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January 2015

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/65912/>

MPRA Paper No. 65912, posted 19. August 2015 05:29 UTC

# **Improving Customer Experience in Mental Health Service: A case Study of Ivy Willis House**

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## **Abstract**

The negative effects of the current economic climate on mental health service providers under the NHS cannot be overemphasised. As the government is trying to cut its expenses and minimise wasteful activities and unnecessary spending within the NHS, every trust and every department or unit within the trust has now realised that it has to justify its existence and review its services to the public. More so, the on-going restructuring of the NHS has led to the closure of some hospitals and departments that are considered not fit for purpose.

Meanwhile, the closure of certain hospitals or departments, especially the accident and emergency departments (A&E), have caused outrage among the general public who reside within the vicinities or catchment areas served by those departments. In some cases, this move is challenged in the courts of law forcing the government to rescind its decision and leave certain hospitals open after they have been marked for closure.

The joint efforts of staff and patients of these hospitals and their determination to preserve these valuable institutions are paying off greatly. However, the same cannot be said about the mental health facilities within the NHS. This is probably because the services provided by mental health departments are not meant for every member of the public. The services are meant for those who have mental health issues. As a result of this, only those who are concerned with mental health issues advocate for their continuous existence and maintenance. The general public do not always speak out for them.

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The aim of this report is to look into the plight of these mental health institutions and the difficulties they are facing in terms of funding, staffing levels, public support, research and development, patient satisfaction among other things. We have chosen Ivy Willis House because of its achievement as one of the most successful mental health rehabilitation centres in the south-west area of London.

**Keywords:** Customer Experience, Mental Health Service

## **Introduction**

Events have shown that any mental health facility that is not providing remarkable benefits to its service users is prone to closure by the government. We understand that the government is desperately looking for ways to save money so as to prevent the economy from returning back to recession. Organisations that are not really focused by the public may be a soft target in this regard. The mental health facilities are good examples of such organisations.

According to NHS statistics, 1 in 4 people will experience at least one mental health condition in their life. Apart from affecting a huge number of people, little attention is paid to this problem. However, if untreated, mental health issues can develop into many other unsocial activities and harmful behaviours or life threatening physical conditions.

The quality and length of the treatment that a person receives during the course of a mental illness contribute immensely to the quality of his physical and social wellbeing later in life. This is why it is very important to look into this problem so as to evaluate patients' experience assessing their levels of satisfaction with a view to identify where improvements are needed. Apart from creating a positive impression in the eye of the government and prevent the services from being suspended or stopped, it will also give confidence to potential service users and encourage them to access the services without any fear.

Ivy Willis House is one of the facilities of the Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust which provide rehabilitation and residential services to residents of Bromley and its environs. The centre offers 24 hour care to clients with complex needs aged 18 to 65 years. The entirety of this report revolves around this mental health facility.

### **The adoption of the marketing concept as a working business culture**

Establishing a customer care culture is a very important ingredient needed for any organisation to be successful. As Geoff and Lester (2010, p.308) portend, this is a holistic way of looking at customer satisfaction and it remarkably affects every stage of marketing including the planning and implementation processes. It is on the basis of this that they suggest that a commitment to customer care should be enshrined in corporate mission statement. This kind of commitment should serve to form and guide a customer care culture and philosophy throughout the organisation.

By and large, it is pertinent to state here that customer care is all about satisfaction. It is also about identifying the need of the customer and trying to meet them. This is more important in the service industry. This is why researchers usually focus on service quality whenever studies are conducted in relation to marketing (Fisk, Brown and Bitner 1993). The development of the SERVQUAL instrument came about in response to this need. SERVEUAL is the modern tool which is now frequently used to measure the quality of service provided by an organisation. The tool was developed by, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) after conducting a series of focus groups providing organisation interviews with executives and customers at well-recognised services. (SSRN)

At Ivy Willis House, improving patient experience is considered as a very paramount goal with which the services of the organisation are evaluated and with which the organisational success is determined. In view of this, many programmes have been put in place to make sure that all staff and stake holders in the organisation constantly focus their attention on this pivotal goal. According to the unit manager, Mr Daniel Daka, every new employee is properly educated during the induction process about the main focus of the organisation. Regular meetings and update sessions are held for existing staff to remind them of their roles in ensuring excellent patient satisfaction. Internal memos are distributed both electronically and in prints for proper delivery. Our interactions with some members of staff further confirmed this claim.

While the efforts of the management of Ivy Willis House should be commended in this regard, it must be stated here that there is still more room for improvement. More efforts are required to promote the marketing concept as a working business culture. This may be

achieved by having unique mission statement that will make the unit stand out among its equals within the trust. Currently, the unit uses the trust's mission statement which is shared by all departments and units within the trust. There is nothing wrong in having a personalized mission statement peculiar to the unit but not dissimilar to the general mission statement for the trust.

### **Understanding Customers and Segmenting Customers**

The first step in achieving customer satisfaction is by understanding their needs and priorities. In other words, the service providers must know what the customers want and device a way to meet those needs. Sometimes, customer segmentation may be required to gain insight into customers' worldview and priorities regarding the services being provided. Minwir (2011 p.296) posited that effective behavioral segmentation might be required for better understanding of the critical business issues to be resolved and the choice of variables applied for the segmentation help produce a meaningful outcome.

The management of Ivy Willis House fully understands the importance of segmentation in identifying the needs of its service users. For instance, the open unit of Ivy Willis House regularly runs focus groups to get feedback from the service users. This gives the management the opportunity to review and evaluate their individual and group experiences.

However, this practice has not been implemented at the close section as of the time of writing this report. The management's attention was called to this and they have decided to extend the practice to the close unit as well.

### **Analysing Needs, Wants, Values and Expectations of Residents**

Despite the importance of customer understanding and segmentation, all the efforts will be worthless without the proper analysis of the feedback collected from customers. Don, (2010, p.164) is right to suggest that all information regarding benefits, priorities, perceived values, and expected values must come from customers themselves. This will enable the service providers to check their opinions with those of their customers. The same thing applies when conflicts occur. We therefore agree with Musunuru (2011) that it is imperative for every

healthcare organisation to make sure that it provides sustained services that will lead to best customer satisfaction.

The entire team of the Ivy Willis House recognises this fact. Treatments ought to be individualised. That is why the needs and wants of every patient are evaluated individually and these are reflected in their individual care plans. Patients are given the opportunity to express their feelings, review their own treatments and rate the services they receive. They do this through the weekly ward round. Every resident attends the ward round fortnightly for a personal review of his/her experience and expectation. The Care programme approach (CPA) is held at regular intervals to enable residents assess the services they receive with staff assistance. Group activities are also held regularly to facilitate close rapports between residents and staff and among residents themselves. These activities include motivation group, current affairs group, relaxation group, creative group, recovery star group among others.

With all these means, the multidisciplinary team at Ivy Willis House is able to gather and analyse the needs, wants, values and expectations of residents allowing residents themselves to take part in this.

This is a major achievement on the part of the management. But we think there is need for a staff to be employed with the sole responsibility to coordinate the assessment of the needs of the patients. This may be a patient liaising officer that will serve as a bridge builder between the staff and residents.

### **Creating Customer-based Value Propositions for Customer Segments**

One of the strategies used by the Ivy Willis team to segment customers for optimal satisfaction is what can be referred to as resident-based value propositions. With this strategy, the team is able to make the unit highly persuasive to potential residents and this also enables the unit stand out among its equals. Within the competitive market of mental health and rehabilitation facility, Ivy Willis House is able to weather the storm and also survive the quality test continually imposed by the government and regulating agencies.

In line with James et.al (2003), Ivy Willis House uses three types of value propositions. These are: all benefits, favourable points of difference and resonating focus. These are discernible

from the unit's handbook and posters pasted around the buildings as well as documents provided to visitors on open days or individual visits.

What we have observed however is that the management relies too much on all benefits for its value proposition to target customers. The most effective way is to apply all the three types of value proposition to achieve the best result.

### **Managing the Customer Experience through Relationship Marketing & Customer Care**

Relationship marketing is another emerging concept in marketing that is gaining prominence among modern managers and policy makers. According to Atol and Jagdish (2008 p.20), this domain of customer relationship management extends into many areas of marketing and strategic decisions. It is even more relevant in the health service sector with particular reference to the social care. The duty of care is often emphasized between healthcare professionals and service users. Reid et.al (2005 p.348) explains that this duty of care is not expected to be borne solely by the altruism and heroism of individual healthcare workers. Rather, it is the natural sense of empathy and social reflection on our shared vulnerability to disease and death. This kind of attitude generates an actionable and measurable method of evaluating patient satisfaction.

The Ivy Willis team achieves this through various forms of patient engagement. Close rapport is facilitated between staff and residents and questionnaires are distributed to residents to enable them express their feelings and showcase their experiences. The open unit is noted to be more effective in this task.

### **Reinforcing the Organization's Identity (or Brands) through changes to the Marketing Mix Variables**

To survive in the modern competitive business environment, an organization, be it in the production or service sector, must develop and promote its own brand. This is a method of reinforcing the organisation's identity in consonance with the changes to marketing mix variables.

These variables are the controlling factors of the marketing trade which managers vary in response to changes in the business environment (Ferrel et.al p.446). By and large, the ability

to create a unique branding for one's product or service is necessary in today's competitive market environment. Schmitt et.al (2007 p52) therefore postulates that brand experience directly and indirectly affects customer satisfaction as a result of brand personality associations.

Basically, Ivy Willis House is an integral part of Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust. Oxleas has succeeded in developing a unique brand that makes it stand out among several trusts within the NHS. Creating a niche that focuses on the mental health and with special interest in Social Care, the trust has made itself easily identifiable in this regard. Using personalized symbols, colours and specialized building structures and designs, it has become almost natural to associate Oxleas with professionalism as far as mental health is concerned.

However, Ivy Willis House does not have any branding system different from that of Oxleas. Whereas, the services it renders to its service users are excellent. The unit needs to also showcase its own success rather than relying on Oxleas for this.

### **Research Requirements for the Organisation to track the Total Customer Experience**

One of the ways by which an organisation can retain customers is to undertake research activities required to track the total experience of those who use its services. Managing experiences is however not achieved merely through creative engagements and entertainments only. It rather involves a very complex and complicated strategy with which organizations try to understand client's experience including expectations and disappointments. Through this type of knowledge, managers are able to orchestrate series of clues that collectively meet people's needs and expectation. (Leonard 2002)

The Ivy Willis team recognizes this power of research and its potency in evaluating the experience of the service users. Various strategies are employed to collect and process data concerning the services received by the residents. Despite employing an administrator who deals with all administrative matters in the unit, collection and preservation of data on patient experience is considered a collective responsibility of all members of staff.

We have earlier mentioned some series of activities organized on regular intervals to stimulate reactions from residents regarding their experiences. We have also stated above that questionnaires are distributed to residents from time to time in order to get feedback from



them. These questionnaires are collated and analyzed and the data collected from them is stored for careful consideration.

Not only that, adequate supports are provided for any member of staff that is willing to conduct research in any area that is related to the services provided at Ivy Willis House. Attending seminars, symposia, conferences and short courses on mental health is encouraged and often funded. Apart from updating their knowledge, these activities give staff the opportunity to be conversant with latest discoveries in the field and open their eyes on new methods to be explored.

### **The Outcomes from becoming more Customer Centric**

Customer centricity is an essential ingredient that must be applied by any organisation that operates in the service industry. Customer centricity here is not the same as customer service. Neither is it about being nice customers. It is a strategy used by organisations to align their products or services to the wants and needs of its customers. It starts with radically rethinking of organisational design, performance metrics, product development and other things in a new and unique ways of serving the customers. It is commonplace for companies to make attempts to steal each other's customers. You must be able to identify the most valuable customers and make them feel special so that you can maximise their value to organisation. (Peter 2012)

Being customer centric is one of the qualities with which Ivy Willis House is renowned. The unit's multidisciplinary team is passionate about trying to identify the particular group of patients that can benefit the most from the services provided. Knowing what it is best at, the team assesses every potential patient and match his/her needs with the team's capacity and the facilities put in place to meet those needs. Identifying the target group within the unit's catchment areas is fundamental to providing an excellent service to the patients.

In most cases, patient is referred to the unit from other hospitals or mental health homes. During the referral process, a team of nursing and medical professionals normally visits the patient and explains to him/her what the unit has got to offer. A follow-up visit by the patient to the unit will be facilitated to make him/her have a feel of the unit's environment.

By and large, all these steps are taken to ascertain that the patient is suitable to live and receive treatment for his condition and benefit from the services rendered within the unit.

With this procedure, the Ivy Willis team is able to make adequate provisions for a form of treatment that is measurable, actionable, predictable and result-oriented.

It is pertinent to mention at this juncture that Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust has a research network that brings together all the research activities undertaken by its teams including that of Ivy Willis. The aim of the network, called ResearchNet, is to showcase innovations that bring about the future shape of mental health services. This usually includes new technology as well as new theories and policies on clinical care and co-produced evaluations and research related to mental health rehabilitation services.

### **Conclusions**

Ivy Willis House has distinguished itself as one of the most efficient and most successful mental health rehabilitation centres in London. Being part of the Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, the unit tries to maintain the highest standard of practice and this makes it survive and excel in this competitive environment. Oxleas itself stands out among its equals when it comes to maintaining good patient experience. Oxleas' performance is analyzed by Monitor, the independent regulator of NHS foundation trusts and the rating was quite favorable. The rating remains green with no evident concerns.

The current drive to close down ineffective and non-performing hospitals and health facilities is sending panic down the spines of many hospital managers and stake holders. This has ignited heated competition among trusts and among departments and units within various trusts. Every trust, hospital, department and unit is now trying to outperform others in order to survive in the present dispensation.

The Ivy Willis team has nothing to worry about. There is no doubt that the team is performing beyond expectation. As far as customer experience is concerned, Ivy Willis has a lot to write home about. The management has different ways of getting feedback from its service users in order to evaluate their experience, identify their needs and expectation and endeavor to meet those needs.

The Care Quality Commission visited Ivy Willis in October, 2013 and gave the unit the highest possible rating. The commission is saddled with the responsibility to inspect hospitals, care homes, dental and GP practices and other similar institutions in England with the aim to

ensure that service users are provided with safe, effective, compassionate and high quality care. Its findings are usually based exclusively on client experience. Also in 2013, two members of the Ivy Willis team won the nurse of the year and the support worker of the year awards respectively.

It is interesting to note that even on many occasions, some patients of Ivy Willis request to be allowed to stay longer on the unit after being effectively discharged. All these point to the quality of services provided by the team.

Despite the success achieved so far, it is pertinent to state at this juncture that there is no room for complacency. The Ivy Willis team needs to intensify their marketing strategy so as to keep up with the constant changes in technology as well as the demographic changes in its catchment areas.

### **Research Plan**

We have adopted combined methods in the collection and analysis of data for this report. To start with, published and unpublished materials were consulted. These materials include books and academic articles published in revered journals on this subject. Also consulted are newspapers and magazines including commission reports and electronic sources. We also visited websites whose pages are relevant to the study undertaken.

We also had some chats with staff and service users at Ivy Willis House to collect first-hand information from them. An informal interview was conducted with the unit's manager, Mr Daniel Daka on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2013 at 14:00 hours. He provided this writer with some pamphlets and leaflets during the interview and these documents contain very relevant and useful information.

Another method used is what can be referred to as experiential participation. The writer achieved this by working directly alongside the nurses and other members of staff and this proved to be the most effective way of gathering privileged and obscure information that is not ordinarily available to the general public.

Owing to the nature of the report, both inductive and deductive approaches were employed in analysing the data collected.

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