Going Digital to Improve the Provider-Patient Experience

As seen in Becker's Health IT & CIO Review.

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Technology has redefined how people shop for and consume goods and services. In today's digital era, companies like Amazon, Uber, and Apple have revolutionized how transactions are conducted – at the touch of a button, anywhere and anytime. According to the U.S. Commerce Department, e-commerce in the United States grew by 14.6 percent in 2015, marking the sixth consecutive year that online sales grew near or above 15 percent.

Digital is the new normal. Technology has changed how we shop, get our information and spend our money. More than seven in 10 U.S. adults (73 percent) own a desktop or laptop computer, according to the Pew Research Center, and nearly 70 percent of U.S. adults (68 percent) have a smartphone. Pew researchers reviewed demographic data from 2000 to 2015 and found a 44 percent increase in Internet use by senior citizens – the fastest-growing user group. Now, 58 percent of all seniors ages 65 and older are online.

The modern technology- empowered economy increases efficiency, strengthens customer relationships and improves customer satisfaction. When companies focus on enhancing their online customer experience, these companies can reach a broader audience, provide additional services, and strengthen customer satisfaction. For instance, consider the tremendous efficiency and productivity gains that have happened over the past decade in

the finance and banking industries, as they've enhanced their online financial services. Keep in mind that it wasn't too long ago that consumer transactions in finance and banking were primarily paper-based.

Health care is experiencing a similar paper-to-technology customer evolution, though in the case of health care, it's been driven by both patient demand and new, data-driven regulations. Yet while there have been technological advances in health care, the industry overall has been slow to keep pace with digital adoption. According to a recent Forbes article, the top five barriers to technology adoption in health care are:

1. Inappropriate technologies that do not address health care's most pressing needs

2. Insufficient funding (no one wants to pay for the technology)

3. Physician reluctance to share medical information with patients

4. Technologies that actually impair provider productivity

5. The perceived impersonality of patient technology

With health care reform shifting from volume to value-based care, expanding the insured population and increasing access and demand for health care services, there is more focus on digital technology as an enabler to achieve the triple aim: improving the patient experience and population health and reducing the cost of care. Despite barriers to entry, providers need to join the digital ecosystem in order to stay competitive in this changing health care landscape and keep pace with the demand for modernizing the patient experience.

The Five Most Vital Technology Components

To sustain a consumer digital strategy, focus on leveraging and optimizing patient-related technology to improve the patient experience and outcomes. Consider technology as an enabler of more productive relationships and improved health outcomes by developing a digital ecosystem for patients.

Here are five key technology components to consider when designing and implementing a digital ecosystem to improve the patient experience.

1. Telehealth

Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64 percent) said they would be willing to try a telehealth (online video) visit in place of an in-person visit, according to a Harris survey on behalf of American Well. While interest in telehealth was highest among Millennials (74 percent), according to the survey, all age groups expressed interest, including those 65 and older (41 percent).

That's no surprise. Virtual visits provide patients with the convenience to meet with a doctor where they are, in a manner most easily accessible to them via their smartphone, tablet or computer. It's a win-win for patients and

providers, as telehealth expands the patient base beyond a local geographic area and keeps patients from having to travel to seek care. Telehealth means patients no longer need to delay care due to a busy schedule or the lack of means of transportation to see a doctor – a vital consideration in rural geographies with limited public transportation options. Telehealth has become accessible direct-to-consumer with companies providing the platform to connect patients with doctors all over the country. Large employers are offering telehealth kiosks for their employees, providing employees with on-site access to doctors while they are at work, and potentially improving productivity.

For patients and providers alike, telehealth has emerged as a cost-effective alternative to traditional face-to-face visits. Currently, 32 states require payer reimbursement for telehealth services. In California, telehealth is covered by most private payers as well as by Medi-Cal and Medicare when coverage criteria is met.

According to a 2014 report by IHS Technology, the number of patients worldwide using telehealth services is estimated to increase from less than 350,000 in 2013 to 7 million in 2018. Telehealth device and service revenues are predicted to grow 10-fold from $440.6 million in 2013 to $4.5 billion in 2015.

2. Remote monitoring and wearable devices

Health care has seen a surge in new portable devices and mobile apps that provide patients with remote monitoring capabilities to track their health status and progress. Remote patient monitoring capabilities are endless, including tracking of physiological data such as blood pressure, weight and blood glucose and providing real-time data on patients at high risk for falls or asthma attacks. Providers that adopt remote patient monitoring devices gain the capability to focus on preventive health management for low-risk patients, and chronic disease management for high-risk patients, with the ability to execute timely interventions and make needed adjustments to care. Data generated from regular health activity tracking provides the care team with better insight for diagnoses and treatment options. To help bridge data connectivity, cloud-based technology platforms are available to connect patient-recorded data from digital health applications, devices and wearables to hospitals, providers, payers and pharmaceutical companies.

Whether the goal is preventing readmissions or maintaining health stability for the chronically ill, remote monitoring helps maintain a close patient-doctor relationship for the opportunity to better manage outcomes. With remote monitoring, patients can feel more at ease knowing their condition is continuing to be managed beyond the acute setting. For example, in a recent University of Missouri School of Medicine survey, 78 percent of patients who had received skilled care via telemedicine said they would use the service again.

3. Registration kiosks

Automating the initial check-in process with self-service, web-enabled devices (e.g., computers, tablets) improves efficiency and reduces wait time for patients – especially when it's combined with a quality pre-registration

program. Once patients are checked in, providing them with electronic status updates (text message or otherwise) on expected wait times can free them from having to sit in a waiting room. For instance, an orthopedic practice that recently integrated a patient paging solution into its check-in process improved patient satisfaction by 20 percent, improved staff efficiency and increased patient privacy and HIPAA compliance. Registration kiosks can be enhanced to improve the patient experience by automating self-service tasks, such as: collecting copayments or outstanding balances, verifying insurance eligibility and coverage information, and completing any pre-service forms. For most patients, registration kiosks expedite the check-in process and ease the workload of registration staff, who can then be freed to handle other tasks.

4. Patient portals

The patient portal is the linchpin of the patient's health digital ecosystem – bringing pertinent patient information together in a single, easily accessible location. A comprehensive patient portal may include appointment scheduling, bill pay, access to lab results, after-visit summary, a provider-patient communication channel, a feedback collection mechanism, patient health information/education and annual reminders of screenings/check-ups. The patient portal enables patients to become more involved in managing their health by providing direct access to their personal health information. It also provides an ongoing feedback loop and open line of communication between the patient and the provider.

For organizations attesting to Stage 2 Meaningful Use requirements with their certified electronic health record, an online portal for granting access to medical records is a requirement. For providers not quite there yet looking for incremental improvements, consider implementing online appointment scheduling and bill pay to start. Online appointment scheduling provides patients with a convenient and private way to schedule, reschedule or cancel appointments; some systems even allow appointments to sync with the patient's personal calendar. Online appointment scheduling can also enable providers to send appointment reminders to patients via e-mail or text message.

5. Social media and web-based content

People turn to the Internet for information, to communicate with others and consume content. Not surprisingly, patients are regularly using the internet to research health information. According to Deloitte's 2015 Survey of US Healthcare Consumers, nearly 40 percent of those surveyed looked online for information related to their health and treatment. Does your organization have an online presence? Is your Web content optimized for online and mobile device searches? Optimizing digital content for search can lead patients to your website to find pertinent information and ideally schedule an appointment with your organization.

Some providers are uncomfortable with patients coming in armed with health information and questions they obtained on the Internet. Forward-looking providers actually encourage their patients to be avid caretakers of their

own health, based in part on patients' own research, and look at their role as partners with their patients.

In addition to building and optimizing digital content, engaging in social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram) can help your organization push information out to patients, supporting brand awareness and widening its circles of outreach. For example, prior to flu season, your organization could send a reminder via social media about the need to get a flu shot, and where recipients can go in your organization to receive one. Deloitte's 2015 Survey of US Healthcare Consumers revealed that 23 percent of consumers reported using social media for health-related purposes. By providing patients with relevant content via social media, providers can stay in touch with patients between appointments without having to invest in implementing technology to do so.

Embrace Technology

Technology can enable increases in patient engagement and improve the patient experience, thereby attracting, expanding and retaining the patient base. Providing digital touchpoints along and beyond the patient journey is fundamental to improving patient experience and organizational success.

If your organization already has a digital strategy in place, consider whether it's optimally deployed to improve the patient experience. Or if your organization is in the early stages of identifying a digital strategy, first ensure your goals are clearly defined and assess organizational readiness. Then, consider the challenges that will need to be overcome, including leadership buy-in, stakeholder support, budgetary constraints and privacy and security considerations.

With a digital ecosystem, your organization can reap the long-term benefits of increased patient satisfaction, patient loyalty, an expanded patient base, revenue growth and improvements in quality of care and outcomes.