

# Making the Health Care Experience

Giving Us All Something  
to thinkAbout

by Sonia Rhodes



*San Diego, CA.* When you think about positively memorable experiences, what comes to your mind first? A five-star dining experience? A romantic vacation?

Taking the kids to Walt Disney World?

Or, is it perhaps your most recent colonoscopy? You know – the medical procedure where a physician uses flexible scopes to view the inside of your intestinal tract. No? Well, at Sharp HealthCare we're doing everything we can to add colonoscopy – and all aspects of health care – to the top of our customers' list of great experiences.

We know that health care is extremely important to everyone. We also know that what should be a personal, respectful, and caring experience all too often turns out to be confusing, frustrating, or downright scary. With nearly twenty years of experi-

ence in the health care industry, there isn't a week that goes by without a friend, family member, or neighbor asking me for help or advice on how to better navigate the health care system to get the care they need and deserve. It shouldn't be that way.

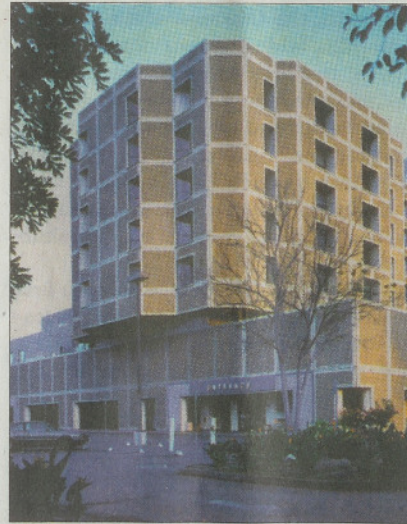
## From Good to Great

As San Diego's largest not-for-profit health care delivery system (and largest private employer, with 14,000 employees), we believe we have a responsibility to our community to provide the very best health care experience for our patients. While Sharp has always been a *good* health care organization, just over three years ago we decided that good wasn't good enough. In late 2000 we set out to make Sharp a *great* health care organization by focusing on transforming the health care experience for our staff, physicians, and patients.

We knew that positive health care experiences meant more than the latest technology. To build the right platform for change, we set out on a national investigation to learn what the best of the best were doing to create positively memorable experiences for staff and customers. We investigated leaders in other service industries as well as other health care organizations.

We read books and journals to stay abreast of what the thought-leaders were saying – and one of our first assignments was to read *The Experience Economy* by Joe Pine and Jim Gilmore. The book became our guide, and our very first stop on a six-month best-practice investigation

was thinkAbout Chicago in September, 2000. Immersing ourselves in the economic experiences of Chicago and especially in the thinking of Joe and Jim set the stage for a remarkable journey.



**Sharp HealthCare: San Diego's largest not-for-profit health-care delivery system.**

Along with our best-practice investigation, we also conducted over a hundred focus groups with staff, physicians, and patients to better understand what was working and what needed work. The response was overwhelming. Sharp was known to have the highest caliber techni-

cal skills and clinical outcomes, but each group wanted more from their experience.

## The Sharp Experience

From that, we used the sensory assessment tools that were taught by Joe and Jim to envision all aspects of the experience we wanted to offer. We created a model with three core components: 1) Service Excellence/Experience Design, 2) Corporate Learning (Sharp University), and 3) Accountability. In September, 2001, we launched what we call The Sharp Experience – our organizational improvement initiative designed to make Sharp HealthCare the best place for people to work, the best place for physicians to practice medicine, and the best place for patients to receive care.

In 2001 we brought all of our employees to the San Diego Convention Center over a two-day period of time to attend one of three identical all-staff assemblies. We called these assemblies “re-commitment ceremonies” because we were asking our staff to recommit to their purpose, to their worthwhile work, and to making a difference in the lives of others. We used these assemblies to re-connect our staff with their heart – and the reasons they chose health care as a profession.

Health care, and the people who work in it, has always had purpose at the core. Over the years, the complexities of health plans, technology, and thousands of rules and regulations seemed to have taken the industry – and many of the workers – off track. We were giving them a chance to

reconnect with and honor *why* they got into health care in the first place. Staff members were then asked to serve as the architects of change by participating in one of over a hundred action teams across our organization. Overnight, we had over one thousand employees actively engaged in work teams to make Sharp a better organization.

Next, we identified our six pillars of success: Quality, Service, People, Finance, Growth, and Community. We created a report card with key targets by pillar so all of our work was aligned with our purpose. We established rigorous measurement of employee, physician, and patient satisfaction and began to benchmark against national data.

We also knew that to achieve our goals we had to become a learning organization. The Sharp University was launched to focus on the education and development of the Sharp team. Educating and developing our 1,000 leaders was a top priority so we created quarterly leadership development sessions focused on skill building and hard-wiring new practices into our every day business. Through inspiration, education and celebration, these learning sessions have helped transform the organization and the experiences we create. Homework is assigned each quarter via what we call the "Accountability Grid" because we believe that learning is an active process. It's critical to get leaders to actually do something with what they have learned.

As a result, every leader has learned:

- How to interpret employee satisfaction data and roll-out the results to staff in a prescribed, action-oriented fashion
  - How to assess and improve patient satisfaction
  - The core steps to service recovery
  - How to create service maps and touch point analyses
  - How to develop Signature Moments
  - How to "round" on staff and patients for better outcomes
  - The value and use of key words at key times (scripting)
  - The fundamentals of service
  - How to re-recruit the winners
  - Factors for physician satisfaction
  - Process improvement methods
  - How to conduct crucial conversations
- And, much, much more.

### **The Results**

Our relentless focus on making health care better has already started to pay off.

By applying the learning from leadership development sessions, the health care experience at Sharp is changing. From using the right words during patient and co-worker interactions to applying the fundamental steps to service interactions. From improving and streamlining complex processes to creating memorable, signature moments for patients and families.

Now, when patients visit the Sharp Metropolitan Outpatient Pavilion for a colonoscopy, they encounter something entirely different from the norm. Special attention is paid to personal privacy and dignity. After the procedure juice and crackers are served on a silver tray with stemmed glassware and special mints. And after discharge, all patients receive a phone call as well as a thank-you note signed by each of the caregivers – including the physicians! The experience is so different that now we have patients recruiting friends and loved-ones to have a colonoscopy. Patients often say that having a colonoscopy was the best health care experience they've had – now that's something to thinkAbout!

And as Joe Pine told us during one visit, "If you can do it in colonoscopy, you can do it anywhere!"

Since 2001 we've seen a dramatic improvement in employee, physician, and patient satisfaction. We've reduced turnover and been recognized for the past two years as San Diego's Best Place to Work. We've experienced unprecedented improvement in overall consumer awareness and perception of Sharp HealthCare, and have been honored with an Emmy award for our thirty-minute television documentary – an unscripted and unrehearsed look at The Sharp Experience from the patient and caregiver perspective.

We hope that by making the health care experience better at Sharp we're helping to make the health care experience better everywhere – because we believe that every patient deserves a positively memorable health care experience each and every time.

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