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Lessons learned: How healthcare leaders are unlocking value through digital consumer experiences

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Amazon. Apple. Disney. Uber. These are today's standard-bearers for consumer interaction, in large part because of how they meet consumers' expectations for personalized engagement and seamlessly meld digital and physical experiences. And while some healthcare leaders might be tempted to think of their organizations as being subject to a different set of rules, they are anything but that in the minds of consumers, who expect the same level of sophistication that they encounter in other areas of their lives. The challenge for everyone in healthcare is to make sure patients believe their hospital, health center, or private practice fulfills the same promise of a consumer-centric experience that they get from top retail, travel, and entertainment companies.

Recently, Chartis and League co-hosted a Becker's Healthcare Advisory Call, convening nearly two dozen healthcare industry executives to discuss unlocking the value in consumer, patient, and member engagement. The event uncovered a curious duality in today's healthcare environment. On the one hand, there was agreement among participants (who included VPs and C-suite executives at both providers and payers) that substantially enhancing healthcare consumers' digital experience was a strategic imperative and that healthcare organizations have a lot of catching up to do in the realm of consumer engagement.

On the other hand, there was a clear lack of consensus on a roadmap for reaching new consumer experience benchmarks. Of the 20 or so organizations represented on the call, no two were taking the same approach. While most leaders in healthcare know digital transformation is a mission-critical priority, the sector has yet to coalesce around how to achieve it.

The group shared some of their lessons learned in starting on a comprehensive journey toward a transformed consumer experience, along with insights on how to overcome some of the persistent challenges along the way.

Cross-Functional Alignment and Collaboration Undergirds Success for Consumer Engagement

Above all else, session participants agreed that for any healthcare organization to set and deliver a successful strategy for patient and member engagement, it first needs to acknowledge that historically siloed efforts cannot work. Digital consumer experiences are horizontally infused across organizations—and working together across business units has strong implications for both governance and the operating model.

For governance, this means a strategic approach that starts with cross-functional leadership across the enterprise including clinical operations, marketing, digital, IT, service center and patient access, revenue cycle, and, ideally, a high-level leader dedicated to consumer experience initiatives. This group must develop and rally around an overarching vision for their digital consumer experience and how that vision, along with specific initiatives, aligns with the strategic goals of the enterprise.

This broad senior-level collaboration is required for the cultural and organizational changes needed for a successful long-term digital consumer experience program. Participants consistently asserted that everyone in the organization needs to be committed to supporting consumer experience initiatives. Leadership must visibly support this both through practical structural changes as well as through a concerted change management effort.

Digital consumer experience efforts need to be regularly and sufficiently funded. One-time investments in vendors or new technologies may yield some short-term results, but only a long-term commitment view that persistently funds the iterative evolution of connected consumer experiences will truly bring value to an organization and its patients. Moreover, this long-term perspective view requires that the right people—and not just those in IT—are allocated to these strategic initiatives. All the while, the work needs to be appropriately monitored to ensure adherence to and attainment of established and agreed-upon goals. This monitoring also supports program communication and change management.

Finally, health system executives spoke to the foundational importance of culture and the need for deliberate change management initiatives. Enterprise focus on the digital consumer experience means, in many cases, that organizations need to think and act in distinctly different ways from the past. To support this change, leaders must regularly communicate the high priority of valuable consumer experience imperatives and how they will positively impact the organization, its consumers, and the overall workforce.

Execution Requires Focused Prioritization and Persistent Measurement

Once a vision and organizational supporting structure is in place, program delivery begins. While different session participants spoke of varying methodologies and approaches to design and deliver digital consumer experience initiatives, some common themes emerged from the conversation.

For starters, panelists agreed that prioritization is essential—health systems cannot do it all. A holistic look at the existing and prospective digital consumer experience portfolio is necessary to inform prioritization. Leaders also need to understand that while it is challenging to establish a methodology for setting priorities that balance varying stakeholder needs and points of view, getting input from all the relevant functions within the organization—and especially from consumers themselves—is critical.

Ultimately, a few components emerged as essential for consideration in the digital initiative prioritization discussion:

- Aligning with strategic goals and mission
- Establishing real-world feasibility
- Advancing health equity
- Meeting clinical needs to better serve and inform patients
- Meeting consumer needs by eliminating pain points across the care journey

While it's wise to learn from the organizations at the forefront of this transformation since they have already begun doing the work, organizations should not pursue initiatives based solely on the digital portfolio of their competition. While a factor, the broader lens of consumer and organizational needs should take precedence.

Participants stressed that for any digital consumer experience initiative to succeed, it is essential to regularly measure the right things and to learn and adjust based on those measurements. As one participant noted, consumer engagement is best thought of as a combination of experience and quality—and both must be measured.

Instead of solely measuring along discrete service areas or episodic lines, digital consumer experiences ought to be seen as a continuum. Measurement should be longitudinal as well as event based. What's most important is to understand how frequently consumer engagement occurs and what they are accomplishing—not, for example, how many are simply activating their profiles in the patient portal.

Finally, benchmarking against non-healthcare consumer measurements is particularly useful as health systems in general work to catch up in how they meet consumer expectations.

Remember to Look Outside for Help

Historically, healthcare has not been very agile. Partnering on solutions with outside organizations can bring inspiration and novel approaches, along with time and cost savings. Still, organizations need a refined strategy for navigating build-buy-partner considerations.

For all vendor solutions, several factors must always be considered. First, trust and security are paramount. Every healthcare consumer needs to feel safe, both virtually and physically, and all solutions should visibly demonstrate how they protect consumer privacy and security.

Organizations also should ensure that the products vendors are selling are real and not simply a vision or future-state roadmap item. While understanding how vendors plan to evolve their products in the future is important to evaluate long-term partnerships, health systems must ensure that their investment helps to solve problems in innovative, not commoditized, ways. Healthcare organizations should carefully evaluate whether externally sourced solutions serve as strategic differentiators and determine what type of partnership might be required to accentuate that differentiation.

Questions to Propel the Consumer Engagement Journey

Everyone is a consumer. By drawing on this universality, healthcare organizations can answer some timeless business questions to help chart their path toward a seamless consumer engagement journey that inspires loyalty and trust:

1. What makes an engaging consumer experience, and how do your organization's digital consumer interactions compare with the non-healthcare consumer experiences people encounter in their day-to-day lives?
2. When deciding where to focus consumer experience initiatives, what criteria do you use? Do you look to functions across your enterprise—such as clinical operations, marketing, IT, consumer/patient experience, and revenue cycle—to identify areas of opportunity?
3. How is your organization measuring healthcare consumer engagement? How do you demonstrate the value of digital consumer experiences to internal users and external consumers?
4. How are you engaging with partners outside your organization to move consumer engagement strategies forward? What is your organization's process for determining what you can, or should, build internally and what you can outsource to strategic partners?
5. What will your organization's digital consumer experiences look like in 3 years? In 5 years? What will this do for your business objectives?

The revolution that's taking place in healthcare consumer engagement is not temporary. It will be with us forever, and it will surely intensify. Digital is here to stay, and the organizations that do the best job of remaining current with it will be the ones that survive and thrive.

Next Intelligence: Key Takeaways

Increasing Consumer Engagement Is Essential, and It Won't Happen on Its Own:

- Building cohesive approaches to consumer engagement is difficult. It takes collaboration, time, and investment.
- Maintain focus on organizational and consumer priorities, and continuously measure if initiatives are achieving their goals.
- Evaluate when to build, buy, or partner. Seek out strategic partners.

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