

HealthLeaders EXTRA!

The New CEO--Chief Experience Officer

By Anthony Cirillo, for HealthLeaders News, Mar. 28, 2007

Fast Company released its list of hot jobs for 2007. On the list is a position that might not be familiar to most: experience designer.

Most experience designers can be found in the retail industry, creating the essence and aura of a store. Their work goes far beyond just the look of a place; they make consumer experiences in which shoppers can immerse themselves. The American Girl doll stores in New York, LA and Chicago are obvious examples.

People travel up to six hours to visit the store in Chicago, spend four hours there and spend an average of \$255. American Girl's brand marketer notes that the stores try to deliver seriousness and sophistication that make girls feel respected and grown up.

In comparison, people are not exactly flocking to hospitals to have an experience. (Although I have heard of hospital dining options that were so good people routinely came in off the street for lunch.) As Fred Lee noted in his book *If Disney Ran Your Hospital*, it is all about the experience. Once at your facility, it is the overall experience that will bring consumers back again. And when friends, family or neighbors have healthcare needs, these consumers will tell them about their experience.

Do it yourself or hire the professionals?

There have been stories in the literature about hospitals addressing the experience component and the steps are well documented:

- Map the experience
- Identify points of interaction
- Conduct in-depth interviews with consumers to fill in experience gaps and understand expectations
- Determine service gaps
- Create work teams to determine how best to deliver the ideal experience

These intentions are good. But the tasks are usually left to work teams and marketing professionals whose jobs don't leave much free time to give this effort enough attention. To change an organization's culture to one that focuses on customer service takes full-time leadership. Further, hospitals work in silos. The consumer might be there for an outpatient test, a physician visit, surgery or as a visitor. All are separate and probably distinct and disjointed experiences.

The Chief Experience Officer

Every aspect of the organization needs to be graded and awarded based on delivering a great customer experience. Adding a chief experience officer does not diminish this, but rather unifies it to external marketing and brand extensions.

Diagnose the need.

Before you call the search agencies, be clear as an organization that the experiential aspect of the business is vitally important and directly ties to the goals and objectives of the organization. If the chief executive is intent on instituting changes and will hold all executives accountable, then an experience officer can help as a change agent. But if the plan is to make the experience officer solely responsible, then reconsider having this position. An experience officer looks at the customer from the enterprise perspective and cannot influence change without participation and commitment from key senior leaders.

Obtain buy-in.

If you have been actively fostering a culture of great experience then it will be a smooth transition to look at this as a next step in the process. As with any new position, it will be viewed as an opportunity by some--but a threat to others.

Look at the big picture.

The education and expectations of the consumer are increasing. While considering quality and satisfaction data when making choices, they also look at experiences. They talk to others. And they surf online. Hospital experiences, like Amazon book reviews, will start to be documented in narratives on the Internet. This is the brave new world of hospital selection. All else being equal, it's the experience. Take note of how other industries reacted to consumer information swapping.

Define the position and competencies.

There are "gurus" springing up that can actually help you define and hire for this position. Here a few things to keep in mind:

- This person must be able to work across the enterprise. That means being able to build relationships with the CEO to the maintenance man. Each person in the organization will have different ways of understanding the concept.

- This person must be able to synthesize data across the organization about customers and connect metrics to customer experiences.
- This person must be able to leave their ego at the door and make others own and take credit for the experience that they help guide.

Start small.

A commitment to this position means that everything cannot be done in six months, a year or even two years. Working behind the scenes as an experience officer, you need to understand across the enterprise the key customer service trends and issues. Define specific deliverables for the first three and six months. Be clear. While you may start in one area of operation that could have been determined by having the poorest satisfaction scores, what you do there is an influencer for what is to come. Never lose sight that across the system one experience needs to be defined. When delivered consistently throughout organization, it will become part of a brand that people will talk about. In fact, add to your arsenal an annual plan for the customer and updated it as routinely as your strategic and marketing plans.

While this might be an example you've heard before, NASA had it down to a science (pardon the pun). When visiting dignitaries would tour NASA in the 1960s, they stopped and asked a janitor what his job was. He replied "to put a man on the moon." NASA understood the end goal, the ultimate experience and had everyone talking from the same page. Disparate jobs, guided by a chief experience officer, develop one harmonious chorus over time. Consider how your employees answer the question: What's your job?

Hospital building and expansion

Let's take up the idea of an experience designer a bit more. The shops created by an experience designer are often considered works of art--miniature universes unto themselves. Experience designers are involved in every aspect of creation--from choosing accent colors on walls to slanting the windows in the right direction. If you go into a boutique and you feel as if you've just had a unique "experience"--you have, and someone went to a lot of trouble to make you feel that way.

Think of what that type of skill set could bring to a hospital that is getting ready to build or expand. Yes, more and more architectural firms and designers are recognizing the experience piece. However, having someone on board to further guide and unite what they do will ensure building projects that are not just aesthetically appealing but which yell "experience" from the moment you walk in the door.

Brand extensions

With services that are now splintering off in new directions--having a presence in malls and airports and other venues--it is equally important to carry the brand experience into off-campus initiatives. A chief experience officer can help guide these efforts especially as you to start to merge hospital experiences with retail experiences. After all, that is where we started this discussion.

As noted above, no one is rushing to the hospital for an experience. But consider this: Blue Cross of South Carolina just added Bumrungrad Hospital in Thailand to its network. Blue Cross subscribers can go there as an option, saving 85 percent or more in costs. But there's more! Bumrungrad's facility is like a five-star hotel, offering services and amenities that define an experience. And it all starts with a concierge assigned to you before you enter the country. That makes a statement.

American hospitals need to make a statement too.