

The 'four minute rule' could play an important role in improving drug and alcohol services. You never get a second chance to make a good impression, says **John Jolly**.



## Four minute warning

**First impressions are important.** Research with juries, for example, found that people usually made a decision on someone's guilt or innocence within four minutes. There is some evidence to suggest that people form an impression of strangers within seven to 17 seconds and that you have only four minutes to recover from any negative impression before it becomes lasting. In other words, people will take one look at you or your organisation and decide whether you or it are for them – then the filters will go up and they will only hear or see things that confirm their initial impression. For this reason, top organisations and top people are 're-engineering' the first four minutes of every interaction to make it a more positive experience for the person on the receiving end.

The four minute rule will have the same impact on drugs and alcohol agencies as it does on the commercial sector. I choose to pay for a relatively expensive mortgage with the Chelsea Building Society because the staff team is just wonderful – they all remember my name and give me a genuinely warm welcome when I arrive, and respond to every request promptly. They make mistakes but because of my initial impressions, I readily forgive them and

still sing their praises.

How would you feel if you turned up at the drugs agency for the first time, soaking wet from the rain and when you rang the buzzer it took two minutes to attract their attention – two minutes is a lifetime when you don't want to be seen going into a drugs treatment agency. No one is at reception to greet you, and posters on the wall list all the things you must not do. Even if the agency turns out to be the best it is likely that you will still remember how you felt during that first four minutes, and that may colour any interaction you have with the agency afterwards. You will also tell others how hacked off you were.

Some hotels have totally re-engineered the first four minutes of the customer's experience – they have got rid of the doorman, the receptionist and the person who carries your bag (even when you don't want them to) and replaced them with someone called a 'greeter'. Now when you show up you are asked your name and taken straight to your room, rather than standing in line to fill in forms at reception. Imagine turning up to the drugs agency and being met by a greeter who takes you straight

into a private room and asks how they can help. Improving the first four minutes of someone's first and every visit may turn out to be one of the best things we can do to improve retention.

So, how do you make the first four minutes of service users' interaction with you as positive as possible? Check your mood and spend a few seconds clearing distractions from your mind before meeting and greeting them. Get yourself in the right frame of mind by asking yourself how the best worker in the world would treat this person, and how the service user would like to be treated. The good news is that you only have to keep it up for the first four minutes to create a lasting good impression – so remember make those first four minutes count.

Retailers and hospitality companies regularly send mystery shoppers to check up on customer experience and offer feedback on individual staff and their performance. I wonder what the feedback on many drugs and alcohol agencies and staff would be – including my own.

*John Jolly is chief executive of Blenheim CDP and a qualified executive and leadership coach.*