
Convenience: Delivering on Patient Experience



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CVS and Oak Street. Amazon and One Medical. Walgreens and Village Medical. Dollar General and DocGo On-Demand. The list could go on and on. Brought on by the allure of the size and stability of the health care market, retailers are partnering, acquiring, or infusing cash into health care start-up companies. While most relationships are still in their infancy, there's no doubt that they will soon make their mark. None of these companies want to *replicate* your practice; instead, they'll aim to extract the most profitable services.

Years ago, a physician explained his simple strategy to optimize patient volume without drowning: intersperse the “quickie-sickies” into the appointment template. These quickie-sickies, with higher profitability on a minute-to-minute basis, are exactly what the new entrants into the market want. Combine those with medications and other auxiliary products like ibuprofen and bandages – and you have a nice business strategy.

For years, practice management experts have urged physicians and administrators to focus on patient experience. Providing a great service means that patients will come – and stay, ideally preventing these new entrants from extracting services from the medical practice. However, “experience” is a difficult term to embrace in health care. Declaring – “let’s give patients the best experience” - to your staff may not always resonate. By the very nature of the situation, your patients are distressed, perhaps even distraught. Employees may be confused: delivering a great “experience” is tough. However, there are tangible opportunities to enhance certain aspects of the patient’s journey that will keep these new competitors at bay:

Focus on convenience. Deliver key aspects of the patient’s journey in a more expedient manner; self-scheduling, for example, may be the best (and easiest) opportunity to ease a patient’s journey into your practice. With self-scheduling, patients can book appointments 24 hours a day, 7 days a week – that’s 168 hours, a remarkable jump from the 40 hours in which our phones are typically answered. Allow booking liberally, then scan through the schedule a day or two before to check for anomalies – and consider a more robust appointment confirmation process to eliminate no-shows. Add an automated waitlist to take advantage of cancellations – and serve to deliver on yet another promise of convenience – to get a sooner appointment without having to jump through hoops. Strive for a *frictionless* process for your patients.

Enhance communication. Today, it’s difficult to communicate with us. Most practices still rely on phones and fax machines as the primary platforms for communication. Both methods are antiquated, and often frustrate practice employees as much as they irk patients. Consider novel platforms like bi-directional texting and web chats; embrace in-basket messaging, noting that some prominent health systems – [Cleveland Clinic](#), for [example](#) – are charging patients for the service. If coded and billed correctly, many health insurers provide coverage for it.

Do your homework. Spend an hour studying the new healthcare entrants; to expedite your search, here are a few to peruse:

Amazon Dollar General Best Buy

Keep it simple. Document the strengths and weaknesses of each offering – and then step back to consider the opportunities and threats. While you may not agree with these companies’ services and platforms – or perhaps their entire being – rest assured that they have spent considerable time testing their ideas before launching. Maintain an open mind;

it's important to anticipate the changing needs of your patients. Review the results at a staff meeting and gather your team's input. Remind your employees – and yourselves – that taxi companies thought they were insulated from Uber, hotel companies from AirBnb, etc. Competition is not a bad thing; we just need to be prepared for it.

Fill the schedule. Medical practices have the great fortune of customers calling day in and day out; some are new, others are well-established. They have one issue in common: they need you. Amazon – and the other retailers – would love to have this problem; we simply need to figure out how to best *channel* the demand. Consider mapping the framework of your schedule, then allow your team to book the appointments without barriers (including empowering the team to make booking decisions without your permission). If needed, hold a few slots open until the day prior – but an even better strategy is to host an “afternoon sweep” each day. During this five-minute huddle, scan the schedule for the next 2 to 3 days. Look for patients who won't show (they've been admitted to the hospital or called in to say they're feeling fine) – and proactively call the patients who are likely no-shows. (Offer the ones who indicate they wish to cancel, a telemedicine appointment instead – research shows that 50% will take you up on it! Of course, only do so if clinically appropriate.) You may find that you don't need to hold the extra slots, as these efforts will result in having a few on the books to accommodate additions.

The past several years have altered patients' expectations for customer service; consider assessing your practice's ability to deliver the experience for which patients hope.

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