



Consumer Engagement Innovations:

The Three Tactics Health Systems Should Use but Never Do

Health systems are missing consumer engagement opportunities by not using time-tested techniques employed by other industries.

Introduction

Imagine your refrigerator broke, it can't be fixed, and you need a new one. You go to a reputable store, pick out a refrigerator, but there are no price tags anywhere and no one at the store can tell you how much it will cost. The best they can do is give you a wide range of what it might cost depending on a lot of variables.

Would you buy a refrigerator from that store? Most people would give it a hard pass. It would be ridiculous to expect anyone to buy something of high value without knowing how much it costs and yet that's exactly what health systems have expected of patients for decades. With changes in legislation, technology, and patient attitudes, health systems can no longer hide behind outdated practices. The health systems that can effectively communicate and engage with their patients on a variety of levels will be set up for success in an ever-evolving consumer-driven world.

Why engagement is important today.

Chronic conditions among the US and global populations are at an all-time high. Currently 60% of adults in the US have a chronic disease, with 40% having two or more conditions.¹ Additionally, the pandemic has created a whole new set of health issues separate from COVID-19 itself. At the onset of the pandemic when the health system was overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, providers cancelled or delayed elective surgeries. In turn, there has been a decline in preventive care such as cancer screenings and pediatric vaccinations, routine care for chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, and even urgent care for conditions such as stroke and heart attack. 41% of patients put off getting medical care with 12% of that group not seeking urgent care.² We are just now seeing the effects of this delayed care. For instance, one study from the American Cancer Society reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant declines in new cancers being diagnosed.³

The pandemic didn't just lead to delayed care, it also led to a 400% increase in patient reported symptoms of depression and anxiety according to a report by KFF.⁴ Additionally, in 2022, 25% of patients reported that they weren't able to get the treatment they wanted or needed for their behavioral health issues.⁵

Compounding the fallout from delayed care and an increase in mental health conditions, trust in providers is at an all-time low with only 34% of Americans having "great confidence in medical leaders" down from 75% since the 1960s.⁶ We saw the implications of this play out during the pandemic with Americans debating the efficacy of social distancing guidelines, mask wearing and vaccines – regardless of CDC recommendations.

So how do we solve the issues of growing chronic illnesses, continuing to get patients back into preventive care and

other treatments, and building up trust in the healthcare system? The answer is consumer engagement.

Healthcare engagement can improve health outcomes.

We know the approaches to health engagement that work. We have seen tactics used outside of healthcare that, when employed in a healthcare setting, are successful in driving patients to take action to improve their own health outcomes. For example, based on multiple health engagement programs that Engagys, the leading healthcare consumer engagement consulting and research firm, has defined and implemented, we have seen dramatic improvements when personalization is used. Just a few examples:

- Approximately three times as many patients closed at least one care gap when patients with multiple gaps were targeted and personalized messages were employed.
- A client found that they could increase their Osteoporosis Management in Women (OMW) measure by more than 30% year over year when personalized messages were introduced.
- Kept appointments for mammograms increased by more than 30% when using a patient's doctor's actual voice as part of an automated call.

To solve our country's healthcare problems, we need to address engagement, and engagement starts with creating the right experience to enable behavior change on the consumer's terms. However, health entities are being compared to companies in other industries like Amazon and Netflix, where consumer experiences are managed as the sum of an individual's interactions. According to a recent Salesforce survey, State of the Connected Consumer, 62% of consumers say their experiences with one industry influences their expectations of others.⁷ Here are some engagement lessons from those other industries and how healthcare engagement measures up.

1. Transparency

Can you think of a single other product or service that does not make consumers aware of the price before asking them to buy the service? Hiding pricing would be unethical, yet that is the norm in healthcare.

Transparency in Healthcare

At a time when patients are savvier than ever when it comes to how their data is used, what they are getting for the price, and how materials are sourced, it makes sense that healthcare - one of the most personal services anyone can participate in - should be transparent. However, this is not the case. In fact, legislation is being employed to prod the healthcare industry to be more transparent.

In 2019, President Trump issued an executive order expanding on the previous price transparency measures for health systems. The rule requiring health systems to publicly post the cost of their services online went into effect January 2, 2021. However, more than a year after it went into effect, 85% of hospitals remain noncompliant with the rule according to a report by Patients Rights Advocate.⁸

Whether it's because they don't have the technology in place to comply or they don't want to share their pricing, it benefits both patients and health systems to be transparent about the cost of their services. Sharing cost is especially important in this current economic climate where inflation increased beyond 8%, the highest it's been since 1981, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.⁹ As we see in other industries, when companies are transparent on their cost and the reasoning behind it, it can increase loyalty.

Transparency Done Right

There is a movement in corporate America to offer radical transparency to its consumers. The thought is that by unveiling business practices at all levels, organizations will gain trust with employees and the public and set them apart from companies shrouded in secrecy. There are numerous benefits to employing a transparent philosophy at the corporate level, but the main benefit is gaining consumer trust and loyalty. According to research by Label Insight, 94% of consumers are likely to be loyal to a brand that offers complete transparency.¹⁰

Patagonia, a designer of outdoor clothing and gear, is an example of a company committed to being transparent about their supply chain and how they achieve sustainable manufacturing practices. As any patron of their goods will tell you, their sustainable practices don't come cheap. However, with their emphasis on eco-friendly decisions, their loyal customers are more than willing to pay for quality goods they feel confident are not contributing to environmental issues. Paying more for goods from a brand that is transparent is not an issue. In fact, according to the previously cited Label Insight research, 73% of consumers say they would be willing to pay more for a product that offers complete transparency in all attributes.

Pricing transparency in healthcare would go a long way to earn patients' trust in healthcare organizations and even in physicians. According to the American College of Physicians, transparency can "improve quality, safety and efficiency throughout the healthcare system due to competition and/or the availability of clinical benchmarks."¹¹

2. Personalization

Imagine calling your hospital, reaching someone on the phone immediately and being greeted by name. Conversely,

imagine signing onto your health portal and information specific to your current health state is displayed with a – “here’s where you left off” message.

Personalization in Healthcare

Personalization is so lacking in healthcare that many healthcare enterprises struggle to get past, “Dear <FirstName>,” in their outreach. And a patient’s call to the call center often results in multiple transfers or discussions, all of which begin anew with each call or transfer. Rarely is it seamless and evident that the organization understands who they are speaking with and how best to serve that patient.

Healthcare organizations arguably know patients more intimately than any other goods or service provider. Health systems have the ability to leverage that data and technology to create a personalized engagement experience from communications outreach to inbound communications such as portal use. This can be done with the same approach that companies like Amazon, Netflix, and Spotify employ for personalized recommendations. It’s called next best action and it can be used by health entities to help guide patients to make health decisions.¹² Whereas other industries use data to personalize recommendations in order to keep them watching in Netflix’s case or buying in Amazon’s case, health systems can use their patients’ data to organize and prioritize the next communication to drive a desired outcome such as closing a gap in care. Additionally, personalization could be used to improve upcoming appointment notifications such as detailing how each individual patient should prepare before the appointment. This type of personalization should also be used to improve the inbound call experience and should rely on personalization that organizes scripting based on a patient’s use case as well as understands where the patient last left off.

Personalization Done Right

Many companies use consumer data to customize experiences directly for each consumer. Consumers now expect this type of unique user experience when interacting with online products. 66% of consumers expect companies to understand their unique needs and expectations according to the previously mentioned Salesforce survey, State of the Connected Consumer.

Netflix, the online video streaming service, provides an example of how personalization creates a unique experience for each member profile. By collecting user data and using AI algorithms, Netflix is able to generate a curated experience that younger generations have grown up with and now expect. For instance, Netflix knows where each viewer left off watching Inventing Anna or the latest season of Bridgerton and not only lets them pick up where they left off, but quickly gives them a list of recommendations for the next show they should watch based off their viewing habits to ensure sustained engagement. This type of personalization not only ensures retention but can also lead to more revenue. According to a survey by Infosys, “a wide majority of consumers (78 percent) agree that they would be more likely to purchase from a retailer again if they provided offers targeted to their interests, wants or needs.”¹³

Additionally, 81% of consumers want brands to get to know them and understand when to approach them and when not to.¹⁴ On top of that, a majority of consumers want more personalization in their healthcare. For instance, in research conducted by Abbott, 72% of patients wanted more personalized care that pertains directly to their unique set of healthcare needs based on their own data.¹⁵ And, personalization has proven to improve clinical outcomes. For a Diabetes Management program, there was a 22% decrease in blood sugar levels in a one-year, weekly or biweekly, automated “nurse” intervention program that

used personalized patient measurement data for each outreach. It only makes sense for healthcare organizations to make personalization strategies a priority.

3. Community

Imagine feeling so connected to your health system that you actively seek out ways to engage with them and promote their services to other people. That might sound a little farfetched, but this exact thing happens in the retail world all the time. Think about all the times someone has recommended their favorite phone, sneakers, or even coffee.

Community in Healthcare

The pandemic has left so many people floundering that never before have they looked so longingly for a sense of belonging, yet most health systems sit idle. Online communities are a great way to connect likeminded consumers and it's no different for healthcare patients. When dealing with a diagnosis or medical issue, patients often go straight to Google or WebMD to find out more information. When researching about a health issue, many people read message boards, chats, and want to know about other patients' experiences right from the source. However, no one thinks to check with their local hospital's website as a starting point and it's a huge, missed opportunity.

There are many reasons why building a healthcare community fails. Has the health system earned the trust of their population to be the one to offer the community? What is the unifying connection of the community? For instance, it was found in journey mapping people living with hemophilia that it wasn't the condition itself that unified those in the community but rather it was the caregiver moms who were navigating unknowns at each stage that created such a sticky community. Health systems need to understand what problem they are solving for patients.

If patients don't perceive a problem that the platform/community is going to solve, it is very hard to build a community.

Community Done Right

The best retailers build a community of followers and inspire a cult following. Apple, the technology behemoth, certainly comes to mind when speaking of a cult following. It started out producing a line of innovative computer products and expanded its community as consumers bought into a lifestyle, not just a computer or a phone. Some customers define themselves in part as loyal Apple users. Their expansion has continued into their online community. One thing in particular that stands out about Apple's approach is that the company incorporates their online community right into their website. Apple Communities is touted as a place where users can find answers, ask questions, and connect with other Apple users around the world. ¹⁶ Apple takes this group a step farther and rewards different levels of engagement with badges, perks and privileges, and showcases status on leaderboards.

Corporations often create a community of loyal brand ambassadors that recommend their products and services with no cost to them. Health systems can be proactive in the way that consumer goods companies are to create a following. For instance, hospital groups can include patients on advisory boards, in social causes, run social media contests, employ social media influencers, and reward engagement and make it public. Additionally, health systems can and should research the types of programs and support that would most benefit patients and then use that information to create patient communities where people can ask and answer questions and offer support and information related to their health queries or specific diagnosis. There is certainly a need for this type of community support and information. For instance, Inspire,

an online health community for patients and their caregivers dealing with chronic conditions, cancer, and rare diseases, has over two million members and published over eight million posts.¹⁷ Creating a community of consumers who intimately know the ins and outs of health system services will only increase trust, loyalty, and retention.

Conclusion

None of these marketing tactics are new concepts for direct-to-consumer firms, but healthcare has always been the exception. Health systems need to transform their patients' experiences into an intentional and cohesive journey. Establishing genuine business-to-patient relationships in healthcare will drive more loyalty than typically seen in other industries—nothing is more personal than an individual's or a family member's health. We know the pandemic has accelerated technology's role in consumer choice, expectations, delivery, and access. This holds true in healthcare, and it has never been more critical for the industry to seize on a trend. The slow and steady transition from a physician-centric model to a consumer-centric model in healthcare must also accelerate so the individual patient becomes the focus.

Patients cannot use Yelp to find the best hospital or health system yet, but hopefully someday soon they will, and it's up to health systems to use the springboard currently provided to begin this process now. Transparency, personalization, and community building are just some of the tools in our toolbox to expedite this change. It's no secret that engaged consumers are good for business. For example, according to research from Gallop, consumers engaged with a particular company or brand will spend 23% more with that company than the average consumer.¹⁸ When healthcare entities focus on a holistic consumer-centric marketing approach, all stakeholders win.

So how do health systems get started? First, assess engagement strategies, goals, and objectives in context of current processes, messaging models, and barriers to engagement. Then evaluate your stakeholder and enterprise organizational models, performance drivers, and measurement approaches to create a design suited to your capabilities. Next, incorporate behavioral economics, healthcare messaging best practices, and traditional direct marketing techniques into healthcare-specific communications.

And then? Be bold. Leverage the proven techniques from other industries to forge a new, engaging path in healthcare.

About Engagys

[Engagys](#) is the leading digital health engagement consulting and research firm leveraging decades of experience to increase consumer engagement and digital adoption for health plans, PBMs and health systems. Our projects help clients change the way their members and patients engage, leading to improved health, increased revenue, and lower costs.

Kathleen Ellmore, Co-Founder, Managing Partner, Engagys

Ms. Ellmore is one of the earliest pioneers in bringing the best of consumer marketing and data driven methodologies to healthcare. Instead of getting you to eat when you are not hungry and buy things you don't need, we can finally use the same strategies to instead change the health equation in America. Kathleen previously led the Consumer Engagement consulting practice for Welltok (formerly Silverlink) for 12 years, leveraging its data repository of over a billion consumer health interactions, the best of behavioral economics, and the latest in clinical research, to create evidenced-based communications on what works to drive consumer healthcare behavior yielding better outcomes and lower costs. She is often quoted in the trade and national press and is a regular speaker on the national stage, having spent the first twenty years of her career in brand marketing at leading consumer marketing organizations, including General Mills and P&G. Additionally, she was a Vice President at Digitas, a leading direct marketing firm. Recently she was selected as Consultant Member of the first ever FDA's Patient Engagement Advisory Committee.

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