Mobile Solutions for Improving the Patient Experience

Managing Wait Times

In our earlier column, “Meeting MU Patient Access Requirements - Is Mobile The Solution?”1 we argued that mobile access should be at the center of a strategy to meet MU requirements for patient engagement. The value of mobile technology goes far beyond meeting MU requirements. We focus in this column on how mobile can enhance the patient experience and, in particular, satisfaction with wait times.

WHY WAIT TIME IS IMPORTANT
Healthcare is becoming increasingly competitive in all aspects of delivery. If patients don’t have a positive experience with your organization, there’s generally found a competing hospital, ambulatory surgery center, urgent care center, etc. in close proximity. Once they or a family member or friend are unhappy with service at one delivery network, they can easily move to another that will work hard to impress them with their commitment to convenience and patient care. We don’t generally see price competition yet, but there are certainly levels of convenience that are apparent to patients. Formal and informal (word of mouth) ratings are readily available.

MOBILE TECHNOLOGY AND IMPROVED PATIENT SATISFACTION WITH WAIT TIMES
Uncertainty magnifies the stress of waiting, while feedback in the form of expected wait times and explanations for delays improves the tenor of the experience.2 Mobile applications can help patients select a facility that will reduce their waiting time and allow them to select an arrival time and register online. Mobile apps can also reduce the perceived (versus actual) time patients wait.

Hospitals and health systems are using smartphone apps to address waiting times in the emergency department (ED) by alerting patients to the waiting time at its various facilities. Two examples are the Detroit Medical Center and the HealthONE system in Denver. Wouldnt patients who can wait prefer to do so at their home or office? NextCare Urgent Care in Arizona believes so and offers it WAHOO (Wait At Home Or Office) online registration service. Brookwood Medical Center in Birmingham, Ala., allows patients to check-in online and select an arrival time before traveling to their ED.

Research has shown that consumers perceive wait times differently depending on what they do while waiting.2 Wait times are perceived to be longer when the consumer does nothing but shorter if they are engaged in another activity. This is another benefit of online scheduling and registration. Another way to reduce perceived waiting time is to allow patients to move around instead of waiting in a room. Pagers and text-based services are used by restaurants to allow customers to move around shopping malls while waiting for a table.

Now mobile apps like NoWait and Diner Connection allow you to check in at the front desk, leave your phone number, then linger wherever you like. The restaurant sends automated text messages updating your status, and guests can communicate with the restaurant in real time. So, if you are, say, having a jovial time of it at a nearby pub, you...
can push back the booking (or cancel it). These apps can benefit in other situations as well. People waiting while a relative/friend has surgery want to talk to the surgeon afterward. Surgeons want to talk to them. But if they leave the area to get coffee, etc., they often miss the opportunity since they don’t know when the surgeon will appear. Providing family members with a pager or texting device could avoid the disappointment of not talking to the surgeon and shorten the perceived time waiting.

**IS THERE A RETURN ON INVESTMENT?**

Should hospitals and systems make the investment in mobile apps? It could be argued that in competitive markets, there really is no choice. On a recent trip, we noticed a billboard in a downtown area that continually flashed “Text 23000 for the Emergency Department wait times at XYZ Hospital.” Can competitors ignore that?

There are alternative investments that could provide a competitive advantage so another approach would be to define what the tangible (monetary) and intangible benefits are.

**TANGIBLE (MONETARY) BENEFITS**

If ED volumes are high, then advertising wait times can help distribute workloads across multiple facilities, potentially lowering staffing costs.

Online registration followed up with a callback could result in shifting demand to an appropriate location. For example, a patient requesting a routine diagnostic service could be scheduled for a regular office visit rather than an urgent care visit. This could especially benefit providers who have accepted risk for serving a particular population and benefit from lower cost.

These are potential benefits which may not be received by all providers.

**INTANGIBLE BENEFITS**

- Greater patient satisfaction equals greater provider loyalty.
- Improved employee satisfaction resulting from a more evenly distributed workload across facilities.
- Physicians and other providers are able to manage scheduled interactions with families rather than feeling like they are being stalked.

**CHALLENGES**

A posted wait time is a “service promise.” FedEx’s promise of next day delivery is an example. Failing to fulfill the promise may result in greater dissatisfaction than if the promise was never made.

Providers who make a promise need to consider two issues.

- Will patients interpret the promise in the way we intended? If we say the wait time is 20 minutes, will they understand this may not mean seeing a physician but a nurse or nurse practitioner?
- Can we accurately measure and report in real-time what the wait time is?

Market research is needed to address the first issue and processes need to be developed for the second that include clear accountability for performance.

**REFERENCES**

3. Ibid.