

Entering The New Age of Healthcare Communications

Why Developing A Patient Portal Should Be Part Of Your Strategy

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We all live in the interactive age, where each passing day brings us faster and smarter access to information. However, the evolution of interactive advancement is only now gaining momentum in hospitals and healthcare systems across the country. Many CEOs recognize the strategic effects interactive initiatives have on physician loyalty, nurse recruitment and retention and patient satisfaction. However, while technologies such as Electronic Health Records (EHR) and wireless nursing stations are becoming the norm, the marketplace demands more.

No longer do people simply want hospital website access for job searches, class registration, volunteer opportunities, hospital foundation donations, or bill pay. In a 2008 Deloitte Survey of Healthcare Consumers, “60 percent [of respondents] want physicians to provide online access to medical records and test results, and online appointment scheduling; 1 in 4 said they would pay more for the service.” According to WebMD, 160 million Americans used the Internet for health information and two-thirds of physicians used the Internet for clinical information.

Hospitals can take their website to the next level by launching a patient portal, where patients can access their medical information, physicians, nurses and more in a secure and convenient manner. The Cleveland Clinic is a great example of a healthcare system that developed a website featuring educational podcasts, vodcasts, and of course, patient portals to address these unmet needs. In turn, they exceeded stakeholder satisfaction, and went on to strengthen its brand as a pioneer of the patient experience. To maintain a competitive advantage—like the Cleveland Clinic—hospital CEO’s must empower their strategic planning, marketing and IT teams to move beyond the norm, and create true value for stakeholders using interactive mediums, including patient portals.

What Patients Want From A Patient Portal:

- Secure access
- Personal health record and medical history
- A way to stay informed before, during and after visit
- Lab results
- Online bill pay
- Prescription renewal & medication lists
- Physician referrals
- Pre-registration services
- Direct communication to physicians and nurses
- Online resources to medical and wellness information

Why Use Patient Portals?

A Competitive Edge. There is higher competition for physician referral loyalty, and nurse recruitment and retention than ever before. A patient portal sets you apart from your competition, because it allows physicians and nurses to build a better relationship with patients through flexible and sophisticated communications. It improves patient satisfaction, which in turn, helps physicians retain and grow their practices. Additionally, it is a convenience factor that consumers have come to expect from other industries such as banks and airlines, so why not us?

Easy Information Access. Physicians and nurses can quickly and easily obtain medical information, even during a medical emergency. This will streamline the flow of information, and prevent delays in treatment or follow-up care. Your staff will be more efficient when they don't have to spend time trying to obtain patient records.

Cost Effective. On a daily basis, with a patient's approval, online physician consultations can be billed at approximately half the rate of an in-person office visit. The physician saves valuable time and the visit is more convenient and cost-effective for the patient. Because of their low costs, insurance companies are starting to reimburse for online consultations. A RAND Health research study proves the health industry could have an annual savings of \$77 billion or more just from the efficiency of Health Information Technology alone.

Improved Patient Satisfaction. If your patient portal includes an "Ask a Nurse" option, you can boost patient satisfaction by allowing patients to submit questions at any time. Nursing staff can then respond when it is convenient. By having patients email non-emergency questions, you decrease the call volume, allowing highly acute patient calls to get through.

Better Informed Patients. In a Markle Foundation study held in early 2008, nearly nine in 10 Americans (88 percent) stated online records would be important in reducing the number of unnecessary or repeated tests and procedures they undergo. Giving patients access to their medical information gives them control over managing their health and wellness.

Organization	Health Record	Appointment Scheduling	Online Bill Management	Prescription Management	Physician Referral & Access	Email Reminders
Cleveland Clinic	√	√	√	√	√ - also offers online 2 nd opinions	√
Atlantic Health	√		√	√		
Aurora Health Care System	√	√	√	√	√	√
Adventist Hinsdale Hospital	√	√	√			
Decatur Memorial Hospital	√	√		√	√	√

Why The Resistance To Patient Portals?

According to a 2007 IGCN, Inc. survey, “90 percent of respondents (105 attendees of the 11th Annual Healthcare Internet Conference) indicated portals will play an important role in the future of healthcare itself.” However, when this survey group was asked, “what are your most successful current web strategies, respondents ranked portals a distant fifth, cited by just 6 percent as the most successful strategy.” So if healthcare leaders recognize their importance, why aren’t more hospital systems having success with patient portals, or adopting them as part of their web strategies?

Many physicians and nurses feel it is just another demand on their time. Some administrative professionals do not believe patients will use it. Conversely, you have those who believe everyone will use it and overwhelm the system. And both physicians and administrators are concerned email communications would eventually discourage in-office visits, driving down profits. There is also a fear of clinical inaccuracies in patient-populated medical studies leading to misdiagnosis and treatment.

Another concern is the use of non-secure channels revealing private health information leading to HIPAA violations. Not to mention, building a patient portal requires a large resource and financial commitment, and often, there are other initiatives that take priority. While some of these concerns may be legitimate, they should not deter you from integrating patient portals into your web strategies. This interactive initiative is the future of healthcare communications, and by not addressing it, you may be hurting your competitive edge.

How To Overcome Adversity To Patient Portals

To develop the right patient portal strategy for your organization, you need to address priorities and challenges, but more importantly, needs. First, conduct research on what interactive options patients, physicians and other stakeholders want and need. Unless your stakeholders really want these tools, the undertaking will be too burdensome. Test the interest in the following applications:

- access to their electronic health record,
- communications with their physician via email,
- test results via email, and
- email reminders when they should schedule an appointment.

Next, create a pilot program for physician-patient communications with only six to 12 physician practices for at least one year to test the services and features. During the pilot program, monitor response rates, and test the effectiveness of reminder messages. If the provider hasn’t sent a response to a patient inquiry within two days, email a physician reminder to check their online messages. Then survey patients and staff after one year to determine qualitative and quantitative results. Did this tool make communications easier and more effective? Did it lead to improved physician loyalty to the hospital? Did it lead to improved patient loyalty to the physician? How did it affect physician, nurse and patient satisfaction?

Lastly, measure the financial repercussions of the pilot program. Did gross income increase or diminish? These results will not be a direct response to the pilot program. There will be other factors to consider; however, the information will be valuable in the conversations leading to next steps.

How To Develop A Patient Portal

Once you've conducted your research and implemented a pilot program, you should have enough data and findings to begin building your patient portal. It's important to gain internal consensus regarding all aspects of your patient portal initiative. Again, building a patient portal is a big undertaking, and will involve multiple areas of your organization. You want to be sure that everyone is on board with your direction, and that everyone's needs are being served with the plan.

There is a wealth of ideas when it comes to patient portals. Determine which elements to incorporate into your patient portal, so you can prioritize them, and develop a plan to phase them in over time. For example:

- How much medical information will be available on the patient portal?
- Will all test results be available or most recent or most common?
- How much medical history will be included?
- Will clinical notes be included?

Next, determine how much access patients will have. Will it be a view-only site or will patients have the ability to post updated medical information directly to the record. Determine how postings will occur; for example, will the medical staff post new information only after there is physician approval?

Develop a brand strategy for the patient portal to enhance the current hospital brand image. The patient portal's design elements such as colors, images and vocal tone should coincide with the overall hospital brand, so there is a seamless experience for users. Integrate usage tracking as well, so you can conduct market research, and measure results on the back-end.

Contract an Electronic Health Record (EHR) vendor to develop the patient portal. Hiring an application service provider to set up and maintain portal hardware and software is advised. The integration of various systems can be challenging. For example, Personal Health Information (PHI) and practice management systems must be integrated to make this process efficient and effective. This will take time and effort and should be conducted by professionals in this specialty who will most likely develop a phased-in approach. This will relieve hospital staff to work on other priority tasks.

Create safeguards by developing secure channels so private patient information is protected during communications. Provide patients with a user ID. Also, browsers must support the secure sockets layer (SSL) used for encrypting data. Avoid standard email and use only communications where patients and physicians must log in to receive messages.

Lastly, it is essential to garner internal support, so your patient portal strategy should include system training and work process programs. Your patient portal will touch so many individuals in your organization, so it's paramount that everyone understands what their roles are, and how to use the patient portal. You want your employees to embrace the initiative, so they become advocates of the system, and encourage usage among staff, physicians and patients.

With the race for creating an interactive competitive advantage underway, patient portals are becoming essential to hospitals and health systems. New technologies and innovations will continue to remove barriers to sharing information between organizations and consumers. This will create opportunities for development between patients and healthcare providers.

As seen on Marketing Health Services:

http://www.marketingpower.com/ResourceLibrary/MarketingHealthServices/Pages/2009/4/New_Healthcare_Communications.aspx

About Gabrielle DeTora

Gabrielle is a healthcare marketing strategist with nearly two decades of executive experience and a proven track record of driving ROI. Gabrielle has worked with the CEOs and leadership teams of nearly 50 health systems, representing over 100 hospitals nationwide. She has served as the strategic leader for health systems, brand marketing agencies, and consultancies.

Earlier in her career, Gabrielle served as the Vice President of Health Strategy for a major advertising agency. There, she oversaw all strategic business planning, branding, marketing, and execution for more than a dozen large healthcare systems, healthcare organizations, and insurance companies.

Her past experience also includes top executive strategic planning and marketing roles at St. Joseph's Healthcare System, Hunterdon Healthcare System, the Cure for Lymphoma Foundation, and the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. This deep experience gives her a keen understanding of the healthcare industry, which she uses to deliver highly effective strategic marketing plans for her clients.

Beyond the work Gabrielle conducts for her clients, she is also called upon regularly to speak at national healthcare conferences, and is a regular contributor to a variety of healthcare publications. Gabrielle has an MBA from Kennedy-Western University and a BBA from the Zicklin School of Business (CUNY).

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