Five Steps to Improving Patient Engagement

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Consumerism is set to be a major disruptor in the healthcare industry. Although still in the early stages, providers choosing to ignore this rapidly evolving phenomenon do so at their own peril. According to a 2015 report by McKinsey, today's patients increasingly expect the same consumer experience in their healthcare encounters as they've come to expect in their retail encounters. The same report finds most patients admit they are willing to choose alternative methods of care such as retail clinics, over seeing their primary care physician, in some instances.[1] As consumerism continues to accelerate, providers will be challenged to find new ways to keep their current patient base happy while attracting new patients. But that's only one part of the challenge.

Increased regulation, changing reimbursement models, and a new focus on patient satisfaction bring added pressures. Providers now find themselves burdened with hours of tedious administrative work each day, leaving less time to care for patients. A recent study funded by the American Medical Association found that every hour spent with a patient creates two hours of paperwork.[2] The same report notes the average provider spends just 27 percent of office time with patients, while almost 50 percent of their day is spent on electronic health records and deskwork.

The combination of consumerism and increased administrative duties leaves already over-extended providers wondering how to address these new challenges so as to remain viable in the long term. Fortunately, there is a solution – patient engagement. Staying connected in a meaningful way with patients throughout the care continuum – beyond the exam room – can improve outcomes, provide a better patient experience, and increase loyalty.

Following are five proven steps providers can take to improve patient engagement.

1. Offer a Patient Portal

Ninety percent of Americans use the Internet. While the highest usage can be attributed to millennials, seniors are gaining pace. A recent report published by the Pew Research Center states 82 percent of those aged 65-69 are online.[3] Unless most of your patients are over the age of 80, it's likely the majority use the Internet.

Patients want to use the Internet to help manage their healthcare, just like they use it to manage their daily lives. With patient portals, they can view test results, send messages to their provider, schedule appointments, fill out forms, and update personal information. Managing these tasks online means less time spent filling out paperwork the next time they're in the office, which helps improve patient satisfaction. Patient portals also motivate patients to be more engaged in self-care.[4] Patient portals lead to happier, healthier patients.

2. Implement Self-service Appointment Scheduling

An article published by Physicians Practice notes most patients prefer to schedule appointments themselves; up to 77 percent actually search online prior to making an appointment. Yet only 20 percent of providers offer the service, leaving calls to the office as the only option.[5] Typically, those calls can be made only during office hours Monday through Friday, whereas self-service appointment scheduling can be done 24/7. Consider the average phone call to schedule an appointment takes eight minutes – with 30 percent of that on hold time – and it's easy to see why patients prefer doing it themselves. Offering patients the opportunity to schedule appointments makes them feel more engaged in their own healthcare and improves the patient experience. It also saves staff from manual, time-consuming phone calls, which leaves them more time to spend helping patients already in the office.

3. Automate Appointment Reminders

According to Modern Healthcare, approximately 23 percent of patients fail to show up for their appointment unless proactively reminded.[6] The number one reason? They simply forget. The cost of that forgetfulness to a practice is substantial. According to Physicians Practice, the average patient visit is worth between $100 to $150.[7] If a practice allows for 20 appointments a day, and 20 percent are no-shows, the impact is $2,000 a week. Automated appointment reminders can reduce the number of no-shows, and allow providers to quickly backfill open appointments slots to avoid lost revenue.

With the move toward value-based care, no-shows can have a negative impact on quality outcomes as well. Patients that don't show up for scheduled appointments may miss important screenings. Enabling them to schedule appointments when, where and how it's most convenient to them is a win-win for both providers and patients.

4. Leverage Secure Messaging

Visits to the doctor are still primarily to treat patients who are already sick. But as today's patients take more responsibility for their own care, they are more likely to seek preventative treatments and screenings as well. Secure messaging can help providers be more collaborative in this effort. Practices can inform patients of seasonable check-ups, screenings, vaccine clinics, and more. Secure messaging also allows providers to send educational messaging to targeted groups, such as foot care information to diabetic patients.

In addition to care-specific information, providers can send more practice-related announcements, such as introductions to new staff, new services available, and changes in office hours or procedures. Engaging patients through secure messaging improves the patient-provider relationship, expands care opportunities, and increases loyalty.

5. Enable Online Payments

The American Medical Association reports that nearly 25 percent of practice revenue now comes directly from patients, in large part due to the adoption of high deductible health plans.[8] Modern Healthcare predicts that number could increase by as much as 50 percent within the next two years.[9]

To minimize the potential revenue impact and improve the payment experience for patients, practices need to make it as easy as possible for patients to pay their bills. One way is to enable patients to pay their healthcare bills the same way they pay their other bills – online. An article in Becker's ASC Review states nine out of ten patients say they want to pay their healthcare bills online.[10]

Offering patients online bill-payment options improves transparency; patients can view their statements, including their deductibles, so they know exactly what they owe. Giving them the opportunity to set up payment plans helps them make more informed financial decisions. And allowing patients to save their credit card information means future payments are even easier. Providing patients the convenience of online bill pay means providers are more likely to be paid on time and in full. The result is reduced cost of collections, and a reduction in bad-debt write offs. Patients are happier too because it puts them in control.

Putting it All Together

The rise of consumerism in healthcare means patients expect a higher level of service, especially now that they're footing more of the bill. Yet with increased administrative burdens, providers are left with little time to focus on improving the patient experience. Although 84 percent say it is one of their top three priorities, more than 50 percent admit they haven't invested enough in this effort.[11]

Implementing a few simple solutions to engage patients throughout the care continuum – beyond the exam room – can improve outcomes, ensure patient satisfaction, increase patient loyalty, and help maintain practice viability for years to come.

SOURCES

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