"Consumers are Online, So Why Aren’t They Using Healthcare Provider Portals?", Industry Analysis by Loyale Healthcare

90% of Americans use the Internet, but only 25% use the patient portals offered by most hospitals. This digital disconnect impacts patient experiences and provider performance, but there is good news for providers who act to deliver rewarding online experiences.

LAFAYETTE, Calif. (PRWEB) April 24, 2019 -- There is a conspicuous disconnect in the healthcare industry and it’s a bigger problem than the industry appears to realize. According to this report from the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) “at nearly two-thirds of hospitals, fewer than 25 percent of patients had activated access to the hospital’s patent portal.” And this poor adoption is occurring despite the fact that most hospitals offer online access to patient information.

This digital disconnect is a problem for three principal reasons:

1) it neglects patients who use and expect online resources, 
2) it creates operating friction that reduces productivity and 
3) adds financial stress at a time when many providers are already dealing with thinning margins, growing bad debt and mounting competitive threats from traditional and nontraditional sources.

It’s unlikely that the poor adoption of hospital patient portals is attributable to poor patient demand. Online use is vigorous in many other sectors of the economy. According to this recently updated report from the Pew Research Center, 90 percent of Americans are using the Internet to keep in touch, shop and gather information. That represents a 65% discrepancy between hospital patient portal usage and Internet usage in general.

Even when measured against online use by seniors age 65 and up, 73% of whom use the Internet, there still remains a 48% gap between online usage and patient portal usage. The conclusion? Most hospital patients are indeed going online, they’re just not going there to engage with their hospital.

Why should digital engagement matter to healthcare providers? Because there is a growing performance gap between the haves and the have-nots. This report written by McKinsey Global Institute and published by the Harvard Business Review found that “The most digital companies see outsized growth in productivity and profit margins.” And it’s not just about how much technology these companies use or own. Even more important are technology’s usage by customers. A digitally-empowered workforce is presented as the most impactful differentiator of them all.

As explored in the article: “How Self Service and Automation Add Value to Patient Financial Engagement”, Americans choose to go online because, more and more, digital channels offer more convenience and equal or better value than traditional offline encounters or transactions, even when they are essentially serving themselves. But when it comes to a patient’s ability to view, understand and engage with her healthcare, the digital channel either goes unnoticed or is deemed irrelevant.

Patient disinterest in their providers’ patient portals is partially attributable to the portals themselves. Too often, they’re difficult to use and understand. They don’t have the information or utility patients care about. This presents a barrier to consumers who are accustomed to one-click online shopping. Like it or not, this is now the standard for intuitive, consumer friendly experiences that people will actually use.
According to research published by Deloitte in 2016, it was observed that “For (consumers’) digital capabilities to more efficiently drive provider strategies and service offerings, they must become easier to use in order to gain optimal usefulness and traction among healthcare providers.” Here at Loyale Healthcare, we’ve learned that If patients don’t land on a portal that’s makes them feel welcome, they’ll leave.

It’s plainly evident that most healthcare providers need to develop digital resources that engage and empower patients and staff. And although fixing the digital disconnect will call for some additional near-term investment, by offering an appealing patient-centric online experience, healthcare providers have an opportunity to engage with their patient/consumers more efficiently and effectively. Additionally, the same digital strategies that entice and engage consumers can also improve operating efficiencies and enhance revenues.

Whether the user is a patient, physician or hospital staff, satisfying online experiences are characterized by simple, user-friendly design; automation to relieve the user of trivial tasks; and robust backend data analytics that drive highly personalized user experiences. Loyale Healthcare is applying these principles to deliver the industry’s leading patient financial engagement experience. When linked with a provider’s clinical portal, patients and hospitals have access to a digital front door where all the information they need to pursue and deliver care can be viewed, understood and acted upon.

As mentioned above, some of digitization’s most significant gains are achieved by digitally-enabling the workforce. Loyale’s Patient Financial Manager™ and Patient Financial Workbenches™, improve staff productivity by automating multiple patient admission and patient financial engagement processes across a variety of systems commonly used by healthcare providers. We’ve also developed the ability to segment patient populations to automatically generate evidence-based workflows that reduce administrative work, improve financial outcomes and impact provider bottom lines.

Another operational advantage to high patient portal adoption is evidence-based business intelligence. It’s now possible to track treatment and patient financial behavior throughout their entire care experience. This data is then aggregated to create performance dashboards that tell healthcare providers what’s working and what’s not, so they can make informed decisions about what to do next.

The operating gains made possible by improved digital engagement are self-evident. When fewer people can handle more work more quickly, operating costs go down. What may be less obvious are the many financial benefits that accrue when patients are engaged digitally in a way that encourages them to seek - and pay for - treatment.

Loyale achieves this by offering price transparency and cost estimates, multiple payment plan options and personalized communications that eliminate surprises and make care affordable. As a result, patients (who are often delaying or avoiding care because of cost) get the care they need, then self-serve to create payment plans that work for them. In other words, providers attract more patients, achieve better patient payment outcomes (patients now account for 35% of provider revenue), and drive better revenue. Additionally, a provider’s reputation as the financially-friendly caregiver gives them a significant competitive edge.

At Loyale, we’ve been engaging digitally with consumers for almost thirty years. All that we have learned about driving desirable consumer behavior over the decades is reflected in our suite of patient financial solutions, where we’re working with some of the country’s largest healthcare providers to deliver better patient experiences, better staff experiences and improved operating performance.
Based on our success, we’ve identified 6 critical components of launching and sustaining a successful, patient-centric patient portal. We’re happy to share them with you here.

Easy to Use: One would think this is a no-brainer, but many providers offer their patients clunky online experiences that are hard to navigate and hard to use. Here, it’s essential to engage with a partner, staff member or consultant with User Experience (UX) expertise, with a disciplined process for portal design and usability that meets patients’ high expectations.

Easy to Understand: This is related to the above but is important enough to be called out. A UX professional will apply certain navigational and visual standards to help ensure that visitors to a provider’s portal can immediately discern the short path toward the information they need, with minimal clicks and pleasing visual experiences through the journey. When launched, the site’s analytics should be reviewed regularly to inform adjustments to encourage future visits and improved engagement.

Easy to act on: Few things irritate an Internet user more than finding what they want, but no way to use it. For example, today many portals include a patient’s billing information in the form of recent invoices. These invoices might be from a hospital, a radiologist, a physician and a physical therapist. Usually, the patient is on her own to try to figure out what will be paid by insurance and what she will owe. Even if the patient’s financial responsibility is presented, the patient has no online options to deal with it and is forced offline, begging the question “why did I come here in the first place?” Loyale deals with this challenge by consolidating bills into a single, easy to understand presentation that can be paid with as little as one click.

Easy to integrate with offline experiences: As noted above, with 73% Internet usage, Americans 65 or older should be encouraged to engage online by bridging the gap between paperless and their preferred communications and record keeping styles. That means giving hospital staff a matching view of the patient experience and offering the ability to easily print relevant clinical and billing information.

Ongoing marketing and communications: A provider portal must be vigorously promoted to encourage adoption. That means having signs at all care delivery locations, flyers in bills and other patient mail, encouragement from clinicians and staff at all times. And a content strategy that makes the portal site a valuable resource for patients who are interested in better ways to manage their health and wellness. The portal can and should be a great channel for nurturing richer provider-patient relationships.

Exceptional user support: Users of even the very best websites occasionally run into something they don’t know how to deal with. When that happens, they must be able to get their problem solved immediately, with friendly personal service that can either walk the user through to a solution or handle it themselves. This includes online chat and easy access by phone. As much as possible, this support should be available 24/7, whenever users will be there.

By acting now to improve adoption of their patient portals, healthcare providers have a compelling opportunity to engage more successfully with their patients, drive significant financial and operational benefits and grow market share. Loyale Healthcare is honored to have been chosen by some of America’s largest and most innovative providers to do just that.

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About Loyale

Loyale Patient Financial Manager™ is a comprehensive patient financial engagement technology platform leveraging a suite of configurable solution components including predictive analytics, intelligent workflows, multiple patient financing vehicles, communications, payments, digital front doors and other key capabilities.

Loyale Healthcare is committed to a mission of turning patient responsibility into lasting loyalty for its healthcare provider customers. Based in Lafayette, California, Loyale and its leadership team bring 27 years of expertise delivering leading financial engagement solutions for complex business environments. Loyale recently announced an Enterprise level strategic partnership with Parallon including deployment of its industry leading technology to all HCA hospitals and Physician Practices.
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