



Keeping millennial patients in the fold

By David Levine | March 20, 2017

The millennial generation has never been analog; the virtual, digital and immediate is all it has ever known. So it's no surprise that millennials' expectations are radically different from those of older generations in all areas of life – including healthcare.

A recent survey of 1,000 patients, conducted by the Health Industry Distributors Association underscores how much millennials want convenience, service and cost control – and how willing they are to walk if their needs aren't met.

The survey found that:

- Millennials are more than twice as likely as older generations to research providers on websites such as Yelp, Consumer Reports and Angie's List.
- 43 percent of millennials used an urgent care site in the past year, and 23 percent used a retail health clinic.
- 33 percent said they waited too long to receive care.
- 38 percent said a provider failed to meet their expectations because they were unable to get lab results during the visit.

- 41 percent postponed seeking healthcare because it was too expensive.
- 60 percent said cost influenced their evaluation of a provider – and was a significant reason why they'd leave a provider.
- 32 percent said they've switched providers when they were dissatisfied, 12 percentage points higher than other generations.

"Millennials are very discerning customers, but when disappointed they will find new options," says Matt Rowan, president and CEO of HIDA. For providers, that means setting different priorities – and emphasizing different parts of the patient experience.

"Previous generations placed a higher value on long-term relationships with providers, and were willing to accept certain inconveniences for those relationships," Rowan says. But millennials "are much more transactional. They consume healthcare like food. Sometimes they want drive-thru, sometimes fine dining. But convenience and quality are two elements they value at all times."

Millennials' perception of quality extends far beyond the exam room, Rowan says. "They want to feel like the facility is up to date and modern, and they make inferences on quality based on that."

They pay close attention to "soft" cues, he says: What does the waiting room look like, is there hand sanitizer available, where's the television.

"Don't overlook simple things, like a comfortable chair," Rowan says. "We had the president of a regional urgent care center at one of our conferences, and he said that when they put patients in an exam room, the first thing they hand them is the TV remote control – and he wasn't kidding."

Some forward-thinking provider groups are taking steps to adjust to the millennial mindset. Mike D'Eramo, chief administrative officer for the Toledo Clinic, says his 90-year-old healthcare system – made up of 160 physicians spread over 62 locations – has been maintaining a social media presence, expanding its phone messaging, and moving to a more robust patient portal that can incorporate more of what young patients demand.

"We are starting to cater to self-diagnostics," D'Eramo says. "A lot of millennials are wired for their health status, especially younger women. They have data they want to share with their physician relative to their heart performance, their nutrition, their calorie intake, and they want those data to be respected."

The Toledo Clinic has also been paying attention to the consumer experience, expanding TV options in its waiting rooms, and rethinking how receptionists interact with patients.

"In what other service industry does the customer look down at the representative?" D'Eramo says. "We are doing some ergonomic things to get employees engaging patients more professionally."

The challenge for healthcare systems, D'Eramo says, is moving nimbly – but not making changes reflexively.

"We have to learn what is a good investment versus what is a fad," he says. "I do think telemedicine is here to stay, as are kiosks."

And he believes the adjustments his system is making for millennials will please older patients, as well.

"We have spent a lot of time designing something that engages the Medicare population, but the lessons millennials are teaching us are as applicable to that population," he says. "My mother and father don't like waiting, they don't like feedback they don't understand, so there are parallels between my parents and my children."

Still, making the pivot to this new demographic has been easier for some providers than others, he says.

"It's a generational thing," D'Eramo says.

"We do have a number of older physicians who are becoming increasingly high tech. Others, not so much. And our younger physicians are very sensitive to these new requirements."

Indeed, Rowan says he's seen changes throughout the healthcare system, inspired by millennials' demands.

"A very large percentage of maternity care is already millennial," Rowan says. "Their impact will be felt more and more as the years pass and they become the core of the healthcare market."

D'Eramo knows that these patients are his practice's future, and that ignoring their needs is fraught with peril.

"These folks don't like standing in line," he says. "The question is, how do we turn that impatience into a business opportunity?"

David Levine is a regular contributor to athenaInsight.



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