Patient as Customer: Focusing on the User Experience in Health Care

The health care sector does not suffer from a lack of technology; from research labs to the patient care setting, technology plays a critical role in every aspect of health care. As technology continues to advance, so, too, will its impact on the way diseases are diagnosed and patients are treated.

Traditionally, technology in health care has been used to create efficiencies in the administrative back office and comply with government regulations regarding privacy and portability of patient information, in addition to improving health care procedures that lead to better patient outcomes. More recently, however, the focus has been shifting to the patient-as-customer experience and technologies that amplify patient-centric interactions.

The shift is due largely to evolving customer expectations, which mirror other industries that are further down the path to deliver exceptional experiences. In health care, which traditionally has valued patient outcomes over patient experiences, this shift will be monumental for many organizations.

Experience drivers such as personalization and convenience will determine much of the technology spending in health care in 2019. And health care organizations are catching on: In a recent survey by PwC, almost half of health care IT executives noted one of their organization's top three priorities over the next five years is revamping the patient experience.[1]

The technologies necessary to drive exceptional patient experiences require a robust network designed to handle the data-intensive requirements of these technologies. Indeed, a slow or inefficient network can lead to a poor experience and low satisfaction, which can be detrimental to the health care provider's reputation and, ultimately, its bottom line.

Customer Experience in Health Care: A Growing Trend

Health care traditionally has not been a sector that paid much attention to experience. Most providers have focused more on treating patients from a clinical perspective, treating the illness with less focus on the person. At the same time, health care plans made it difficult for patients to switch providers if they're not happy or satisfied with their care. Today, however, it is much easier to do so.

Exacerbating the situation is a bureaucratic administrative environment that is often complex and difficult to navigate, leading many patients to frustration. Seemingly simple tasks such as insurance claims traditionally have been heavy with paperwork and approval processes, often delaying coverage and resulting in higher costs for both the patient and the provider.

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That's changing, however, as patients are becoming more digital-centric and self-reliant—and, as such, they have a growing sense of empowerment regarding their health care experience. The industry, too, is being disrupted—new, non-traditional health care providers offer an alternative to the staid, appointment-only doctor's office experience.

The recent acquisition of insurer Aetna by CVS Health is a prime example. The new combined entity will provide patients with not just their prescription and over-the-counter medications, but it plans to open expanded health care facilities within the stores to help customers manage chronic conditions and provide more primary health services through the CVS MinuteClinics.[2]

The proliferation of urgent care centers, too, is drawing more patients away from doctor's offices, lured by the promise of faster service at lower cost. For patients with minor ailments who can't get in to see their primary care physician immediately, the no-appointment-necessary model of urgent care centers offers relief more quickly. And, for patients with chronic conditions, urgent care centers are an alternative to more costly emergency room visits for immediate treatment, such as a diabetic attack.

Patients are using technology to take control of their health care, as well. Wearable devices that keep track of user health data such as blood pressure and heart rate are providing patients with data they need to better understand their overall health—and to know when they need to visit their doctor for treatment of any ongoing condition. Increasingly, patients are also looking for apps that better connect them with their health care providers and their own health care data, such as the ability to view lab results online or simply make appointments.

Additionally, a plethora of health-related apps are

enabling patients to bypass going to the doctor altogether. These "doctor on demand" apps provide advice from medical practitioners and some also include the ability to communicate with physicians or other healthcare providers to discuss symptoms and determine whether the user should seek care at a hospital or urgent care center.

Enter Patient-as-Customer Technologies

The disruption in the health care sector is forcing health care providers to reassess their patient care strategies in the context of customer experience, ensuring patients are not simply being treated but also treated well. That includes ensuring their visit occurs on-time and without much wait to see the doctor, appointment-setting and billing is simple, and interactions are personal and engaging, whether it's with the receptionist, nurse, lab technician, doctor or billing specialist.

Certain technologies, such as online bill pay and online scheduling, have already been adopted by health care facilities in an effort to provide more streamlined processes for customers. In fact, 65 percent of organizations surveyed by PwC already have online bill pay capabilities and 43 percent have online scheduling. Interestingly, 46 percent also have remote patient monitoring and an impressive 50 percent have a social media presence.[3]

The value of such technologies is apparent: seventy-three percent of customers in PwC's survey said experience is an important factor in their purchasing decisions overall. In health care, almost 80 percent of customers noted their experience with a particular provider was important in their decision-making. However, only about 50 percent of health care companies said customer experience was a digital priority for them.[4] Another study found 59 percent of consumers expect their digital health care

experience to be similar to their retail experience. Additionally, according to the study, 50 percent would switch their current provider for one that promises better technology.[5]

Tools that streamline tasks for the patient—such as payment processing, prescription refills or access to test results—are in demand, as patients increasingly want convenience in their health care dealings. Additionally, technologies that provide a faster route to health care, such as AI-enabled chatbots, are helping patients and caregivers alike.

Technologies designed and built to improve the patient-as-customer experience are growing in popularity, as providers grasp their potential to advance the patient-provider relationship.

Chatbots can be used for any number of tasks in health care, from answering simple questions such as location information or hours of operation via text to sharing information on prescriptions or lab results.

The combination of chatbot technology and artificial intelligence can create powerful results. For example, clinics working with IBM Watson could utilize chatbots to provide patients with basic diagnoses for minor ailments, such as viruses or ear infections. The patient then could be connected automatically to an online scheduling system, where they could make a follow-up appointment for treatment with their primary care physician or receive directions to the nearest urgent care center for more immediate treatment.

When connected with an electronic health records (EHR) system, chatbots also could provide personalized interaction and be proactive in helping patients manage their health. For example,

AI-connected chatbots could scan records for a patient's last scheduled appointment, then alert the patient if they're due or overdue for an examination. Alternatively, chatbots could scan EHRs for medication information and alert a patient if a prescription needs to be refilled or their health care provider of any potential drug interactions.

Technologies that enable patients to heal at home also are looming on the horizon for health care providers. In early 2018, Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston piloted "The Home Hospital," a test project that enabled patients to receive care at home after being treated in the emergency room. Patients were sent home equipped with a tablet device that constantly monitored the patient's vital signs, heart and respiratory rate, and movement. The tablet also allowed patients to communicate anytime with medical staff via phone, text or video. Patients participating in the pilot rated their health care experience higher compared to previous hospital visits, were more active and slept better.[6]

The Network's Role in Improving the Patient Experience

Technologies designed and built to improve the patient-as-customer experience are growing in popularity, as providers grasp their potential to advance the patient-provider relationship. However, these transformational technologies can't be sustained on legacy networks and IT architecture. To reap the benefits of these technologies, health care organizations—from hospital to doctor office to insurance provider—need sufficient bandwidth and smart, software-defined architecture to move data quickly and securely. Only with the resulting increased capacity, flexibility and control of business applications running across the organization, can they enable streamlined processes and more meaningful patient and provider experiences.

As organizations strive to become ever more digitally focused, they need an environment that supports digital transformation from every point on the network safely. Hybrid cloud and network environments, SD-WAN and high-speed broadband are just some of the technologies that can enable

health care organizations to better manage their business applications across all locations. Networking components such as WiFi and unified communications, meanwhile, ensure employees can work anywhere with no impact on productivity.

What's more, managed services can help organizations as they adopt new technologies. By tying disparate systems together and "filling in the gaps" both during and after network upgrades, networks aren't over-stressed and processes are streamlined for IT managers.

Working with a network service provider can help IT leaders in their quest to adopt digital transformation technologies and embrace new services. By working with a network services provider, organizations can leverage virtual and physical private Ethernet connectivity to assure there are no issues regarding network performance and availability for critical applications at all locations. In addition, they can take advantage of the latest in security services to ensure sensitive patient data is secure at all times. And they can receive all or some of their most critical connectivity functions as a managed service, including managed connectivity, WiFi, security, voice and business continuity, among others.

Conclusion

The focus of technology in health care is shifting, as more organizations recognize the importance of the patient-as-customer experience and technologies that amplify patient-centric interactions. Increasingly, patients expect their health care digital experience to be on par with retail, and organizations that put their efforts toward technology solutions that promote convenience and personalization will be better able to navigate the changing health care landscape.

To learn more about how Comcast Business can help, click here.

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