

The new digital landscape:

Creating an engaging consumer experience in an evolving health care environment



We're witnessing a shift in consumer expectations. During the COVID-19 pandemic consumers adapted to new telehealth and digital technologies. But even before the pandemic, studies showed that patients often switch providers due to poor digital experiences.¹ Consumers now want the same level of convenience, access and personalization that they experience in other aspects of their lives, and health care leaders have begun to embrace this shift, as evidenced by their growing investment in individuals' digital experience.²

However, enhancing these digital systems faces several challenges. Issues such as a lack of digital literacy, health literacy and privacy concerns complicate accurate data collection at patient intake.³ Furthermore, aligning patient and provider schedules for digital services and providing accurate medical cost estimates are additional hurdles.⁴

Data shows that health care leaders are making investments in things like patient portals, communications tools and remote patient monitoring. But they need to consider how to make these investments the most effective. To stay competitive, they must recognize the importance and account for the challenges to improving the digital front door. This means prioritizing the 5 key components of a good digital experience: functionality, customer service, self-service capabilities, personalization, and the integration of omnichannel digital solutions. When maximized, these investments can help further transform access to care and help health care leaders meet rising consumer expectations.

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Patients are looking at things like Amazon and Google, where you can order something on Amazon and have it on your doorstep in a couple of hours. They want the same experience from health care.”

– **Dr. Melissa Urrea**

VP Medical Affairs, Optum Health

1. Continually test and review digital functionality to create a seamless consumer experience.

Functionality is the cornerstone of a good digital experience in health care settings. According to a survey about consumer experience and digital health, half of consumers agreed that a bad digital experience ruined their entire experience with a health care provider.⁵ Functionality means that digital solutions are usable and accessible, allowing users to navigate with minimal effort. Important elements include quick loading times and accurate navigation, where all menu buttons and links direct users correctly and efficiently.

Digital health care tools must be designed to meet a wide array of needs, ensuring they are not only working for patients but also fit seamlessly into clinician workflows. To further improve accessibility and usability, these solutions should feature practical designs that cater to users of all technical abilities. And using plain language removes barriers to patient comprehension, making the information accessible to users with varying levels of medical knowledge.⁶

To ensure optimal functionality, health care leaders should:

Conduct comprehensive testing. By rigorously testing all digital tools before and after deployment, any potential issues that impair usability can be identified. Comprehensive testing involves initial testing phases and ongoing evaluations to ensure that the tools continue to meet standards of accuracy, speed and user-friendliness.

Seek and incorporate user feedback. Establish mechanisms to actively collect and analyze feedback from users regarding their technical experiences with digital tools. This feedback is invaluable as it provides direct insights into how well the tools meet the needs of users, what problems they encounter, and how the user experience can be enhanced. Incorporating this feedback into system updates improves the operation and boosts user satisfaction, as consumers feel their input is valued and acted upon.

2. Combine digital tools and human interaction to enhance customer service.

A 2021 Harvard Business Review study identified customer service as a top priority for health care executives, ranking higher than lowering costs and increasing revenues.⁷ Good customer service in health care means building and maintaining trusted relationships with consumers. When patients trust their providers, they are more likely to continue their care with them. This trust is fostered through efficient digital tools that provide quick answers to routine questions and by making human interaction available when needed. Being responsive to patient inquiries allows providers to improve overall patient experience and ensure that all consumer needs are met across the platform.

As digital tools become integrated into health care, the connection to a live human remains important to patients. Health care is inherently personal, and situations involving complex decisions or emotional distress require the empathy, understanding and nuanced communication that only human interaction can provide. This blend of digital efficiency and personal touch defines excellent customer service in health care, ensuring that consumers feel valued and cared for on all fronts.



The more practical functionality you can build into a digital front door, the more useful they are to patients.”

— John Shaw

VP New Product Development and Strategy, Optum Health

To effectively integrate digital tools and human interaction in customer service, health care leaders should:

Deploy digital tools for efficiency. Use chatbots and automated systems to handle straightforward inquiries and common questions. This frees up human resources for more complex and sensitive issues, ensuring that technology complements rather than replaces human interaction.

Ensure accessibility to human support. While digital tools serve the initial contact points, it is crucial to have an easy and quick transition to human representatives when needed. This could be facilitated through options in digital interfaces that allow people to request a call or a live chat with a human agent.

Train staff for empathy and technical support. Equip customer service teams with the technical skills required to manage digital tools and the interpersonal skills to provide empathy and understanding. This training ensures that when human interaction is required, the service is compassionate and effective.

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A live human maybe sounds contradictory to the whole digital push, but health care is still personal. It can be so expensive and is such a fragile experience. We want to provide that backbone of human support.”

– **Stephanie Meyer**

VP Product, Advocacy Product, and Optum Guide, Optum Health

3. Build consumer confidence in using a variety of digital self-service options.

Self-service tools in health care are increasingly common, and there is a clear demand from consumers for these types of services. In fact, 81% of consumers say they want more self-service options.⁸ As technology advances, consumers are looking for ways to take control over their health and the care they receive. Digital self-service options meet this need by giving individuals the ability to independently manage tasks such as registering as a new patient, scheduling appointments, and accessing services.

Adopting digital self-service tools also encourages ongoing engagement between patients and providers. By facilitating regular interactions through these platforms, providers cultivate a strong, trust-based relationship. Patients who regularly use these tools become more familiar with their functionalities, which boosts their confidence in managing their health care autonomously.

This autonomy is particularly relevant for seniors, who are increasingly becoming digitally savvy and wish to age in place. By offering more self-service options, these tools enable them to manage their health independently and efficiently, which is essential for maintaining their independence and quality of life in their own homes.

To further boost consumer confidence in using digital self-service options, health care leaders should:

Enhance educational resources. Develop a comprehensive suite of educational materials that cater to different learning styles and preferences. This could include tutorial videos for visual learners, detailed FAQs for those who prefer reading, and interactive webinars or live sessions for patients who benefit from real-time guidance. When health care organizations provide varied resources, consumers can choose the method that best suits their learning style, which increases their comfort and proficiency with digital tools.

Streamline user interfaces. Invest in the continuous improvement of user interfaces to ensure they are as intuitive as possible. Use regular user testing and feedback to identify pain points and areas for enhancement. Simplifying navigation and reducing the number of steps required to complete actions can significantly decrease user frustration and help consumers feel more in control when using the platform.

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I think we'll continue to see a desire for scheduling at the hands of the patient, and a desire for more understanding of results, whether that's diagnostics, blood panels or lab data.”

— **Tricia Purdy**

Head of Strategy and Product, Optum Rx

4. Implement greater personalization measures across digital platforms.

Personalization in health care is transforming how organizations interact with their consumers by offering customized experiences that consider various factors such as demographic data, engagement history, location and specific needs. This approach enhances consumer engagement by delivering content that is directly relevant to each individual. It also significantly boosts organizational performance.

A 2020 study revealed that 75% of U.S. consumers wish their health care experiences were more personalized. Similarly, 54% of consumers feel that their health care providers and insurers don't have all the contextual information needed to personalize recommendations.⁹ Personalization is crucial. It demonstrates a commitment to understanding and addressing the unique aspects of each patient's health journey, thereby fostering a deeper connection and trust between patients and providers.

To make consumers' digital experiences more personalized, health care leaders should:

Integrate comprehensive data systems. Ensure that all consumer data systems are interconnected and capable of sharing information seamlessly. This integration allows for a holistic view of each patient, enabling the delivery of personalized experiences based on comprehensive data analysis of past interactions, preferences and health records.

Adopt a consumer-centric approach in communications. Tailor communication strategies to meet the individual preferences and needs of consumers. This approach involves using the data to understand what services or information are most relevant and listening to patient feedback to continuously adapt and refine personalization strategies.

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Clinical information, financial information, demographic information, personal preferences. It's the constellation of all those things that need to come together to best understand how to engage the consumer.”

— **Tricia Purdy**

Head of Strategy and Product, Optum Rx

5. Design an omnichannel strategy that caters to diverse patient preferences.

Omnichannel experiences provide a consistent, high-quality experience across various platforms and channels, both digital and in person. This seamless integration may help retain consumers and enhance their satisfaction by allowing them to interact with providers through their preferred channels. Data shows that 40% of consumers will avoid organizations that do not support their preferred communication methods.¹⁰ This highlights the critical need for businesses to adopt an omnichannel approach to effectively meet evolving consumer demands.

In a hybrid care environment, consumers might engage through digital channels like telehealth, chatbots, patient portals and online bill payments, as well as through traditional in-person visits. The ability to offer a cohesive experience across these channels can significantly improve consumer satisfaction. It also enhances communication between providers, caregivers and patients, ensuring that all parties are well-informed and that care is coordinated effectively.

To successfully implement an omnichannel strategy, health care leaders should:

Develop a unified consumer communication platform. Create a central platform that integrates all communication channels. This platform should allow individuals to move smoothly between different modes of interaction, such as from a chatbot to a live telehealth session or from online appointment scheduling to in-person visits.

Employ smart routing systems. Use advanced routing technologies that intelligently direct consumer inquiries to the most appropriate channel based on their complexity and urgency. For instance, simple queries could be handled by automated chatbots, while more complex issues are escalated to live agents or specialists.

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Our job is to orchestrate, to mediate, to guide across all channels – and digital is obviously of utmost importance.”

– **Stephanie Meyer**

VP Product, Advocacy Product, and Optum Guide, Optum Health

Navigating the digital transformation is a complex yet vital endeavor, and prioritizing essential elements like functionality, customer support, self-service options, personalization and seamless omnichannel integration, can enable leaders to more effectively and efficiently enhance both care and convenience. Investing in these areas not only responds to the growing consumer expectations but also places organizations at the forefront of innovation. Such a strategic emphasis ensures that health care systems deliver top-tier experiences, rivaling the best in any consumer industry.

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