

How Digital Tools Drive Holistic Patient Engagement, Better Outcomes

The moment for digital patient engagement and experience is here, with more leading healthcare industry voices agreeing that these technologies will come to define the patient journey toward wellness.

After all, healthcare has been in the throes of a digital revolution for decades. The transition to electronic medical records plus the forces of value-based care and an increasingly aging patient panel have pushed the industry to rethink how it will drive patient engagement moving forward.

All of that has collided with the emergence of healthcare consumerism. Patients have become increasingly responsible for the cost of their own medical care—out-of-pocket patient costs [increased](#) by 10 percent between 2020 and 2021 alone—and because of that they’ve become discerning customers of the healthcare industry.

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That’s prompted heavy investment in patient engagement technology. More than half of healthcare CIOs prioritized digital patient experience going into 2021, surveys have [shown](#).

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But so far, this effort toward a digital patient experience has focused primarily on patient acquisition, like online appointment scheduling and online reputation management via provider review websites.

There’s a good reason for that. Research from Press Ganey has [suggested](#) that patient acquisition hinges on a good online presence, with most patients wanting to research new doctors using reputable online provider reviews. Patients want to continue that intake journey online, with more than half saying they want to use online appointment scheduling as opposed to calling the office to book a spot.

Moving beyond digital patient acquisition

According to Dwight Raum, chief digital officer at Quil, those marketing tactics are a good step forward, but a truly patient-centered digital experience will ultimately need to run deeper than that.

“Healthcare’s coming of age when it comes to use of digital engagement tools,” Raum said. “What we’re seeing right now is a bit of a market rush for a whole bunch of point solutions.”

Those point solutions are generally acquisition-focused tools, like online patient intake and digital reputation management efforts. But as healthcare works to improve outcomes, not just patient volumes, that digital healthcare experience must be able to support a holistic patient engagement strategy that leads to overall patient wellness.



“As healthcare comes through its adolescence and starts to mature to a more strategic look toward patient engagement, we’ll see a more cohesive platform type of approach,” Raum noted. “Absolutely marketing will still be a major part of this, but we’ll also see a continuous line connecting marketing to a fully engaged patient experience strategy, which focuses on patient loyalty and establishing a meaningful, ongoing relationship.”

Designing a digital patient journey

Good rapport and a strong interpersonal connection between patient and provider will still be essential here. That’s why patients seeking care for serious medical inquiries often return to a doctor with whom they have a longstanding relationship with; the patient trusts this doctor and feels a sense of loyalty to the provider and the practice.



But the consumerization of healthcare is expanding, and having that digital patient experience is important for supplementing interpersonal relationships and building loyalty with discerning healthcare consumers.

“When it comes to establishing a relationship and establishing loyalty for a patient, a lot of that is based on where that individual is in their care journey and in their life. Not just where they are in a specific episode of care, but also understanding that that relationship evolves over time,” Raum explained.

“When we look at the way consumers are expecting any kind of services they procure to be provided, there is an increasingly higher bar for digital engagement.”

Nudging the patient toward healthy behavior, wellness

When it comes to patient engagement, digital or otherwise, the mind naturally turns toward the older adult population with chronic illness. There’s a good reason for that; the Baby Boomer generation is aging into Medicare, and with that typically comes a slate of health complications not typically seen in younger patients.

Those complications need chronic disease management, health coaching, and engagement.

“As you progress through your life and more problems start to occur, or you have to have more health maintenance, you start to seek a continuing relationship with a primary care provider,” Raum explained.

“The primary care physician is a quarterback for the care around all those different aspects of specialty care that one may need to have,” he continued. “A consumer generally wants to have a relationship that’s built on trust with that PCP, but also have access to the best care that they can get whatever the needs they may have at a given time.”

Holistic digital patient engagement tools should be able to nudge the patient toward getting wellness checks, screenings, and generally close care gaps, Raum noted, all key elements to care management for an aging population.

But there’s also a lot of potential there for a younger, healthier population.

“There is a perspective that healthcare is very transactional among this younger generation,” Raum said. “Maybe you go in for an annual physical, maybe you don’t. Maybe you get strep throat and you get some antibiotics, but it is largely transactional.”

Digital patient engagement tools still have the power to supplement that interpersonal connection while also building healthy habits that lead to long-term wellness. In other words, organizations can use digital patient engagement to build patient loyalty among younger populations and ideally achieve good long-term outcomes.

“There’s a lot of opportunity to use digital interventions that would nudge individuals into the right patterns of behavior that were conducive to long-term health,” Raum stated.

Baking family, caregiver engagement into digital platforms

Whether engaging older or younger patient populations, healthcare organizations should consider how digital patient engagement includes the family caregiver.

For adolescents and young adults, parents still play an important yet informal custodial role in their adult children’s health. In the middle of life, a partner or spouse may wish to be involved during certain episodes of care, like pregnancy or a surgery. And for senior populations, many providers may see some role reversal, as adult children begin to care for their aging parents.

In each case, substantial evidence shows family caregivers make a positive difference in patient outcomes. Studies have [shown](#) that family caregiver engagement can reduce hospital readmissions by 25 percent.



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To enable family caregiver engagement, healthcare providers need the tools necessary to drive education and activation. In doing so, providers can empower the caregiver as their loved ones’ partners in care management.

A good digital patient engagement strategy is going to consider the role of the family caregiver right from the start, Raum recommended.

“That’s just something you bake into the strategy up front,” he stated. “From a technology standpoint, the digital experience tools need to incorporate caregivers within their frameworks to support these interactions.”

Using digital patient engagement to meet the bottom line

Of course, digital patient engagement can have significant impacts on the provider bottom line.

Digital patient engagement has a positive impact on patient wellness, something that is critical for organizations as they adopt value-based reimbursement models. The success of value-based care relies on good clinical outcomes, which are supported by strong patient engagement and nudges toward healthy behaviors.

“We can demonstrably show better outcomes,” Raum pointed out. “There’s lower utilization of healthcare with healthier outcomes. That’s the win-win that every provider organization is looking for. As providers take on more risk in the health outcomes, they will see that accrue to their bottom lines.”

What's more, digital patient engagement could help streamline workflows for providers, who are currently seeing astronomical demand on the part of consumers. Tools like automated patient messaging or nudging leaves providers to complete more high-acuity tasks, Raum noted.

“There is a major mismatch right now across the country in terms of supply and demand for healthcare,” he stated. “A provider organization trying to meet that demand must leverage digital tools to scale up the provider organization.”

Conclusion

Healthcare is at crossroads as it contends with the dual demands of healthcare consumerism and traditional medical needs. Patients are increasingly seen as customers, but medicine is still an essential service which augments the way people shop for and access care. Simply put, patients want good customer service, but they also want and need quality medical care and patient engagement.

Provider organizations have met this duality by investing heavily in a digital presence and patient engagement technologies, but in order to be truly effective those tools need to take a holistic approach. In addition to online reputation management and online appointment scheduling, organizations need to consider how digital tools support the patient through the entire care journey.

Between supporting younger cohorts in achieving long-term wellness and helping older adults with chronic disease management, digital patient engagement tools have the power to achieve optimal clinical outcomes and an impressive bottom line for providers.

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About Quil



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