

# OPERATOR INSIGHTS

presented by  **ENSEMBLE**  
HEALTH PARTNERS

## Even Social Distancing Can't Mask a Great Experience

Finally hearing the news that your state is easing restrictions on elective surgeries as one of the first steps to reopening the economy is music to every healthcare system's ears. It can also be overwhelming as we navigate our way into a "new normal." After what feels like an eternity following shelter-in-place orders, people are undoubtedly experiencing both joy and anxiety; joy at the return of more normal routines, but anxiety over changes that will exist long after this pandemic is behind us.

With different trends across the country, we understand not all states have reached their peak number of cases. But, for those of us in locations where economies are starting to reopen, we have opportunities to demonstrate what it means to act with empathy when we resume the "new normal."

**“ALTHOUGH THE  
WORLD IS FULL  
OF SUFFERING, IT  
IS ALSO FULL OF  
OVERCOMING IT”**

-Hellen Keller

### Acknowledge Their Fear

The last month has required families to become well versed on engaging via Zoom, Facetime, and other technologies. As we ease our way back into face-to-face encounters, it is important we recognize and address the fear our patients are likely feeling as they come back into our hospitals. To do that, first remember your "why." Why did you choose health care? Why did you choose to serve? Most of us can say it is because we wanted to give back or care for others. Now is your chance to lead with empathy and a servant's heart.

Second, consider our patient's fear likely comes from not knowing what to expect. Anything we can do to be proactive with information about how things will look and feel during their visit is critical. Collaborate with your Marketing Team to ensure your social media and websites are updated with the new processes patients must follow and how processes may have changed (such as adding markers on the floor for maintaining a social distance or registering via phone) to keep them safe.

Finally, pay attention to the verbal and nonverbal cues you receive from patients. Listen to the things about which they express fear or uncertainty. Is it the being around other people or the procedure itself? Perhaps they are concerned with the amount of time they'll spend in the location. Whatever you pinpoint by acting with empathy, take time to resolve it.

Taking these steps may not solve all situations, but they will certainly reduce anxiety and demonstrate how we are being proactive to be the difference they need right now.

### Be Music to Their Ears

You've heard it said a thousand times, it's not just what you say, but how you say it. Your tone has never been more important than it is right now because your smile is hidden behind a mask. The dictionary defines tone as "a musical or vocal sound with reference to its pitch, quality, and strength." Are you being music to someone's ears or do you sound like a child's first recorder lesson? Your tone is responsible for expressing an attitude or feeling about your work environment and about the state of the world today in mid-pandemic. How you convey your message will evoke an emotional response from those around you. As we return to the "new normal" we want to evoke positive feelings: hope, confidence, enthusiasm, empathy. In the days and weeks ahead, as you engage with more and more people, be mindful of your tone, including the volume of your voice, your articulation (masks muffle!) and the speed at which you're talking.

## Unmasking Your Smile

Entering a facility right now could be compared to a quiet Main Street town after dark or a business district on a Sunday morning. The halls are quiet, and the faces are different. A screener dressed in full body personal protective equipment ("PPE") may meet patients at the door, screen their temperature, and ask screening questions. To our teams it may seem the norm as we do this added protection daily, but to a guest and patient at our facilities they may not see the person behind the mask.

Beyond barriers of countries, traditions, or languages, the smile is a universal sign that brings comfort and happiness. Safety precautions now leave smiles masked and covered... but do they? The term "smile and dial" is used frequently with sales and customer service call centers. Despite a caller not being able to see the physical smile, the upbeat tone and positive language communicates the smile and impacts the interaction. Studies evidence this through enhanced sales and satisfaction measures. Although your physical smile may be currently covered by a shield, a paper or handmade cloth mask, it does not keep us from maintaining a smile behind it. Your upbeat tone, positive language, and even your eyes tell the person in front of you that you understand and you're here to help.

As some areas welcome more patients and continue to serve those already entering our facilities, consider a few small actions we can take to show compassion:

1. Smile through the mask: Smiling eyes are real, and they are a powerful communicator
2. Don't ignore your added veil: Explain or acknowledge the additional PPE
3. Put yourself in the patient's shoes: Expect patients to be weary, anxious, or uncertain, and be prepared to educate them on new processes or requirements
4. Ensure a photo or badge is clearly visible: Identifying yourself by name and keeping your badge visible goes a long way to making a connection and building a patient's trust
5. Pin a photo of your family (even your fur baby) to you: Quietly acknowledge we all are a part of something bigger, even the front-line heroes

## Having a Heart at Six Feet Apart

Six feet apart; we hear and see it everywhere, from gas pumps to overhead announcements and duct tape red x's on the floor. If you are anything like us, you have felt the uneasiness even in the grocery store. People seem nervous

about even saying hello or smiling at one another. But what we should embrace is the idea that physical distance does not keep us from losing sight of those around us. There are no rules prohibiting a pleasant "Good Morning" or sharing a smile. **Each associate should continue to practice safe social distancing, but we should also practice social kindness.**

Patient Access is the first point of contact at many locations. Our teams are supporting screening tables, emergency arrivals, and outpatient testing. To maintain the distancing standards, we have approached many processes differently: Exchanging needed information in plastic bags, asking patients to stand six feet from desks, or standing behind plexiglass barriers. Returning to normal may not look the same. Here are some ways to continue the important work of your teams... while you are six feet apart:

1. Ensure there is a robust Pre-registration process in place to limit time at the point of entry
2. Consider using phones in open areas to limit patient information being shared in public areas
3. Post a phone number at Point of Registration that patients can call from their own personal devices to limit contamination
4. Utilize online portals to collect data prior to visit

As we all adapt to the "new normal," remember patients have the same fears we do, except theirs may be coupled with the additional anxiety of a medical condition bringing them to our hospital during a pandemic. Be sure to maintain a positive attitude, let your voice be music to their ears, and remember to smile because even a mask can't stop the spread of kindness.

Handshakes and hugs may no longer be appropriate, but friendliness and service will never go out of style. Wave and say, "good morning," provide directions, or even walk a patient where they are going. This little bit of "extra" can change their entire experience and make them feel normal in a not so normal world.



### Authors:

**Susan Milligan, CHAM, CRCR**

Director Patient & Guest Experience  
Ensemble Health Partners



**Codi Loughrin, CRCR**

Patient Access Manager,  
Assessment Team  
Ensemble Health Partners



**ENSEMBLE**  
HEALTH PARTNERS

**Solutions born from experience, not theory.**

Contact us to learn more at [Solutions@EnsembleHP.com](mailto:Solutions@EnsembleHP.com)  
or 704-765-3715.