A paradigm shift is occurring in how care is delivered, and it's not being led by providers, payers, or regulatory bodies.

As deductibles and out-of-pocket costs continue to rise, patients are increasingly taking on a new role as healthcare consumers. Experiences from the general consumer market influence expectations for speed, transparency, and overall convenience. Capabilities such as price comparison shopping, on-the-go orders and payments, and hyper-personalized engagements are reshaping what people look for in a provider. This trend is commonly referred to as the consumerization of healthcare, and it is critical for independent practices and health systems with long-term growth aspirations to observe and act accordingly.

To say that most healthcare organizations are behind the curve on these trends would be an understatement. In its 2018 State of Consumerism in Healthcare Report, consultancy group Kaufman Hall found that only 8% of US hospitals and health systems demonstrated strong consumer-centric performance. Providers that ignore this trend do so to their own detriment. Current processes and systems are too complicated and unwieldy for patients to develop a strong sense of loyalty. As a result, providers risk losing business to newly emerging nontraditional services that emphasize technology and convenience.
To understand this trend and its potential impact on your business, it is necessary to delineate the factors driving this movement and the specific expectations of customers. From there, you can more effectively evaluate the opportunities available to help support your patients as they seek to take charge of their healthcare.

**Tech brings disruption**

According to Gartner, “Consumerization is the specific impact that consumer-originated technologies can have on enterprises. It reflects how enterprises will be affected by, and can take advantage of, new technologies and models that originate and develop in the consumer space, rather than in the enterprise IT sector.”

By embracing consumer-friendly tools and practices, telehealth-based startups, retail clinics, and urgent care facilities are steadily expanding their presence in the healthcare market. In the early 2000s, the first retail-based clinics were established. Today, there are approximately 2,000 facilities in the US alone, which analysts project to grow over the coming decade. Additionally, a series of Consumer Health Insights surveys conducted by McKinsey between 2014 and 2018 reveal an increase in urgent care visits, while reported primary care provider (PCP) visits declined from 83% to 70%.

Despite these trends, the data also suggest that PCPs are well positioned to turn things around. According to McKinsey, 85% of survey respondents preferred their PCP’s office for annual exams, while 80% preferred it for routine care.

While providers are likely to retain periodic checkups and chronic care visits, alternative players still pose a significant risk to acute care services. Those suffering from a cold, flu, respiratory infection, and other nonemergency acute ailments want faster, cheaper, and more convenient care. With thinning profit margins and a portion of compensation now tied to patient satisfaction, providers must leverage technology to deliver more flexible, personalized experiences and empower patients with actionable data and information.
Creating a more patient-centric experience

Embracing patient-centricity begins with listening to your customers' needs. Here are some of the most common expectations of today’s healthcare buyers, as well as the technologies and practices to help improve their experience.

Provider reputation. Online reputation and branding are critical components to consumers’ purchasing decisions. They not only want to know that others have purchased the same goods and services, but also that the quality and experience were positive enough to earn an endorsement. As consumerization trends continue to affect the healthcare market, providers need to invest in the health of their practice’s public reputation.

Today, there are a wide range of review websites, including Yelp and Google reviews, as well as sources dedicated to healthcare, such as Health Grades and RateMDs. According to a recent survey conducted by Software Advice, 71% of healthcare consumers said that they use online review sites as their first step for finding a new provider.11 Google’s search engine algorithms also assist users in discovering this content by prioritizing user-generated reviews in search results. Those who are not yet active in this ecosystem, will find themselves already behind the trend. Fortunately, it’s not too late to become engaged.

One way to positively influence online reputation is by encouraging current clients to visit a preferred review site and leave feedback. It can be expected that the majority of these reviews will be positive. Among the respondents to the Software Advice survey who said they leave online reviews, “a combined 72% of patients said they leave ‘very’ or ‘somewhat positive’ feedback when reviewing healthcare providers.”11

As with any business, it is nearly impossible to make every person happy, so the occasional negative review is imminent. While you can’t alter or remove them, many websites allow businesses to respond directly to users’ feedback. This creates an opportunity to manage negative sentiments in a constructive way, while also demonstrating your commitment to customer care in a public forum. Feedback from the Software Advice survey states that, “66% [of respondents] said it’s either ‘very’ or ‘moderately’ important to them that providers answer negative reviews in a reasonable way that presents their side of the encounter.”10

Outside of review websites, online reputation can also be improved through an active social media presence. By giving customers and prospects a transparent look into your organization, and keeping them attuned to the latest news and policies, this helps further develop relationships and trust. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to gather valuable feedback from your audience that can help inform improvements to your operations and the overall care delivery experience.
Fast, easy, and flexible scheduling. Traditionally, appointments have been scheduled by phone. This process frequently puts people on hold as they wait for a representative or requires them to leave a message for a return call. Once connected, they are offered a limited selection of availability with prolonged wait times. This experience is burdensome, and may result in people sustaining pain or discomfort for days, if not weeks, before receiving care. Beyond the potential negative health outcomes this poses, the process creates an arduous experience that can drive your customers to seek alternative options.

A consumer-centric model removes these issues by providing convenient ways to schedule visits as well as more immediate access to care. This can be accomplished in several ways.

- Patient portals with online scheduling can provide a fast and convenient way to schedule appointments, even while on the go. Time is a precious commodity, so the ability to arrange meetings with a doctor while waiting in line at the grocery, or traveling from a business conference, provides flexibility as well as a more positive experience.

- Telemedicine visits allow practices to be more agile when booking rapid turnaround appointments for acute illnesses. They can also help expand care delivery to vulnerable and immobile populations. With many insurance payers expanding their telemedicine coverage as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, providers should consider applying this technology to their service offering for more flexible encounters.

- Adopting open office hours by reserving 1 hour each morning and afternoon for same-day appointment requests can improve responsiveness to patients’ needs and help withstand the challenges of alternative care providers. If your office cannot afford to reserve time during current business hours, offering extended business hours each day or every other day for quick turnaround requests can help improve satisfaction rates.

Implementing these practices not only improves the scheduling experience, but may also benefit your bottom line. By providing greater flexibility and immediacy in scheduling, you can see more people and minimize the time between an initial appointment request and final collections. This can help expedite return on investment, and expand the overall revenue pipeline. Shorter wait times can also aid in reducing the likelihood of noncompliance and appointment no-shows.

Remote patient care. Awareness and interest in telehealth technologies surged during the COVID-19 pandemic due, in large part, to concerns of in-person viral transmission, coupled with expanded telehealth coverage by Medicare and many private insurers. During this time, the New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center (NYP/WCM) conducted a study to determine whether patient satisfaction differs between video and in-person visits. Compared to the pre-COVID-19 period of this research, NYP/WCM experienced an 8,729% growth in telehealth visits. From this study, they concluded that satisfaction with telehealth visits is high, and in some cases higher than in-person visits.
As interest in telehealth and remote care services increases, providers should consider adding telemedicine, remote patient monitoring (RPM), and other virtual care capabilities to their standard service offerings. Doing so can help improve the overall care experience by establishing additional touchpoints, reducing the cost of visits, and enabling greater scheduling flexibility. For those serving chronic care, immobile, and geriatric populations, these capabilities can provide even greater opportunities for enhancing the overall quality of care.

Implementing telemedicine provides a simple way to extend and improve continuity of care. Using secure, peer-to-peer connections via web, phone, or mobile application, you can engage with patients wherever they are, whenever they need you. The ability to conduct visits remotely can also expand the geographical reach of your services, which can be particularly beneficial for practices and residents located in rural and suburban areas.

RPM expands care capabilities outside of the traditional office environment by capturing vitals. It is an ideal solution for observing chronic care patients and those recovering from surgical procedures prone to postoperative complications. For organizations that provide in-patient care services, RPM can help reduce the duration of stays, helping free up bed space for others. With RPM, you can further expand your reach, gather actionable data, and increase the revenue potential of your practice.

**Collaborative care profiles.** Interest and engagement in personal healthcare is on the rise. A biennial survey conducted in 2020 by the Deloitte Center for Health Solutions revealed that, “more consumers are using technology for health monitoring and are willing to share their data.” Furthermore, it showed that one of their top desires is to have a communicative and trusting relationship with their clinician.

Building a collaborative healthcare experience starts with shared access to health data. A recent survey, commissioned by The Pew Charitable Trusts, demonstrated that 61% of adults want the ability to download their records on mobile devices to help them manage their own health. This would suggest support for the data access rules mandated under the 21st Century Cures Act, legislation passed in 2016 largely governing activities of the FDA, which included provisions for greater patient access to health data. However, more can be done. While policies can help improve access, patients will rely on providers to help them understand their data, including what information they should focus on and how it should inform their decisions and lifestyle. Showing them how to access and understand their data can help build loyalty.

Outside of clinical office environments, people continue to embrace wearable technologies as an opportunity to become more engaged in their personal health. In 2020, 42% of US consumers said they used tools to measure fitness and track health-improvement goals, according to the Deloitte survey. Among those, 77% attest that this has helped change their behaviors at least moderately. While the data provided by wearables may not always be pertinent to an individual’s health issues, it’s important to embrace patients’ interest and excitement. Speak with your population about wearable technologies to help them understand how they can best make use of them based on their personal health conditions and goals. Share your opinions on how you can both use the data as part of a collaborative healthcare experience.
The desire for greater care collaboration isn’t limited to the patient-clinician relationship. In fact, 81% of adults say they would support the exchange of health record information between providers when caring for the same person. This includes some key information that currently falls outside of those specified by current federal policies. With a heavily fragmented EHR market that includes more than 300 products, it’s critical to identify a reliable EHR vendor that offers the best user experience for your unique operational needs, along with robust interoperability between differing systems.

**Transparent billing and simplified payments.** Too often, the true cost of care is unknown to patients until payment is due. This can wreak havoc on savings and budget planning, particularly for those on a fixed income or living paycheck to paycheck. It’s a primary source of confusion and frustration. While providers shouldn’t bear responsibility for this systemic issue, there are ways to provide greater predictability, transparency, and adaptability.

Two simple ways to avoid billing and collection issues are to ensure accurate capturing of registration data, and to perform insurance eligibility verifications. While this may seem obvious to some, they continue to be common occurrences that cause stress for both patients and providers alike. By taking measures to ensure these tasks are performed during each registration, you can avoid potential headaches and maintain trust. Technologies and services, such as practice management software and outsourced revenue cycle management services, can provide additional support to help maintain best practices for registration, claims processing, and billing and collections.

As individual-payer responsibility increases, the need for cost transparency takes on greater importance. A recent survey conducted by InstaMed revealed that 89% of respondents wanted to know payment information upfront, and 85% wanted an online estimation tool to evaluate costs prior to their visit. Offering an overview of anticipated costs, in advance, can help build confidence and create a positive rapport. This can be done at the point of collecting copayments. If your front office has limited time or capacity, you can simply ask visitors if they have any questions about their payment responsibilities prior to meeting with their physician. These simple steps can help improve the billing experience and prevent potential misunderstandings.

Providing a variety of payment options is another consumer-friendly practice to consider. This can take the form of flexible payment plans, online payment systems, diversified forms of accepted payment, as well as prequalifying assistance for Medicaid or other financial aid programs. Simplifying the payment process is not only beneficial for patients, it can also help improve the speed and rate of collections. Education is an important component in helping people become aware of their payment options, so it’s critical to notify and remind customers during visits, over the phone, as well as via email and post mail.

When it comes to the cost of prescribed medications, ePrescribing, or electronic prescribing, technologies provide quick and easy access to review and compare drug prices. Some platforms also incorporate electronic coupons, which can be passed along directly to patients. Offering this technology expands cost transparency, while also helping to reduce costs, improve adherence through electronic monitoring, and eliminate prescription fraud and abuse.
Healthcare providers who embrace these consumerization trends can position themselves for growth in the years to come. However, those who fall behind risk losing portions of their business to an abundance of emerging alternative care services.

For some independent providers, implementing these recommendations may seem daunting or simply not feasible. Fortunately, there are numerous technologies and services available to help overcome challenges of limited time and resources. By working with reliable healthcare IT vendors to implement electronic health record management, remote care, revenue cycle management, and enhanced patient communications capabilities, you can revolutionize your care experience to meet the needs of today's savvy healthcare consumers.

To learn more about Quanum Practice Solutions, contact us at 1.888.835.3409, or send us an email at SalesSupport@Quanum.com.

References:


