How to Make Healthcare More Consumer-Centric

Save to myBoK

By Janie Tremlett

The conversation in healthcare is shifting from "patient engagement" to "consumerism." This changing lingo indicates a new mental model—a new approach to thinking about patients as consumers and to delivering a healthcare experience as consumer-centric, just like many other industries. Drawing on successful models from retail and airline industries, the vision of the future of healthcare is simple: build a place online, and on-the-go, as well as in the physical environment where people can learn, engage, and easily transact their healthcare. The formula for achieving the biggest short-term wins and laying a solid foundation for long-term success lies in taking a digital approach to healthcare, providing patients with convenience, information, and empowerment. The following is an outline of changes the healthcare industry should make in order to make healthcare more consumer-centric.

Improving Consumer Convenience: Easy, Seamless Access to Care and Information

Consumers expect access to information at anytime and from anywhere. Ubiquitous access to information should not stop at healthcare. All the information a consumer needs to know about their healthcare, including personal health records, preferences and lab results, as well as actionable tasks like appointment scheduling, bill-pay, and clinical questionnaires, should be available to them anywhere, anytime, from any device. The recent launch of patient portals by many facilities is a good first step—but more must be done.

Better Utilization of Patient and Family Preferences

The Amazon experience is special because it is built around the website remembering consumer preferences, linking customers with recommended products, and tracking deliveries to a customer's doorstep. Healthcare can operate this way by using the patient portal to request and record the times and days of the week that work best for a patient's schedule, tracking the status of their lab results, and even delivering educational content relevant to the patient's problem list and social history.

Patient Flow Optimization

When it comes to going places, consumers are hyperaware of timeliness: Subways have digital signage; map applications give estimated travel time; and rideshares show how far a car is from the pickup location in real time. Applying these principles to healthcare creates transparency and increased patient satisfaction.

Queuing systems allow staff to see the status of patients in the waiting room, including how long they have waited, and whether there are any special needs that must be addressed immediately. Staff can use this real-time information to prioritize patient visits and streamline patient flow. Virtual queuing takes this further by publicly displaying estimated wait times via the web and mobile access. Patients can also be summoned off the queue in by SMS text, an e-mail, or a phone call so they are not confined to waiting areas and can grab a bite to eat in the cafeteria, instead.

Analytics dashboards associated with these tools allow staff to spot bottlenecks and divert resources appropriately. In addition, management can better understand their patient flow metrics over time to optimize staff assignments and facility layout for a better customer experience.

Beyond waiting room management and queuing is the option to track patients throughout their entire visit. One way to implement patient tracking is through "wayfinding" on mobile devices to help patients navigate healthcare facilities and campuses so they arrive at their appointment on time. In addition, wayfinding can use beacons to provide administrative

insights into how long patients linger in any given space, which can help reorganize staffing to address peak hours or to reevaluate the appropriate use of space.

Improving Consumer Information: Better Patient Communications

Consumers want to give and get feedback from the business they interact with. Communicating with patients about their health, the price of their care, and the quality of services has never been more important. Secure messaging ensures patient-provider communication, personal attention, and keeps patients out of the doctor's office. Conversely, gathering feedback on the quality of service is crucial for improving customer service and maximizing reimbursement. An in-house satisfaction survey conducted on tablets in the waiting room can collect data and provide insight on the quality of the service patients receive. Healthcare organizations can then use this information to improve on major pain points and increase HCAHPS scores.

Diversify Patient Education Using Technology

Digital technology provides an opportunity to use all kinds of media to disseminate information beyond the typical pamphlet or brochure—including text messages, video, and multimedia. Every waiting room has underutilized space, and a captive audience. Queuing screens or digital displays in waiting rooms and cafes can be useful in educating patients and families on important topics. For example, the use of a "vitals chair," or a special waiting room chair equip with a touch screen computer and vitals monitoring devices, allows patients to complete questionnaires or explore content specific to their health before their appointment. One such chair, developed by Vecna, allows users to self-report their height and then self-measure their core temperature, blood pressure, weight, and blood oxygen saturation using an integrated set of devices. The chair will then print a receipt of the user's measurements—all during the downtime patients face waiting for their name to be called in the doctor's office waiting room.

Widen Patient Communities

While personalized communications with the healthcare system can streamline operations, offer patients communication options with other patients can improve outcomes. In a country where one in four people live with chronic conditions, communities help deepen research, improve understanding, and provide coping skills–all things that are critical to healing. Healthcare organizations can create online communities like Patients Like Me and CureTogether. Offline, hospitals can use their physical infrastructure to organize patient community meet-ups and invite speakers, researchers, and clinicians to host events and give public presentations on managing chronic diseases. Creating a bond amongst patients is powerful for healing as well as in developing patient loyalty.

Improving Consumer Empowerment: More Administrative Self-service

Banking and airlines set the standard for self-service both online and at the bank or airport through text and e-mail alerts as well as consumer operated kiosks and ATMs. Following this model, it's possible for healthcare systems to offload burdensome administrative tasks to patients and to have them complete as much as possible from the comfort of home. While this provides a clear benefit to the healthcare system, patients actually want command of these administrative tasks like scheduling, downloading an express pass, updating demographics and insurance information, and paying bills.

More Clinical Self-monitoring and Reporting Wanted

Take the administrative work further into clinical territory by letting patients answer clinical intake or social history questions and record that data. Imagine a virtual clipboard: handing patients a tablet with the same questionnaires you'd have given them in paper form, but now it's automated. Patients can answer questions about history of present illness, medications, and chief complaint, as well as screenings for drug and alcohol abuse, behavioral and mental health, and antibiotic over-prescription. This will not only offload manual data entry from clinicians, but will relieve patients of having to fill out the same forms over and over.

Help Patients Manage Costs

Perhaps the biggest driver toward consumerism is the cost of care and patient confusion about their payment responsibility. Consumers are looking for tools like payment estimation that will empower them to make informed financial decisions, save on costs, and comparison-shop. In addition, offering bill pay online and accepting a variety of different payment options makes it easier for the patient to pay—whether it be via cash, credit card, ACH, Apple Pay, etc. Offering bill-pay online is a mutually beneficial way to reach the consumer as it also yields significant return in the form of collecting on past-due balances and even collecting payments on an estimate.

A Consumer-centric Platform for Patients

The smartphone is a gold standard for consumerism–with preferences, apps, and access to all the information a consumer needs. The future of such an experience for healthcare is not far off; but the healthcare industry must start with a practical, digital approach to treating patients like consumers.

Janie Tremlett is vice president of global business and marketing at Vecna.

Original source:
Tremlett, Janie. "How to Make Healthcare More Consumer-Centric" ([Journal of AHIMA website](#)), September 2015.

Driving the Power of Knowledge