



How to meet the needs of patients-as-consumers

By Lia Novotny | October 25, 2018

Thanks to the internet and social media, instant gratification is now a baseline consumer expectation. You can outsource your grocery shopping, order pizza in a single click, or go on a shopping spree at 2 a.m. from the comfort of your couch.

Healthcare organizations are scrambling to catch up to the instant customer experience provided every day in so many other industries – but the challenges are myriad. Paul Shenenberger, chief information officer at Summit Medical Group, sat down with athenaInsight to share how Summit has successfully made the shift.



Paul Shenenberger

Q • Many physicians resist thinking of their patients as consumers, but not you. Tell us why you believe healthcare should be taking cues from consumer-focused businesses

A • If people can order a pizza just by asking Alexa, why will they settle for less when booking a doctor's appointment? They want to easily get an appointment exactly when they need it. The internet has changed consumer preferences and behaviors but, sadly, healthcare has not kept up. When booking a plane ticket, one of the worst-rated consumer industries, is easier than booking a doctor's appointment, you know you have a problem. As a result, about 85 percent of patients still schedule medical appointments by phone. We know our patients – meaning our customers – aren't satisfied with that.

The irony is that 27 percent of physicians' schedules go unfilled, while at the same time patients wait two weeks or more to see most specialists. This costs practices patients

and money – a single unfilled hour a week represents \$10,000 in lost revenue annually.

The current model isn't sustainable. Millennials won't tolerate a healthcare system untouched by the consumer revolution that has impacted every other aspect of their lives. There is no way they will sit through 11 options in a phone tree to get an appointment – data show that 60 percent of customers today hang up after 60 seconds on hold, and only 32 percent will actually call back. It's why retail clinics now provide an increasing amount of routine care, including 29 percent of flu shots in 2017 – they see patients how and when they want to be seen.

Q ▪ **What's your vision for how this translates to healthcare?**

A ▪ We need to go where our patients are: online. Just as the medical practice must now be considered a "business," so too must the patient be considered the consumer. Any medical practice must meet consumers where they are, providing ease of use, meeting all their needs and innovating constantly.

Some 80 percent of factors that affect health outcomes happen outside of a provider's office so we need to be there, too. Patients go about their lives and make choices independent of our care – we need to meet them where they are if we are going to affect change in their approach to their health.

Q ▪ **What has Summit done to make that vision a reality?**

A ▪ The first thing we did was tackle the low-hanging fruit – we implemented a patient portal to engage patients and lower administrative costs. This got us a quick win when it came to patient loyalty. After all, 84 percent of U.S. patients want electronic access to their medical records, but only 37 percent have it. And 40 percent of them say they would switch providers to get it.

Next, we had to tackle the problem of scheduling and access, because I have found that quality and price pale in comparison to the impact that access and convenience can have on consumer satisfaction. The first step was to standardize the protocols for booking providers ensuring that primary care visits were standard lengths with standard reasons across all of our provider.

Then we made it our goal to open all our doctors' schedules to patients through online appointment scheduling – even specialists. And we worked with our physicians to include night and weekend appointments to accommodate patient preferences.

Although this was a big cultural shift, everyone knew it was what we needed to do to put the patient at the center of care. And we are all in it together – physician leadership, IT, admin – even the CEO works Saturdays.

Finally, we have further streamlined the patient experience with online registration and pre-appointment care surveys delivered via our portal. The goal is to have all primary care appointments scheduled online by 2020, and with 30 percent booking that way so far, we are well on our way.

Q ▪ **How do you know it's working at Summit?**

A ▪ A year and a half after its introduction, we had almost 60 percent of our patients on the portal. Nationally, the portal adoption rate for large health systems is only 30 percent. And we decreased administrative costs while improving our financial results. In the first quarter the portal was live, we saw an 8 percent increase in patient-pay-yield and were receiving payments 16 times more quickly. Patients are opting to pay online because it's easier. The easier you make it for a patient, the more you are going to collect.

Early indicators are that patients are seeing the value. In the first half of this year, we have already booked 18,000 appointments using the portal, more than twice as many as the same period last year. And complaints related to booking errors are way down. All this tells me we are going in the right direction, that we are using technology as a tool to build the patient-centered medical system our consumers want and need.

Lia Novotny is a contributing writer to athenaInsight.

athena**insight**

A daily news hub reporting from the heart of the healthcare internet, with access to a comprehensive data set of healthcare transactions from athenahealth's nationwide network. We equip leaders with actionable insight and inspiration for making healthcare work as it should.

Stay in the know

Sign up for weekly data and news:
insight.athenahealth.com/newsletter