Why Urgent Care Needs More Controllers, Fewer Empathizers

Urgent message: The rise of self-service technologies means that when patients actually do need to interact with frontline staff to resolve a service issue, their more complicated issues, more stringent demands, and higher expectations require an opinionated and outspoken "controller" personality type to take control of the situation.

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As urgent care relies on positive of word-of-mouth to drive new and repeat visits, a center not only must deliver an exceptional patient experience, but also resolve complaints and grievances quickly and satisfactorily. Since most problem resolution falls on the customer-facing staff, a question for urgent care operators is, "Which employee personality type is most effective at handling patient grievances—the one urgent care operators should target, hire, and train most often?"

The reflexive answer might be the employee who demonstrates empathy—the thinking being that an aggrieved patient or customer is likely to respond favorably to a representative who shows they understand their feelings. However, workplace studies and the accompanying data suggest that the reality is quite the opposite. Take-charge "controller" types have, surprisingly, shown to be the most adept at quickly and effectively resolving customer complaints.

So, what is a "controller," what makes them so effective at fixing customer issues, and how should an urgent care operator go about training and staffing controllers going forward?

Self-Care and Complex Customer Issues

Across industries, the rise of self-service technologies (eg, apps, kiosks) has allowed customers to increasingly handle low-complexity issues themselves without the need for a live-agent interaction—an option they've shown to prefer. This concept of shifting rote work from paid employees to customers (the lowest cost resource) is called *functional shifting*. And although increased appli-

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cation of self-directed service channels has steadily reduced customer service costs, the consequence has been a rise in live customer interactions involving complex issues—along with a rise in frustrated customers.

Why are customers so frustrated? Because expectations have shifted, such that when they do interact with reps, aggrieved customers expect a knowledgeable and efficient advocate, with a solution at the ready. Unfortunately, companies continually underinvest in talented frontline reps who can effectively navigate complex customer problems, resulting in stressful, expensive, and reputation-damaging remediation attempts.

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Self-service across industries has resulted in reduced costs, but increased numbers of frustrated customers with complex issues. Workplace studies prove conclusively that controllers—with their ability to think on their feet, diagnose issues quickly, and take charge of the customer interaction—outpace other customer reps across a number of key performance and quality metrics.

In short, today's reps remain woefully unequipped to handle live interactions, leaving outraged customers little recourse except to share their negative experiences through social media.

How Controllers Solve Problems

CEB, a global best practice insights and technology consultancy, at the behest of their struggling client companies, set out to discover the optimal service representative profile for remediating complex customer issues. Through diligent research, CEB identified seven distinct customer service rep profiles:[1]

- Empathizers – Great listeners and empathizers
- Accommodators – Enjoy offering discounts and refunds
- Controllers – Opinionated and outspoken; tend to take control of the interaction
- Rocks – Optimistic and unflappable; don't take things personally
- Hard workers – Sticklers for the rules; detail-oriented
- Innovators – Like improving processes and procedures; create novel ideas and options
- Competitors – Want to win and outperform colleagues; like to influence others' points of view

Naturally, managers favor empathizers, and have tended to staff them most often. The hard data, however—gathered through global, cross-industry studies of nearly 1,500 reps—showed that controllers, the least favored, scored the highest across key performance management, customer service, and productivity metrics.

Overall, controllers do the best job of making the service interaction as quick and effortless as possible.

Controllers: A Snapshot

Why are controllers the least favored by managers, but the most effective? Controllers have strong personalities, are opinionated, and are confident in their knowledge and expertise. They're driven to deliver fast and easy resolutions, and have little problem "going off script" if they feel the solution requires it. They can also quickly "triage" a problem, discern a customer's personality, and evaluate the context of the interaction. They then use the information to guide the customer to their customized solution. To a controller, it's all about arriving at the simplest and easiest resolution, regardless of the path they take to get there. And to a frustrated customer who has already spent time trying to resolve the issue, the candid, off-script, take-charge nature of the controller is more than a welcome respite—it's a saving grace.

Hiring and Training Controllers in Urgent Care

Despite the best intentions, even the most dedicated urgent care center will occasionally get an aggrieved patient. Whether it's an insurance/billing/copay mix-up, a modesty complaint, or a miscommunication during a provider-patient interaction, complex patient issues are sure to arise at some point. So, knowing that controllers handle problem resolution most effectively, how can an operator identify controllers among hiring candidates, as well as train existing employees to adopt controller-like attitudes and behaviors?

To attract controllers, pay heed to your job application messaging. Controllers tend to be interested in job listings that emphasize things like:

- Flexibility to express their personality
- Taking initiative
- Owning customer issues
- Being a self-starter
- The ability to think on their feet

By contrast, controllers are turned off by outdated job listings that suggest rigid guidelines, strict procedures, and adherence to inflexible standards. Avoid these types of descriptors.

Training existing staff to be more controller-like also requires a shift in training methodology. The typical

According to the January 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article "Kick-ass Customer Service":[1] There are seven types of customer service representatives with distinct personalities and approaches to the job. Companies typically don't hire the right personality types as frontline/customer service representatives. Companies often fail to equip frontline reps to handle increasingly complex job challenges. A new approach to hiring, as well as training, is needed to help all types of reps learn to be "controllers." Company culture should value and reward "controller behaviors."

teachings of product knowledge and rote processes, for example, must give way to teaching listening techniques and frameworks that mimic a controller's naturally tendency to quickly diagnose a customer's primary issue and arrive at a quick, effective solution. Additionally, supplemental on-the-job, manager-led training can help reps retain and master controller techniques better over time.

"Urgent care must work to develop a 'controller-friendly' customer service culture that favors flexibility over rigidity, and assertiveness over conforming to outdated norms."

effective resolutions possible—which helps garner highly coveted, positive word-of-mouth. Additionally, urgent care must work to develop a "controller-friendly" customer service culture that favors and rewards flexibility over rigidity, and assertiveness over conforming to outdated norms. Such a shift can help create an environment that allows controllers to flourish, and do what they do best—solve problems. ■

Conclusion

Urgent care centers will inevitably have patients with complex issues they can't resolve on their own. Hence, centers should make a concerted effort to recruit, hire, and train controllers in service of the quickest and most

Reference
1. Dixon M, Ponomareff L, Turner S, DeLisi R. Kick-ass customer service. *Harvard Bus Rev*. January–February 2017. Available at: https://hbr.org/2017/01/ kick-ass-customer-service. Accessed March 26, 2017.

Summary

- Data from workplace studies suggest that staff with take-charge, "controller" personalities are better suited for resolving customer complaints quickly and effectively.

- Controllers are most likely to be *drawn to* job listings that stress:
  - Flexibility to express their personality
  - Taking initiative
  - Owning customer issues
  - Being a self-starter
  - The ability to think on their feet

- Controllers are most likely to be *put off by* job listings that stress:
  - Adherence to rigid guidelines
  - Strict procedures
  - Inflexible standards

- Training existing staff to be more controller-like is possible, but requires methodologies that focus on listening techniques and frameworks that are in step with the controller's affinity for diagnosing the primary issue and arriving at an effective solution quickly.