Together, those efforts will improve the urgent care experience across the nation.

Looking forward to seeing many of you in a few months in Las Vegas. Remember that early registration ends December 31!

[*Postscript*: I wish I could claim credit for the title of this article, "Everything Speaks"—it is such a simple distillation of an idea—but I can't. It belongs to a consultant named Karen Baird, whom I heard speak in October, and she should get the credit.] ■