



DON'T WAIT ON WAITING ROOM

7

ways to reinvent hospital waiting rooms *(and why they should be redone)

Hospital administrators should make a periodic effort to visit the waiting rooms in their facilities. In contrast to the nice one inside the front door, which has been spruced up to make a good first impression, the waiting areas outside the imaging suites, emergency room, outpatient surgery area and all other departments are likely to be square rooms with off-white walls, no windows, 2-by-4 fluorescent ceiling lighting fixtures, and faded tile floors with mismatched, uncomfortable chairs lining the walls forcing everyone to look at each other.

Administrators familiar with the research reports about a hospital environment's effect on healing may have started to upgrade their facilities. However, it is important to avoid the mistake many other administrators make — overlooking the waiting rooms. The front lobby and waiting area can serve as inspiration for these small waiting rooms, which have the same ability to make patients and family as comfortable as possible, help them relax and make a good impression on them.

1

Waiting areas in customer-centered industries

Airline customer clubs set up at major airports, such as the Delta Sky Club and American Airline's Admirals Club, really are just another type of waiting area, but they are so nice that people pay money to wait in them. They feature comfortable furniture, lush carpets, attractive wall treatments, nooks with televisions, power and Internet connections for laptops, snack bars, soft music and much more.

Another cue administrators would do well to take from the hospitality industry is the replacement of the receptionist with a concierge. When a patient arrives, the concierge could greet the patient and take his or her name and insurance information. The concierge might also estimate the length of the wait, invite the patient to relax in the waiting room, or even set patients free to move about the facility as they wish with a small vibrating alarm, such as restaurants use to call guests when their table is ready. An approach like this would give patients the latitude to get something to eat in the cafeteria or browse the gift shop.

The imaging department waiting room at St. Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

PETER SELLAR

UPGRADES

2 Furniture versus seating

Chairs placed around a room's perimeter, as in most hospital waiting rooms, tend to be the same size — and people on one side of the room must stare at strangers on the other. To avoid this, rooms can be designed to use furniture of different scales in long rectangular spaces instead of square rooms. However, some patients should have the option of seating themselves along the walls, such as those who use wheelchairs. Seating them in the middle of the room only puts them on display. To accommodate these multiple needs, waiting areas may be subdivided into one or more small living rooms, which can be laid out with easy chairs, sofas and tables. Some can even be placed inside nooks or alcoves.

Traditional 2-by-4 fluorescent ceiling lights should be avoided. Bright lights that throw off 50 foot-candles are appropriate in other areas of the hospital where the light is necessary to work; but in a hospitality environment, it does not complement one's physical appearance — it actually makes visitors look more ill than they are. Conversely, a church may use light levels of 3 to 5 foot-candles, which is an appropriate level for casual reading. In a waiting room, appropriate lighting can be achieved with a much more non-institutional feel with floor lamps, table lamps and wall sconces.

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ANTON GRASSL

A waiting room in the Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Mass.

3 Enjoying the outdoors — with large windows

Pleasant views of nature make people feel better. So does natural light. In fact, natural light adjusts slightly as time passes, working with human circadian rhythms. Therefore, a large window or windows with interesting natural views should be included in every waiting room.

Some waiting rooms easily will accommodate windows. Others don't, but it can be done. In airports, terminals are long waiting rooms divided by gates. In

hospitals, it is possible to line up several departments along one side of the building. Their waiting areas can be set against the front walls, as in an airport, looking through the central space and out the windows on the other side.

If it is impossible to find space that can accommodate windows, alternatives may include large paintings or photographs that depict nature but are framed like windows. It also is possible to buy timers that mimic daylight and circadian rhythms or even use wall finishes such as glass that provide a luminous quality.



The West Campus Clinic Library at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston, Mass.

6 Design accents

In many hospital waiting areas, fabrics and flooring were chosen with durability in mind, resulting in color and pattern selections that either are dull or tired looking. Interior designers can find equally appropriate flooring and fabrics with understated patterns, adding detail to the space so that the longer patients must wait, the more they will appreciate the designs around them. For example, fabric patterns might complement the artwork on the walls. People enjoy finding subtle connections they didn't notice at first.

7 Sensory Input

In Delta's Sky Club, music plays softly in the background, and a light aroma of food preparation — something like cookies in the oven — is often detectable. Other background noises, such as a fountain or an imperceptible white noise system, can help mask conversations and preserve a sense of privacy, a service which greatly would improve patients' and visitors' experience of hospital waiting areas where conversations often tend to be particularly personal.

4 Ambience

Every waiting room needs something unexpected to stir curiosity and occupy the minds of people who may be worried or afraid of what they face. Pediatric spaces often have small aquariums with unusual fish; this could work in any waiting room. So could a fireplace. It also may be possible to replicate interesting exhibits from local museums, as long as appropriate credit is given.

5 Multimedia functionality

Many waiting rooms have a television blaring in the corner, but not everyone wants to watch television. Of those who do, chances are good that none of them wants to watch the program that is playing. A television may be located in an alcove for interested patients to control, its placement limiting its impact on the entire waiting area. Depending on the room's size, it may be advisable to install more than one. For patients or visitors who wish to use laptop computers while they wait, other alcoves can provide outlets. Laptop users also should be allowed access to the Internet via a free and secure Wi-Fi connection.



A waiting room in the Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Mass.

The benefits outweigh the costs

All of these suggestions do add up to a cost that is higher than that of a run-of-the-mill waiting room. It takes creativity and effort to locate waiting rooms on outside walls. Furnishings will cost more, as will the flooring, wall treatments and lighting.

But a waiting room renovation will not add

significantly to the cost of a department renovation. If a department overhaul costs \$10 million, for example, dressing up the waiting room might cost just \$50,000. It's the intangible benefits that come into play. For example, what these patients communicate to others about their pleasant waiting experience at a hospital will enhance the hospital's image in the community. A

comfortable waiting room that helps make patients feel better, even if only temporarily, is worth the investment. After all, they are the customers.

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