

The Key To Improving The Modern Patient Experience

Why a Strong Digital Strategy Is Critical for the Formation of an Exceptional Patient Experience



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Abstract

The patient experience is the sum of all the interactions had with a healthcare organization. Therefore, the experience itself isn't confined to the walls of a hospital or the examination rooms of an outpatient clinic—the experience starts anywhere and anytime the patient first encounters the healthcare provider.

Typically, this first encounter happens on the Internet, usually (though not always) through the healthcare provider's website. Modern healthcare organizations (from large systems to independent hospitals and clinics) need to provide a more comprehensive continuum of care that extends beyond the physical spaces of their facilities.

This white paper will explain why a strong digital strategy is an integral component of the patient experience, and how it can improve a healthcare organization's long-term success.

¹ <https://www.healthleadersmedia.com/nursing/patient-experience-one-person-time>

Satisfying Demand Versus Experience

Healthcare in the United States is changing at a breakneck pace.

Not only is a growing (and aging) population increasing the demand for healthcare services overall, but advances in technology are changing the way patients expect to experience those services.²

“Experience is subjective and can vary greatly from individual to individual.”

Addressing increased **demand** is a question of volume, solved through the addition of material resources (e.g. staff) and the elimination of operational inefficiencies; it's a black and white challenge. **Patient experience**, on the other hand, is mired in shades of gray. Unlike **demand**, which is empirical in nature, **experience** is subjective and can vary greatly from individual to individual.

If a hospital needs six more doctors and two more x-ray machines to match **demand** volume, it can solve that problem by hiring and purchasing the resources required. But if a hospital learns 38% of its patients are dissatisfied with the **experience** provided, knowing where to begin the improvement process is a far more difficult—and far more important—question to answer.

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3116776/>

Why Experience Is More Important

Patient experience usurps demand volume in the arena of importance for the simple fact it matters more to patients than anything else.

It is more important than a healthcare organization's ability to deliver on medical expectations, more important than its ability make life easier, and more important than its ability to offer great value. Having a plethora of world-class operating rooms or a large employee roster comprised of the most technically-skilled staff in the country means little to patients in the face of an experience built on compassion, dignity, respect, and clear communication.³

In fact, patient experience is so important that it has been strongly associated with hospitals and healthcare

providers' ability to increase per patient revenue, according to the Deloitte Center for Health Solutions. Furthermore, "hospitals with higher patient experience ratings financially outperform lower-rated hospitals even after controlling for [differences in] hospital and local area characteristics."⁴ This improved revenue and financial performance is due to higher patient loyalty, a reduced risk of lawsuit associated with medical malpractice, and the cultivation of a stronger reputation in communities leading to an increased use of services by new patients.⁵

Therefore, any healthcare organization capable of consistently creating an exceptional patient experience will enjoy a **competitive advantage** over its peers in the industry—even peers who can better meet other patients demands—which is why it is the most important thing for healthcare providers to focus on moving forward.⁶

³ <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/life-sciences-health-care/us-dchs-the-value-of-patient-experience.pdf>

⁴ <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/life-sciences-health-care/us-dchs-the-value-of-patient-experience.pdf>

⁵ <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/life-sciences-health-care/us-dchs-the-value-of-patient-experience.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/disrupting-beliefs-a-new-approach-to-business-model-innovation>

Where Does The Patient Experience Begin?

To create a better patient experience, healthcare decision makers must know where that experience starts:

The patient experience starts whenever and wherever someone with an Internet connection has a health-related question, concern, or need.

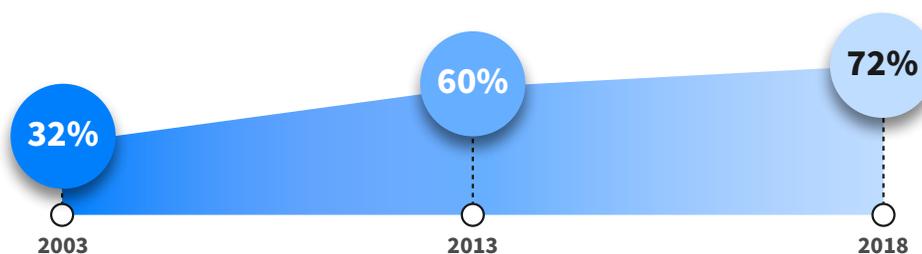
The patient experience isn't pivoting online—it has pivoted online. Today, almost as many American adults start their healthcare search online as engage with healthcare practitioners in-person.⁷

Consider that in 2003, an estimated 32% of Americans (93 million people) used the Internet to obtain healthcare information,⁸ and by 2013 that percentage nearly doubled to approximately 60% (187 million people).⁹

Assuming a similar growth trajectory (and accounting for the rapid expansion and adoption of technology by Americans in the last several years¹⁰), healthcare providers can confidently estimate no less than 72% of the US population (234 million people) currently use the Internet on a regular basis to obtain critical medical information.

The more people look to the Internet as a key source (and, in many cases, a primary source) of medical information, the more they will perceive something as innocuous as a Google search for “flu symptoms” to be the start of their patient experience. To remain relevant and competitive against their peers, healthcare providers must recognize and adapt to this change in both perception and behavior.

Americans Using the Internet to Obtain Healthcare Info



⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/physician-visits.htm>

⁸ <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/15/health-online-2013/>

⁹ <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/15/health-online-2013/>

¹⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2018/05/25/the-best-tech-innovations-of-the-last-three-years/#77dc815125a4>

As an illustration of this trend, consider the following true story:

In the bustling delivery room of a Dallas hospital, a man stands bedside awaiting the birth of his first child. His wife in agony, he grips her hand in solidarity and support, offering what encouragement he can for hours, until the physician finally announces:

“Congratulations, it’s a beautiful baby girl!”

The husband—now father—races to the foot of the bed, anxious to lay eyes on his little girl for the first time.

She is beautiful, with ten fingers, and ten...toes.

The toes are there, but something isn’t right, and suddenly a single thought enters the father’s mind:

What’s wrong with my daughter?

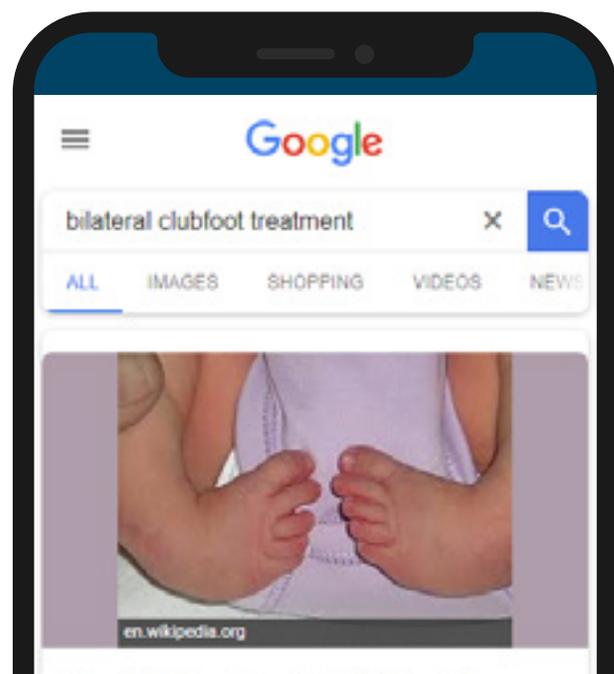
Catching the attention of the obstetrician, the new father whispers, “Did you see her feet?”

“Yes, it’s bilateral clubfoot,” replies the doctor, “It can be corrected.”

But all the new father hears is that something is wrong with his little girl. Something called ‘bilateral clubfoot.’ Something that could keep her from playing soccer, dancing at her senior prom, or walking down the aisle at her wedding.

As the obstetrician and the nurses devote their attention to the new mother, the man doesn’t wait to ‘learn more’ or ‘discuss the options.’ He removes the smartphone from his pocket, opens Google, and types the phrase “bilateral clubfoot treatment” into the search bar.

*The results he encounters will directly impact **how, when,** and—most importantly—**where,** his newborn daughter corrective treatment.*



Here the **patient experience starts on a smartphone.**

The new father turns to his mobile device in a moment of immediate need to learn about his daughter's condition; what he can do for her, and **where he can take her** for the treatment she will need.

It is a perfect example of modern patient behavior.

In much the same way people use resources like Bitcoin to bypass the limitations of traditional financial institutions, and Uber to navigate around the limitations of taxi-based transportation, patients use Internet-based resources like Google and WebMD to sidestep the traditional limitations of healthcare, *particularly* access to information.¹¹

Right or wrong, today's patients head to the Internet with their medical concerns long before they ever pick up the phone and call a physician. Instead of waiting for referrals, patients turn to the Internet to find the most highly-rated hospitals, clinics, doctors, and specialists in their area. Health systems and healthcare facilities no longer have the luxury of sitting back and "waiting" for the patients to come in. Instead, they have to be proactive in their efforts to expand the healthcare experience into the digital realm in order to remain competitive into the future.

The fact that today's healthcare experience starts online shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone—as the costs of traditional, in-person healthcare continue to rise, healthcare providers and patients alike are turning to the Internet to cut costs, improve convenience, and increase efficiency. As an example of this, "New York's Mount Sinai Hospital has developed a hospital-at-home program" that can treat many common conditions remotely while the patient sits at home for as much as 50% less than inpatient care and higher patient satisfaction.¹²

By some estimates, as much as 30% of all in-facility healthcare could already be provided over the Internet, which is why "more hospital systems are reducing the need for large hospitals staffed [with] high-level specialists by investing in telemedicine," allowing physicians in central hubs to care for and monitor patients who are resting comfortably in their own homes.¹³

This shift has been accelerated by major improvements in "customer experience" by non-healthcare businesses in non-healthcare industries—businesses like Amazon that have famously "raised the bar" in terms of what it means to put the customer first.¹⁴

¹¹ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/disrupting-beliefs-a-new-approach-to-business-model-innovation>

¹² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-the-hospitals-of-the-future-look-like-1519614660>

¹³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-the-hospitals-of-the-future-look-like-1519614660>

¹⁴ <http://healthcare.mckinsey.com/sites/default/files/Consumerism%20Myths%20Final%20%2810-15-15%29.pdf>

New Competition Will Focus On Improving The Patient Experience

Speaking of Amazon, on January 30th, 2018, the Jeff Bezos-led tech giant announced a joint-venture to launch a new low-cost healthcare company. Neither Amazon nor its partners (Berkshire Hathaway and JPMorgan) had any experience operating in the healthcare industry, yet the announcement erased more than \$30 billion dollars in market capital from America's biggest healthcare companies in two hours.¹⁵

But to institutional healthcare investors, Amazon didn't need to prove its medical expertise; its track record of creating an unparalleled customer experience that disrupts entrenched industries was more than enough to cause concern.

By announcing its intention to enter the healthcare industry—an industry famous for dragging its feet when it comes to adopting new technologies¹⁶ or adapting to new consumer behaviors¹⁷—Amazon sent investors running for the hills with more than \$30 billion in market cap in tow.

However, juggernauts of industry like Amazon aren't the only threat to the stability of today's healthcare systems.

Innovative players willing to challenge the status quo like Sonde Health—a small, Boston-based startup that recently released a speech analysis tool capable of assessing the mental and physical health of patients—are picking up steam with plans to steal market share away from traditional hospitals and health systems.¹⁸ These new, nimble startups are “superseding physical constraints like having an actual hospital by harnessing the power of mobile technology,” making healthcare less of a hassle for patients, thereby improving the patient experience.¹⁹

In the years ahead, it will be incumbent on hospital and health system decision makers to **start adopting new mindsets, new skill sets, and new tactics** that will help their organizations move forward with greater speed and agility in creating an improved patient experience. If they fail in this charge, the organizations they represent will also fail in the face of increasing competition, technological innovation, and patient dependence on digital care.



¹⁵ <https://qz.com/1192731/amazons-push-into-healthcare-just-cost-the-industry-30-billion-in-market-cap/>

¹⁶ <http://www.govtech.com/health/Why-Are-We-Dragging-Our-Feet-When-More-Automation-in-Health-Care-Will-Save-Lives.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.clickz.com/health-marketers-drag-fee-as-patients-flock-to-social-media/61418/>

¹⁸ <https://www.sondehealth.com/about/>

¹⁹ <http://fortune.com/2017/04/20/digital-health-revolution/>

Start With The Lowest-Hanging Fruit

Implementing transcendent technologies (e.g. Sonde Health) at scale in the context of a hospital system isn't easy, and because it isn't easy, it takes time. Unfortunately, patients aren't patient—they want an exceptional experience today, not tomorrow—which means healthcare decision makers looking to improve their digital strategy must attack the low-hanging fruit first.

1. Website Optimization

When a physician meets a patient for the first time, it goes without saying the physician should be polite, friendly, well-groomed, well-informed, and compassionate, as the expression of those qualities is essential to leaving the patient with a positive experience.²⁰

The same is true for a healthcare provider's website—it should be informative, inviting, easy-to-use, and attractive to visitors, as those characteristics are critical to the making of a strong first impression and the delivery of a great experience.

Yet few hospitals, health systems, and healthcare organizations invest in their websites the way that they should. Many websites lack basic features like

post-prescription refill forms, online bill pay, patient pre-registration, rehabilitation information, aftercare information, and mobile responsiveness; and nearly 20% have onsite errors like broken links, pages, and images that tarnish the patient experience.

For healthcare marketers and key decision makers, it's important to remain cognizant of the fact today's consumers don't separate organizations from their websites—a healthcare organization with an outdated or dysfunctional website will be perceived by potential patients as an outdated or dysfunctional healthcare provider, incapable of providing an exceptional experience.

2. Listing Optimization

Perhaps no fruit hangs lower on the bough than listing optimization. Online healthcare directories like MedlinePlus, HealthGrades, and the universally-known WebMd, are accessed by hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of Americans every single day. Healthcare organizations that invest the time and energy to ensure their information (address, website, phone number, etc.) is accurate on these sites are immediately improving their patient experience for the simple fact they're

²⁰ <https://www.beckershospitalreview.com/hospital-management-administration/why-top-hospitals-have-inadequate-websites-10-things-to-know.html>

demonstrating their meticulous nature. Patients value that depth of attention to detail as a hospital or healthcare provider that can get the little things right (like updating and maintaining online listings) is far more likely to get the big things right (like offering a great patient experience). Moreover, having accurate online listings is a fundamental part of creating a strong digital presence. Without optimized listings, search engines like Google are less likely to place a given healthcare website on page #1 of search results.²¹

3. Search Marketing

Old or young, when people feel they have a non-emergency medical need that may require professional attention, they turn to the Internet before turning anywhere else, which really means they turn to well-known search engines like Google and Bing.

For healthcare organizations, search marketing is the ideal opportunity to align the start of the patient experience with the expression of a specific medical need, concern, or question. Put another way, it is the fastest, most cost-effective way of delivering a personalized experience to a customer.

In the story from earlier, the father uses Google to “learn about his daughter’s condition; what he can do for her, and where he can take her for treatment she will need.” The results he’s served by the search engine deliver the exact information he needs to hear at the exact moment he needs to hear it, from a specific, local hospital with an education-focused website optimized to deliver a high-value user experience.

It is a fitting example of how the healthcare organization that does the best job starting the patient experience through search improves its chances of transitioning potential patients into paying patients.

4. Facebook Marketing

For all the controversy surrounding the company in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Facebook remains one of the best places for businesses to spend their marketing and advertising dollars.²² This is especially true for healthcare organizations, as teenagers and young adults (low-revenue patients) are replaced as the primary users of Facebook by older adults aged 55 and up (high-revenue patients).²³

²¹ <https://www.patientpop.com/blog/online-reputation-reviews/optimize-healthcare-directory-profile/>

²² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/09/07/what-does-facebooks-new-ad-transparency-mean-11-marketing-pros-share-their-predictions/#5035b5c075c6>

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/12/is-facebook-for-old-people-over-55s-flock-in-as-the-young-leave>

As older Americans increase the amount of time they spend on Facebook and other social media platforms, healthcare organizations will have the opportunity to be front-footed in starting the patient experience, communicating their penchant for compassion, dignity, and respect in care before any specific medical need arises.

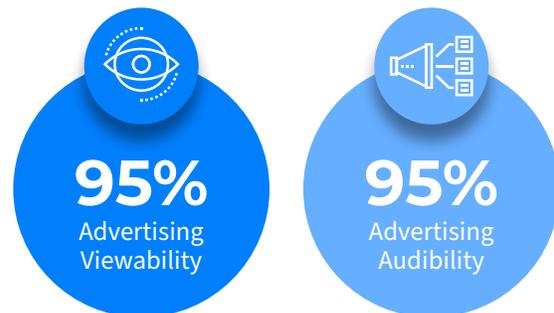
4. YouTube Marketing

YouTube is quickly becoming the new television. But more than that, YouTube is becoming one of the world's best advertising and marketing platforms; not only is it the second-most used search engine in the world behind Google, but it has "an extremely engaged user base with 95% advertising viewability and 95% advertising audibility."²⁴ For healthcare marketers and organizational decision makers, that means YouTube presents an incomparable opportunity to start the patient experience with maximum transparency and impact.

In addition to advertising, every hospital, clinic, and healthcare system in the United States should have its own YouTube channel where it publishes videos that convey its commitment to delivering the best patient

experience possible. These videos can be diverse, ranging from testimonials with previous patients and interviews with resident physicians, to facility tours and treatment demonstrations. This type of video content is not only free to publish on YouTube, but it is extremely appealing to potential patients who want to know exactly what they stand to gain and experience by engaging with a given healthcare provider.

YouTube Delivers



²⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/01/16/the-future-of-media-buying-youtube-versus-traditional-tv/#5b95c8a42675>

In Summary, Ask The Big Question

“What will best serve the patient?”

That is the signature question every healthcare marketer and decision maker should ask themselves before engaging in any effort to strengthen the digital strategy of their organization. Asking that question will—more than anything else—improve the patient experience in a healthcare organization overnight.

As the landscape for healthcare continues to change, there can be little question that hospitals, health systems, and other healthcare organizations will need to adapt in order to survive. In the pursuit of that adaptation, there will be many temptors (facility expansion, staffing increases, equipment upgrades, etc.) that attempt to distract from the most important goal:

The improvement of the patient experience.

It is up to healthcare leaders and executives to prevent those temptations from usurping the patient experience as the ultimate objective. Success (and therefore, survival) in the healthcare industry depends on maintaining the insight, agility and discipline necessary to keep the patient experience the underlying theme in every decision made, and every initiative undertaken.



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