



Designing A Digital Experience to Drive Revenue and Patient Engagement

by Bill Krause

08/20/2020



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With the rise of healthcare consumerism, people are looking to hospitals, health systems, and physician practices to deliver the same user-friendly, digital experiences they receive from other industries. A recent survey found that more than 80% of consumers surveyed believe “shopping for healthcare should be as easy as shopping for other common services.” Specifically, they want streamlined access points online where they can shop for and purchase healthcare, easily make appointments, understand what they need to pay, make payments, and set up payment plans – or even obtain financing for care if the estimated costs exceed their budgets.

These types of digital experiences help providers recruit new patients and keep them engaged, which leads to better outcomes for both the health of the patient and the financial health of the practice. Unfortunately, most healthcare organizations aren’t ready to provide this level of convenience. In part, this is because they have relied on patient portals as their main digital engagement tool to date.

The problem with portals

There are a few reasons why [patient portals](#) underdeliver. First, portals are only for patients that have an existing relationship with a provider. However, the patient experience begins when consumers start shopping for care. Relying on a portal alone is a missed opportunity to generate new patient business.

Second, portals don’t mirror what consumers expect from digital solutions. The interfaces are clunky, the functionality is limited, and the technology only supports a pull strategy, meaning that it waits for the patient to come to it rather than periodically reaching out and prompting the individual to take action.

Third, a patient must be logged into a portal before they can do anything with it. This makes it harder to schedule appointments with new physicians because there is not an established connection. In these cases, the patient must pick up the phone, wait on hold, set up an account, possibly wade through insurance approval and pre-authorization, and then make the appointment.

Finally, portals aren’t ideal for communicating costs. While some allow the patient to pay co-pays, they aren’t designed to give realistic cost estimates, offer payment plans, suggest alternative funding sources, and so on.

Taken together, these challenges result in low, inconsistent portal use. Even if a hospital indicates that 50% of its patients access the portal, one-time or limited use should not be viewed as patient engagement. Instead, to realize true engagement, organizations should be thinking about ways to foster two-way conversations to keep new and existing patients focused on their health and how the hospital, health system, or physician practice can meet their needs. This improves patients’ experience and builds loyalty, while also reducing leakage and growing revenue.

What are the risks of poor digital engagement?

Without a well-considered plan for providing a retail-like shopping experience that includes transparent cost information, healthcare organizations run the risk of losing patients. This is especially important as the marketplace becomes more competitive and focused on patient experience, and retail clinics continue to pop-up around the country.

In addition to market changes, regulatory pressures are also making patient-centric financial communications a necessity. Several states are implementing price transparency regulations, and a federal requirement is right around the corner. To meet these standards, organizations will need effective tools that reliably determine and share prices with patients in advance of their appointments.

So where do organizations go from here?

It's clear that patient portals are not the answer. But how can organizations do a better job of giving patients the convenience they seek? Here are four best practices to consider.

1. Evaluate your organization's digital tools.

The first step is to take a hard look at the digital solutions you currently provide and compare them to those available from other industries, such as travel, retail, and financial services. Consumers want a digital, retail-like shopping experience where they can search local providers, compare reviews and costs, schedule their treatment, and even pay – all in one intuitive place.

Don't be fooled into thinking that only younger people want these tools. Research shows that more and more older adults are embracing mobile activities like online banking. In fact, The Harris Poll found that 80% of Baby Boomers (individuals between 56-76 years old) "wish there was a single place to shop for and purchase care."

Digital tools designed to improve access and transparency while making it easier to pay create more engaged consumers and provide a better patient experience. Achieving this dual dynamic requires digital tools are part of a comprehensive end-to-end solution.

2. Streamline access to shoppable services

These are elective procedures and screening tests that an individual can schedule in advance and include things like planned joint replacements, colonoscopies, and mammograms. Healthcare organizations offer standardized pricing for these services, allowing patients to shop around for the best price, location, and experience.

When patients are able to use a digital tool to research a service, set an appointment, and make a payment, it can drive patient satisfaction and increase the chances the individual will choose to have the procedure with the organization supplying the tool. With 67% of consumers stating they would "shop for healthcare entirely online, like any other products and services," streamlining access to shoppable services will drive engagement and revenue.

3. Adopt tools that help people understand their care costs.

More than half of consumers surveyed for The Harris Poll said they have "avoided seeking care because they weren't sure what the price would be." The biggest hurdle to accessing care is price transparency, resulting in patients not getting the treatment they need and in poor revenue management for a practice.

Patients are more likely to pay their portion up front when they understand what they owe and feel confident that the cost information provided has taken into consideration their current insurance, deductibles, and co-pays. A key to accurate estimates is an automated solution that checks the patient's insurance digitally, determines the benefits, reviews the amount of any deductible, and verifies whether the individual has already met their deductible. When a patient financial tool also offers the ability to make payments or set up a payment plan, it can increase patients' propensity to pay, boost the amount of self-pay funds the organization collects, and substantially reduce the cost-to-collect.

4. Enable digital appointment scheduling

Consumers view scheduling and rescheduling appointments as a very difficult task. Digital solutions can address this pain point. Mobile tools and apps that patients can use to schedule appointments monitor wait times, digitally complete forms, and check-in for appointments are essential to breaking down some of the barriers to patient access.

Before onboarding a tool like this, organizations must think through the change management challenges in getting all stakeholders on board. Historically, physicians have been hesitant to open up their calendars to permit digital scheduling. However, transparency and standardization are becoming increasingly important to meet patient demand and are necessary to make these types of tools work smoothly.

Although digital tools are gaining popularity among all generations, there are still people who prefer to pick up the phone to price, schedule, and pay for care. In addition to digital solutions, organizations should have service-oriented call centers to work with these patients. Such centers should have well-trained professionals who are available during and outside of traditional business hours so patients can access the information they need when they need it.

Relying on the status quo is not wise

Healthcare is only going to become more consumer-driven as high-deductible health plans continue to disrupt the industry. Hospitals, health systems, and physician practices cannot afford to rely on outdated technologies that don't facilitate two-way conversations or the digital experience patients expect. To compete today and in the future, organizations need a comprehensive, retail-like solution that offers a seamless user experience and spans the entire patient journey. Tools and technologies used in combination with putting the patient first will build loyalty while also improving an organization's clinical and financial outcomes.

About Bill Krause

Bill Krause is the Vice President of Experience Solutions at Change Healthcare. Serving the healthcare industry for over 12 years, Bill leads innovation and solution development for patient experience management at [Change Healthcare](#). In this role, he is responsible for the development and execution of strategies that enable healthcare organizations to realize value through leading-edge consumer engagement capabilities.

Previously, Bill provided insights and direction into new product and service strategies for McKesson and Change Healthcare. He also managed business development planning, partnerships, and corporate development across a variety of healthcare services and technology lines of business for those companies.

Prior to McKesson, Bill worked at McKinsey & Company as a strategy consultant, serving a variety of clients in healthcare and other industries. He received his MBA from Harvard Business School and his undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia. He also served as a lieutenant in the United States Navy.