

‘Know Your Customer’ Lunches Build Relationships, Goodwill

Jill Schlabig Williams

Subject: Children’s Medical Center in Dallas

Location: Dallas, TX

Size: 483-bed private, nonprofit children’s hospital, one of the largest pediatric healthcare providers in the nation

Staff: 13-person biomedical engineering department

The biomed department at Children’s Medical Center in Dallas cooked up a creative way to build relationships with customers. Once a month for the last several years, staffers have treated representatives from other hospital departments to a formal luncheon, complete with plated lunches, using linens, china and silverware. What did they get in return? A better understanding of customers, a chance to talk through interdepartmental issues, a feeling of appreciation for the biomed staff, and a strong foundation for personal relationships throughout the hospital that has heightened the department’s profile, respect, and service. While budget constraints have suspended the lunches for now, the concept offers some food for thought.

Challenge

“When I came on board at Children’s as manager of biomedical engineering in 2000, we had challenges in regard to staffing, and some clinical departments had concerns with response times and turnaround with medical equipment,” says Ron Greenwalt.

Greenwalt first came up with the idea of customer lunches in the early 1990s when he joined ARAMARK (then ServiceMaster) and managed medical equipment at a New Mexico hospital. That department conducted annual customer satisfaction surveys which always included two key questions: “Do you know what we do?” and “Do you think we know what you do?”

“The answers to those questions were always ‘no,’ ” Greenwalt says. “We wanted to encourage better com-



The biomedical engineering staff at Children’s Medical Center in Dallas regularly hosts customer lunches to build relationships throughout the hospital.

munication on both sides, so we held a mini-open house and invited another department to come.” From there, another manager suggested buying lunch for customers as part of a formal meeting. Greenwalt brought the concept with him when ARAMARK took over as the outsourced manager of the in-house biomedical engineering function at Children’s Dallas. He has used it to strengthen the department’s standing in the hospital.

Solution

Greenwalt and his team first started at the top, inviting hospital vice presidents and department directors to lunch to pave the way for future lunches with managers and supervisors. “They were overwhelmingly encouraging,” he says.

At first the aim was to hold a biomed department meeting and then invite guests—customers—from outside the department who would join them for sandwiches and make a formal presentation about their department. Greenwalt quickly learned that an informal approach was better. Participants didn’t feel like they were at another rigid committee meeting.

“We wanted to encourage more open discussions around the table and allow time to build relationships, so we got rid of the formal presentations and stepped up the atmosphere by offering a plated lunch, nice silverware, and iced tea in glassware.”

Greenwalt typically opens the lunches by introducing himself and explaining the concept. He welcomes guests to talk about business, but encourages them to relax, interact, and enjoy themselves with the goal of making personal connections.

“We do around-the-table introductions, with everyone telling a little about themselves and what they do in their department,” says Greenwalt. “It is enlightening to see how impressed everyone is [by] what the other department does. It is not uncommon to discover that many clinicians have very little comprehension of the complexity surrounding the service of medical equipment. This often sparks interest and questions about what it takes to be a biomed, which makes for some very proud moments for our staff while explaining their backgrounds.”

The guest list often is determined by department needs. “If a customer is having a difficult time with an issue related to our department, we will invite them to join us for lunch,” he says. “We’ve never been turned down. At these lunches, all the disgruntled feelings disappear. It’s a great way to break the ice and patch up bruised egos.”

The surgery department was one customer that had concerns about response times. Greenwalt invited his surgery colleagues to a lunch to discuss the problems. He then committed to hiring a technician dedicated to servicing equipment in the operating rooms.

Greenwalt also focuses on new faces in the hospital, inviting new managers or clinicians to attend. He once invited the sales and service team from a vendor that was installing a new monitoring system throughout the hospital so the staffs could meet one another, learn expectations, and build relationships.

“After the meetings, I always ask folks to tell us if they thought the lunch was a good use of their time. They always say that the food was good, but that it was even better to have the opportunity to get to know each other,” he says.

Joy Winand, now a project manager within the hospital, was first invited to a lunch as an intern. She says she gained “a clearer role of the equipment management function. “[Greenwalt’s] staff is incredible, and the lunches gave me a better appreciation of all they do.”

Greenwalt annually budgets \$3,000 for the lunches, which typically last about two hours and are catered by Sodexo, which provides food and catering services at Children’s Dallas.

“ At these lunches, all the disgruntled feelings disappear. It’s a great way to break the ice and patch up bruised egos. —Ron Greenwalt



Results

“In the beginning, we initiated the concept to improve communication with our customers,” he says. “Today, after six years and almost 500 lunch guests, we still do it to improve communication with our customers. As many of us know, this can be a rather thankless job. To hear from customers every month, and to discover just how much they appreciate what we do for them daily, is very satisfying.”

While the lunches do require time and money, Greenwalt says the value far outweighs the cost. “Building up personal connections eases tensions and concerns, adds an element of personal attachment, and makes it easier for my team to visit the clinical areas,” says Greenwalt.

The lunches also are a way to recognize and reward biomed staffers for their hard work. Biomed team members frequently receive praise from Greenwalt and customers during the lunches.

“Over the years, in part because of relationships built at these lunches, we have added services, improved services, started a second shift, and dedicated technicians to areas such as the laboratory, cardiology, and surgery,” says Greenwalt. “We have renewed old acquaintances and, more importantly, made a lot of new friends.”

While the lunches were a casualty of budget restrictions in 2009, Greenwalt is determined to serve up the monthly get-togethers next year. “We’re hoping it will be back in the budget this year, but if it’s not, we’ll continue the outreach somehow.”

He recommends that other biomed departments launch a regular outreach effort. “If buying lunch for your staff and a few guests is outside your budget, set up a time to take your team to another department for a tour. Follow this up by inviting that department to yours for a tour. Provide simple refreshments and display some equipment in various stages of repair. You will be amazed at the response. People love to share what they do, and this is an excellent way to capitalize on making new friends and improving customer service.” ■

Jill Schlabig Williams is AAMI’s senior writer.