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The Role of the Contact Center in the Patient Engagement Revolution

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An Introduction to Innovative Customer Service

To many, customer service is the basic idea that as providers, we deliver a certain level of experience and service to those who help pay our bills and keep us in business. Whether it is through acquiring new business, retaining existing patients, or expanding existing relationships through new opportunities, one customer experience can set the tone for a single customer's impression of our organization and impact many others in the process.

Through the internet and social media, patients are smarter, more educated shoppers. Before they make the decision to do business, they have researched their options through various channels in an effort to ensure they make the most educated and appropriate decision. Once that business is acquired, the customer experience helps guarantee future business with both them and their peers.

What if you were able to provide a customer experience others envied, where patients sang your praises through every channel possible, and business was endless? Realistically speaking, we know there will always be the 'never satisfied' patient or the disgruntled partner. However, we can create an innovative approach to customer service that leads with those ideas and values in mind.

As healthcare providers, we have the ability to provide a secure, efficient, and effective process to engage with our patients, retain their business, and help ensure that their decision to do business with us and, in many cases, trust us with their health and the health of the ones they love, is a priority to us.

The contact center serves as the core of the customer service arena for companies of all types. It is the natural fit for leading the charge in creating a more innovative patient experience. Whether large or small, every healthcare organization has a customer service center that plays a critical role in helping expand patient engagement strategies. As an industry, we will never be perfect. But with the right strategies and technologies in place, we can create a plan that tempts perfection.

Patient Engagement Defined

The healthcare industry is extremely complex and sensitive in nature. Through regulations, privacy challenges, and increasing research and technology, this industry continues to change regularly. Similarly, the expectations of patients continue to change in an effort to get quicker access to information they require. The idea of patient engagement is providing patients with access and allowing them to communicate with the provider when and how they prefer.

The downfall for many providers is waiting for patients to reach out to them before they provide information. With recent changes to regulations through the Affordable Care Act (ACA), providers are forced to be more proactive in their efforts to engage with patients. Cost-cutting measures, penalties, and potential loss of business are creating an increasing need for automation around engagement practices.

The Engagement Revolution – Intuitive Customer Experience

Patient engagement is no longer just about automated outbound calls for appointment reminders and refill confirmations. Providers are finding creative ways to reach out to patients. As technology offerings grow, providers are presented with the opportunity to leverage existing infrastructures and new options to expand how they communicate with patients, other providers, and payers. No matter who the customer may be, patient engagement is transforming in a way that the expectations of the customer demand personalization, automation, and standardization.

As we explore the expectations of the patient, it is important to look at how the provider can remain competitive and retain business. At the end of the day, the contact center or patient service center is at the core of patient engagement and communications. Many of the lessons to be learned are driven by communication options, interaction details, reporting, and best practices that can be started in the contact center and rolled out throughout the enterprise – no matter the size of the provider.

5 Lessons to Be Learned

Customer Experience: A Multichannel Endeavor

The customer experience is redefined every day. Customers have different preferences based on nationality, gender, age, and other demographics. And their desire to do business how and when they prefer only increases the complexity of these expectations. For this reason, the business must to adhere to these ever-changing expectations in an effort to more effectively match customer needs while providing a competitive advantage given an innovative customer journey.

Many industries have already succeeded in capitalizing on the concept of a 'when they want it, how they want it' mentality. In today's fast-paced society, many of these industries have taken an innovative multichannel or omnichannel approach in order to make this goal a reality. For this reason, great lessons can be learned from various industries about how to interact with the customer.

For healthcare providers and payers, patient engagement is the primary focus in cutting costs, reducing readmissions, and preventing future expenses – as well as ensuring a seamless experience for all customer inquiries. Looking at how we, as consumers, deal with innovative businesses on a daily basis can help drive how we implement customer strategies for our own business.

The True Meaning of Multichannel

The term multichannel is thrown around continuously, creating a mismatch of terms and definitions. As it relates to 'multichannel' in the context discussed here, it is the ability to use two or more channels to communicate with patients, members, and other parties involved in daily operations. These channels may range from traditional modes of communication such as voice, fax, and email, to more recent channels like web chat, social media, and video.

The general idea with any multichannel implementation is that providers are allowing patients and payers to communicate with them in the way they prefer. By creating a multichannel environment that invites multiple ways to engage both inbound and outbound, patients receive a more personalized level of care from the provider. Furthermore, many multichannel implementations include self-service options to increase access to information no matter the time of day.

Knowing When and Where

Multichannel in no way means 'every channel.' One of the biggest challenges for providers is determining what channels to make available to patients. One would expect that the majority of providers have traditional voice outlets to engage with patients. This may continue to be the primary channel for many patients. Given the demographic of their patient base, it is the responsibility of the provider to determine what additional channels, if any, will prove beneficial to their patient engagement strategies.

The best and easiest way to determine next steps is to simply ask. For instance, simple inquiries like appointment reminders, procedure follow-up, or refill confirmations are increasingly being made available through SMS and email. At the time of enrollment with the provider, the patient has the option to communication preference, recognizing that these preferences may differ based on the notification. This may be driven by availability or confidentiality concerns. Either way, the idea is that the patient has the choice.

Multichannel projects should be organized and implemented like many other technology tasks. Providers should talk to patients, determine the need, and look at a scalable, paced plan to increase engagement automation. Once a plan has been put in place as to what channels to offer, how to offer them, and how to implement, it will be important to determine an ongoing management plan. This includes staffing requirements, recognizing that not every user will be capable of handling different types of interactions. It also includes an ongoing maintenance plan for administration and reporting. Monitoring the use of current channels will help providers expand existing and future projects to create an even more effective strategy.

Lessons Learned: What Other Industries Can Teach Us

For decades, the retail industry has created a stir in how they interact with customers. From Zappos to Amazon, companies continue to transform how we do business. Our expectations as consumers have evolved, and more industries have capitalized on this evolution as a way to become innovative thinkers and providers of customer service. Great lessons can be learned from these customer experience leaders.

In some ways, the healthcare industry is forced to be somewhat conservative in how they handle information. Personal security prevents providers from getting too innovative in their efforts to provide a superior customer experience. What they can do, however, is learn from the lessons of other industries in an effort to ensure that different strategies are successful.

Self-Service Done Right

The travel and financial services industries have self-service figured out. They have done the research to know that self-service can be a communications channel that can free up real-people resources in the contact center and become a preferred method of contact for customers. No wait times, no repeating information, no language barriers…just a quick and easy way to get information when you want it. If only it were that easy.

IVRs have earned a bad reputation in recent years, mainly as a result of poor implementations. Companies not taking the time and resources to develop menus and options that actually prove beneficial to customers. The airline industry has been able to revolutionize an automated yet personalized experience for the customer. Upon calling in, the system immediately recognizes who the customer is based on the number associated with the account. From there, recent activity on the account is tagged and the menu prompts are driven by that activity. For instance, if the customer has an upcoming flight, the IVR assumes they may be calling about this. The prompts are now driven by making changes to that flight, cancelling the flight, or getting current status. If the customer is not calling in about that, they are directed through another personalized menu.

The idea behind this implementation is that automation of the IVR can prove to be just as much, if not more, personalized than a real person. Through integration with backend systems that contain relevant customer data, the IVR is more dynamic and intelligent.

For healthcare, this same data exists in EMR systems or billing applications. As soon as a patient calls in, the IVR can be linked to relevant patient information to help drive the call or suggest why they might be calling. From recent procedures or discharges to upcoming appointments and outstanding bills, a patient journey is created through a self-service engine.

Any time information is made available to a patient or caregiver, it is always important to include security parameters for authenticating the caller. This may mean limiting information that is provided through the automated menu and escalating the call to a person if confidential medical information needs to be shared. It could also mean getting creative with authentication to confirm that the caller is who they say they are through recent technology like voice biometrics. No matter the implementation, self-service implemented correctly can serve as a cost-saving, convenient, personalized communication channel for providers, patients, and payers.

Process Automation: Not Your Typical Player

Basic business processes are targeted on a regular basis as a way to increase efficiencies within a business and standardize everyday processes. Much value is overlooked around the idea of leveraging business process automation as a tool for integrating and automating the customer journey. Most processes involve multiple data points, various users, and different tasks that must be completed in an effort to create this efficiency. Ensuring these are all seamlessly tied together can help create an improved patient experience and increase operational efficiencies.

A Communications Driven Process

Every interaction that comes into an organization drives some type of process. Communications between a provider and a patient are typically related to an overall process that will include various pieces of data and multiple parties in an effort to complete it. However, organizations often overlook the value of combining processes with the interactions that take place.

When we look at patient details, when they have been to see us, and what they need, there is a huge value in pinpointing the interactions they have with us to help better drive the direction of related business processes. From frequency of interactions, the reason for them calling, and the sentiment associated with the interactions, metrics around patient communications can help us better handle processes and future interactions.

Tying Multiple Layers Together

Starting with the patient discharge process, there are various pieces that have to be taken into consideration. Follow-up appointments are scheduled, all information is submitted to EMR applications, patients are monitored, follow-up interactions are handled and reported on, and progress of the patient must be tracked. This is one common process, with various touch points that could be streamlined to create a single automated process.

Data exists in various systems, and additional processes are kicked off that trigger these actions. Providers have the opportunity to look for integration points across all of their systems, including their communications platform, in order to streamline basic business processes.

This common patient discharge process could be facilitated by a single automated process. At each step in the process, a new action could be taken. When the patient is released from the facility, all information is tracked in the EMR or other business application. At that point, a follow up appointment is set up, the patient is sent a reminder based on their preferred method of contact, and any kind of advanced biometric devices are registered to them. The results from these devices can be periodically tracked and sent to the provider, and notifications can be sent to both the provider and the patient as a way to monitor ongoing patient care. If the patient reaches out to the provider at any given point, all previous interactions, biometric data and EMR related data are passed over to the physician, nurse, or representative taking the call to ensure a more personalized experience.

This process is just one of many driven by a higher process but includes various points of contact with different individuals and applications. By streamlining these efforts, both the provider and patient are reassured the correct protocol is carried out automatically. Additionally, all information, tasks, and interactions that take place are tracked and monitored for future follow up.

Not Your Typical Contact Center

Traditionally, the call center was a point of contact for the provider. The role of this center was to schedule appointments, answer basic questions, or take messages for physicians. As technology and patient expectations evolve, the call center became the contact center. This engagement could include telehealth opportunities with physicians and nurses, self-service channels for bill payment, and multichannel options for communicating with experts and providers.

Some providers would argue that they do not have a true contact center. In their mind, a contact center is a room full of individuals fielding calls from patients, other providers, payers, and other parties. In reality, a contact center could be hundreds of representatives, nurses, and physicians, or just a handful of individuals fielding patient calls. The main goal for the contact center is to service incoming and outgoing customers as well as respond to patient needs and inquiries.

No matter the size of the patient service center, it is the core of the patient engagement operation. It is imperative that providers focus more on these operations to help guide the patient journey.

The Importance of Resources

When we think about the frustration of dealing with companies on a daily basis, that frustration is often driven by the reality that the person taking our call does not have the information they need to respond efficiently. This may be a limitation of the technology provided to them or a hole in the business process. Either way, the representative on the phone is the individual who we take our irritation out on.

No matter the patient inquiry, resources will be one of the biggest challenges for providers as they look to improve engagement strategies. The term resources refers to the people in the seats as well as the resources made available. Research has shown that content employees provide higher levels of customer service. If an employee doesn’t have access to a patient file or has to consistently ask for patients to repeat information even though it has been confirmed through the IVR, this lack of resources creates frustration for the patient and the employee servicing them.

As discussed in the multichannel section above, the easiest way to gain insight into a customer’s needs is to simply ask. The same holds true for those who work for you. In many cases, they are also the customer. By surveying employees who talk to patients daily, you can get additional insight into patient requests and determine what your employees may need to more effectively do their job and provide improved customer service.

Proactive vs. Reactive Engagement

It can be easy to respond to patients only when they engage with us. What sets certain providers apart is the ability to create a better relationship with patients by taking a more proactive approach to customer service. The idea that we can provide value to a patient even when they do not realize it can help expand our ongoing relationship with them.

Patients trust providers with their health and wellbeing. This dynamic of the industry makes it even more important that the level of patient service be unique. The contact center has tools in place to help provide necessary responses to incoming interactions along with more creative outbound notifications.

As the social media trend evolves, more and more organizations are using this channel to engage with customers. The same holds true with provider opportunities. Thanks to social media, patients can get additional insight about almost everything from their physicians that was previously never available.

Additionally, proactive reminders through multichannel options like SMS, mobile applications, and email can help patients feel more in touch and educated on their health. From pre-op to post-op, to prescription reminders, to basic 'just checking in', automated outbound communications can serve as a great tool to talk to your patients without requiring the human resources to do so.

A Changing Industry

The Affordable Care Act has forced providers and payers to take a step back and look at overall business processes and operations. Many of these are tied to how they work with patients and members on an everyday basis. Preventing readmission, ensuring patient following, and overall population management are increasingly important for healthcare organizations of all types.

As telemedicine and biometrics increase, the one on one interaction that providers have with patients will decrease, and the incoming and outgoing communications will increase. The way physicians practice medicine is transforming, and there is an increased need for flexibility for the industry. Patients are now looking for new and creative ways to work with their physicians in an effort to save time and money and get increased care.

Given the recent regulations, there is an increasing concern over the quality of care. That concern could be limited with just basic changes in how communication is handled with patients. The level of personalization does not cost providers, but it can create an increase in revenue. This change in the industry, although scary and uncertain, can also serve as a great opportunity for healthcare providers and payers to re-examine changes they may have needed to make in the past that are now unavoidable.

Call to Action

In an uncertain time for medicine and healthcare, providers and payers have the opportunity to capitalize on adjustments to their previous processes and procedures. Through increased integration, improved customer service strategies, and assessment of current business processes, organizations can make the decision to move to a more innovative and proactive strategy for patient engagement.

The contact center or patient service center can serve as a great starting point and central location for change. In addition, contact center metrics and interaction reporting can help providers learn more about what to expect from incoming calls and interactions.

It is important that providers and payers realize that although they are in the same industry, the expectations of patients and members may differ significantly. Just because one strategy has worked for one of their peer organizations does not mean that it will work for the demographic of their patient or member base. However, those same strategies may be able to be tweaked in an effort to realize the same changes.

We are all in the business the make a living. What separates the healthcare industry from others, however, is the idea that we are dealing with real people, their health and wellbeing – and still trying to do what is best for them. The services being rendered and sold are much more sensitive in nature, so a quality patient journey can be the perfect place to add personalization and care to your services. Take time to sit down with various levels and types of employees and patients. Learn what is working, what needs to change, and make a plan to transform your business. Become part of the patient engagement revolution.

About Interactive Intelligence

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Interactive Intelligence offers integrated contact center, content management, and business process automation solutions that increase customer service and satisfaction. With the ability to integrate with existing administration systems, the company's standards-based all-in-one communications software suite eliminates the cost and complexity of multiple systems and provides a single view of all customer interactions across your organization. Almost 200 insurance companies and over 6,000 organizations worldwide back the company's open, standards-based, all-in-one IP communications software suite which can be deployed as an on-premises or cloud-based solution that improves agent and policyholder service.

The Author

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