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Engaging Patients Through Innovation On Their Health Journey

CONSIDERATIONS FOR HEALTHCARE
FIRMS POST PANDEMIC

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Some believe that innovation for the sake of innovation runs the risk of disrupting the delicate balance required to manage patient care responsibly. But the world has changed dramatically in just a few months, and everything, even topics once considered sacred and untouchable in health care circles, should be scrutinized under a more powerful lens. When done right, innovation should only enhance the art and science of health care, not interfere with it. While challenging old models and bureaucratic roadblocks is no small feat, some firms have managed to do so with great success. Change is not easy, but it is possible.

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THE WORLD IS CHANGED

Just a couple of months ago, no one could have predicted the extent of COVID-19's effect on society. With social distancing and isolation, health providers have been scrambling to find new ways to engage patients as they navigate their health journey.

Truth is, prior to the pandemic, many healthcare brands were already facing pivot points in their strategy, business plans and offerings. Progress has been slow as the healthcare industry overall has been reluctant to innovate consumer engagement for a variety of reasons, including reliance on antiquated paradigms, commitments to legacy systems and business models built around traditional product and service offerings. Now, in the face of a crisis, the healthcare industry has visibly changed, with most waiting rooms and medical offices sitting empty. The pandemic has acted as an accelerant of this impending transformation towards new methods and approaches to engaging consumers along their health journey.

In recent years, consumers have become increasingly sophisticated and empowered as innovation and technology continue to transform the healthcare delivery model, moving towards a marketplace where patients can more easily consume health services, products, information and education on their own terms. And, with so many options to choose from between providers and products, healthcare brands must be nimble and adaptive to engage these audiences.



Can healthcare brands better engage consumers (patients) in this new world order?

There's no "one size fits all" approach, but it should start with a fresh look at your firm's value proposition. Is it clear, worthy and valid in today's environment? Does your firm deliver a product, service, or an experience that aligns not only with consumer needs, but also with their beliefs and attitudes? Does your firm make good on its promises? Are your customers (patients) more than just satisfied; are they advocates for your firm? If you're not sure, it's time to look inward and bring your leadership team together to gather these meaningful insights in a way that can be operationalized and aligned with long-term business goals. Armed with intelligence on consumers' feelings, beliefs and attitudes that directly affect their behavior, including purchase decisions, companies can evolve their internal operations and the delivery experience of their products and/or services to be better positioned to meet and even exceed their patients' expectations throughout their health journey.



SILVER LINING

While many other industries have fallen into the “down and out,” or worse yet, “irrecoverable” categories of life after coronavirus, the healthcare industry has a unique opportunity to emerge stronger than ever before. Many healthcare firms have long ago realized there is significant potential to innovate aspects of their businesses, even though for an array of reasons they may have been slow to make changes in the past. This crisis has become a catalyst to unleash that potential by untethering firms from the business units, legacy systems or antiquated offerings hit hardest or deemed unworthy or invalid. There appears to be a silver lining in that COVID-19 has thrust a significant opportunity upon firms to shift on every level—from the decisions made in boardrooms to the experience at the point of care. Moreover, consumers (patients) are ready and asking for it. Today’s consumers take a holistic approach to health, incorporating not just the doctor’s office, but diet, exercise, mental wellbeing and overall happiness into their definition of health and wellness.

DRIVING FORCES OF INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY

Innovation in health care has evolved a myriad of methods for brands to engage consumers along their journey to health. And, consumers see themselves as more than an idle observer or recipient. In fact, they want to exert control over their health experience, including when, where and how they receive it. A variety of sources and studies indicate that approximately 80-90% of consumers now vet their doctors online, including specialty practices, before calling for an appointment. Technology is empowering consumers, and they are quickly becoming less reliant on providers as a single source of information.

The Pew Research Center and Internet Life Project report (2013) found that 72% of U.S. adult Internet users have looked online for health information in the past year. Of those who have looked online for health information, 59% say they have gone online specifically to try to figure out what medical condition they or someone else might have. 54% of these “online diagnosers” spoke with a medical professional about what they found online; however, 46% did not. Furthermore, 35% did not visit a healthcare provider to get a professional opinion. These findings point to the notion that patients trust Internet information more than ever before, not to mention that resolving simple health concerns from the comfort of one’s own home can relieve some of the burden placed on health insurance providers and the system overall.

A proliferation of products and services are matching consumers’ rapidly changing desires and expectations.

New and disruptive methods of health delivery are becoming mainstream, and studies reveal that patients want their health care journey to feel personalized and easily accessible. This desire is ever more possible through the marketplace of options, including apps that assist patients with a variety of health needs, including blood pressure monitoring, medical records checking, daily exercise monitors and medication reminders. A study by **Accenture** shows that consumers’ use of mobile and tablet health apps has tripled over the previous four years, up to 48% in 2018. Many visited patient portals to access electronic health records (EHRs), view physician notes regarding medical visits and review their prescription history. In addition to apps, wearable technology is on the rise, with 75% of consumers view-



HARNESSING THE POWER OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

New software and apps are hitting the market in hopes to reduce the burden on the healthcare system and are proving to be especially helpful during a pandemic. Pocket-sized ultrasound devices like **Butterfly iQ** connect to an iPhone and can aid in lung scans to triage patients. **Carebrook** has recently released a new app that not only uses light pulses against the skin to monitor for things like one's heart rate using PPG or photoplethysmography (similar to Fitbit), it can "see" using a smartphone's camera to capture the light on a person's cheeks below the eyes to measure heart rate and oxygen levels. While it's not a screening or diagnostic tool, this app enables patients to monitor changes in vital signs that can indicate a deterioration of health.

ing their ability to monitor glucose, heart rate, physical activity and sleep as beneficial to engaging with their health. Health-based wearable technology is **estimated to grow** at an annualized rate of 10% through to 2023, and well-known brands including FitBit, Apple and Garmin have jumped in to deliver products and services that meet consumers' growing demand to monitor their own health.

Exercise equipment and media company, Peloton, realized the opportunity to leverage consumers' desire to be in the drivers' seat of their own health journey long before the pandemic. Peloton effortlessly meets consumers where they are—at home—by using technology to empower and connect them to a community of like-minded people. With the pandemic forcing people to find ways to stay fit and connected at home, Peloton is thriving more than ever.

A brand's purpose should serve as an anchor that enables expression of a consistent set of values—and deliver clear communications at every opportunity or interaction.

Recognized by Fast Company as a 2019 Most Innovative Companies, **Health Recovery Solutions** has developed a telehealth platform that reduces hospital readmissions while improving health outcomes for high-risk chronically ill patients. Built-in software connects in real-time (using bluetooth enabled devices) to remotely monitor vitals. It also provides educational videos and supports virtual communication by helping physicians manage chronically ill patients for over 85 large medical centres.

Telemedicine, or telehealth, promised to shape the future of healthcare; however, until now it has not been the success story it had hoped to become. Even as of a December 2017 **study**, only 18% of patients had used telehealth, with the majority citing lack of use due to uncertainty about their insurance plan's coverage or provider accessibility. With that said, many are interested in telehealth, with 59% liking the time savings and convenience associated with it, and 55% appreciating the faster service and shorter wait times. Others said they like how telemedicine offers better access to specialists. Telehealth platforms such as **EQ Care** in Canada and **Amwell** in the U.S. meet regulatory requirements and can help providers expand access to patients, which 70% of healthcare professionals have cited as their number one reason for using it. Not long after the COVID-19 virus hit the U.S., Amwell's app utilization had increased by 158% nationwide, and 650% in Washington state alone.

INNOVATION THAT'S WORKING

Retailers like Walmart and CVS are innovating their customer experience as well. They are meeting consumers where they are by adding **Care Clinics** and **Health-Hubs**, which are much akin to walk-in clinics that offer easy access to everything from medical checkups to teeth cleaning—even counseling services. Bloomberg reported that in Calhoun, Georgia, “Walmart ‘care hosts’ take customers from the waiting area to one of 12 care rooms in the 6,500-square-foot facility. Afterward, patients are steered to the in-store pharmacy. While they wait for their prescriptions, they can visit the produce section and grab some veggies recommended by the doctor. Later, there’s even a free Zumba class in the community room.”

A closer look at CVS Health Corporation demonstrates its ability to not only take notice of shifting consumer preferences, but to quickly pivot and address societal concerns on a dime, such as provide a solution to dwindling access to medical professionals even before the pandemic. With a significant number of bricks and mortar stores already delivering a localized experience, CVS realized the potential to reallocate space within existing assets to serve consumers’ health needs with in-store health clinics, as CVS is already a trusted point of care on their journey to health. And as the pandemic hit, albeit deemed an essential service, innovation shows no signs of slowing now as many CVS drugstore locations have quickly built up online shopping capabilities and parking lots were turned into mobile testing stations.

CVS also began bonusing employees (essential front line workers providing patients with medications) in response to the pandemic. While the brand’s purpose is helping people on their path to better health, it has continuously adapted its product, service and experience to turn customers, prospects and even its staff into advocates.

Recently, CVS Health **announced** a partnership with UCLA Health to provide home-based care, working closely and collaboratively with a patient’s medical team to transition them to telehealth and remote monitoring for a quasi “hospital at home” delivery model for patients’ continued care. Regardless of the pandemic, this model can serve the needs of an aging population while also reducing demand on hospitals.

So, what’s next for CVS Health? As it continues to extend its reach to support consumers along their health journey, maybe it will look more closely at preventative health, developing its own proprietary experience for consumers looking for a holistic health journey; one where they can access all their health records while receiving personalized health tips and information. Or, maybe CVS will partner with a well-known consumer-facing health app or software that will not only extend the pharmacy’s reach to new audiences but provide existing customers with an enhanced experience, thereby increasing affinity and advocacy for CVS Health as an important brand in their personal health journey.





3 KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGING PATIENTS POST PANDEMIC

1. Decide what, if anything, has changed for your firm.

Amidst the disruption caused by the pandemic and economic downturn, there are industries and categories that are clearly winning, while others are down and out. Within health care, some firms are just surviving while others are thriving. Is your firm still moving full steam ahead or merely surviving in hopes that the demand will be there when it is ready and able to pick up the pace—recouping lost revenues as you go back to “business as usual” once the crisis is over? Or, has your firm realized that these dramatic forces have only pushed it into a reinvention? If so, now is the time, as evolution is being embraced and even demanded by consumers. Now, more than ever, firms need to look beyond tactical efforts to strategic considerations by evaluating and understanding audience attitudes in order to realize how their behaviors have changed over time, and what effect this will have on your firm’s future, including its product portfolio and brand positioning. Understanding your audience, and the most impactful audience engagement factors, will be critical to charting a new course forward following this disruption.

2. Revisit your firm’s short and long-term business objectives.

Much like a physician prescribes a rehabilitation program for patients in recovery, leadership will need to put together a treatment plan for the firm. Bureaucratic rigidity is the enemy of innovation, thus it is critical to bring together leaders from all functional areas of the business to work together and rally around the belief that in order to transform the firm for the future, change needs to happen from the inside out. Firms facing transformation will need to revisit short and long-term objectives, looking at how to better meet consumers where they are and how they want to be engaged, and even understand how improved engagement can aid in measurable outcomes aligned with value-based health. Otherwise, continuing to rely on antiquated strategies, legacy systems and product or service delivery models will lead to unsustainable business and marketing practices.

In addition to financial objectives, a reinvention should include a fresh look at your brand’s ethos or purpose. Is your brand’s purpose aligned with short term vs. long term objectives? If your brand disappeared tomorrow, would it even be missed? A brand’s purpose should serve as an anchor that enables expression of a consistent set of values—and deliver clear communications at every opportunity or interaction in order to engage employees and consumers around the “why” and the larger vision.

3. Prepare for the road ahead—post pandemic.

While the exact timing of a post-pandemic world is uncertain, there is no doubt the world will rebound as it has after every crisis that has come before this one. In preparation for life after COVID-19, healthcare firms should preserve those aspects of their product or service experience that customers believe are relevant, meaningful and remarkable, while looking for ways to improve the parts that are falling short. Is your firm's focus on customer acquisition, or is your firm engaging customers in a way that drives advocacy? The latter drives long-term engagement that's not reliant on advertising and promotions. For example, if your firm stopped advertising tomorrow, would sales stop? Building long-term strategies around relevant insights and leveraging innovation is a path many successful firms will take to engage consumers in a meaningful way.

Fitbit is a great example of a firm that realized how consumer preferences were changing, and so it pivoted. In 2015, despite its worldwide success as a well-known wearable device, Fitbit's stock price had plummeted from its original IPO value of \$47.60 to just under \$12.00 in early 2016. In a 2017 earnings call, the CEO announced, "Our 2015 growth in the U.S. and in 62 other countries around the world, demonstrated that people's desire for data, inspiration and guidance in pursuing their fitness journeys is a worldwide movement. While Fitbit is known as a consumer brand, the real potential of our brand and technology is to become a digital health platform that improves people's health and integrates into the healthcare ecosystem." Fitbit saw the opportunity to engage consumers' desire to manage their health journey, while owning a platform which healthcare providers and other organizations would find valuable.

Some firms have sought to improve the consumer experience by bolting onto existing technologies, such as wearable tech and home health devices, that make it easy to extend the experience while empowering patients along their health journey. For example, orthopedic clinic groups are using Breg **Flex** technology for

patients who are wearing a knee brace, most commonly after knee surgery. The knee brace includes a sensor and an accompanying application that provides the patient with important rehabilitation exercises (and reminders) that should be done from home. The sensor and application send vital information to the patient's healthcare provider to aid in monitoring and staying connected on the patient's journey to recovery, increasing compliance by 75% with therapy protocols while also improving measurable clinical outcomes.

IN CLOSING

Change is hard. It takes courageous leadership and decision making from the top, and there are challenges across the healthcare industry as a whole; specialty, ambulatory and other clinics, hospitals, insurers, third-party administrators and even self-insured employers who in the U.S. carry a significant portion of the burden of healthcare for Americans—as this is a tightly connected ecosystem. For example, insurers need to consider how to improve access to innovative methods, like telemedicine, by including it in their plans, and healthcare providers need to be compensated fairly for using them. While some of these integral healthcare systems challenges still exist, healthcare firms facing transformation will need to look at how to improve their delivery from the inside out—or risk becoming obsolete.

Traditional healthcare practices and innovation are two sides of the same coin. Yes, patients will always desire recognizable services like intimate provider/patient rapport and in-person visits, but what has changed is consumers' demand for choice when it comes to how and when they want their health care delivered. While innovation is alive throughout the healthcare industry, some firms have embraced it more than others. If you are a firm who understands that maintaining the traditional status quo is hurting your long-term goals, there has never been a better wakeup call than right now to find the courage, energy and strength to breathe some much needed innovation into your organization. 🦅



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