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HOW TO BRIDGE THE PATIENT DIGITAL EXPERIENCE GAP IN HEALTHCARE

A Frost & Sullivan Virtual Think Tank

Frost & Sullivan, The Growth Pipeline™ Company for 60 years, recently assembled a select group of thought leaders to participate in a series of three Virtual Think Tanks to discuss How to Bridge the Patient Digital Experience Gap in Healthcare. The sessions were moderated by Greg Caressi, Senior Vice President, Transformational Health, Frost & Sullivan, and included providers from leading healthcare organizations.

The purpose of the Virtual Think Tanks was to gain a better understanding of the challenges and successes the healthcare professionals had experienced with financial communications and processes, and patient engagement overall, particularly in the digital realm. Although different groups met on different days, they all discussed a similar set of topics, and many recurring themes emerged in these sessions. This summary document will highlight their key insights, and underscore areas where improvements in the patient experience can be made.

Moderator:

Greg Caressi
Senior Vice President, Transformational Health
Frost & Sullivan

Amanda Ricci
Director, Corporate Access Services
Premier Health

Scott Nygaard
Chief Operating Officer
Lee Health

Rachel Schweers
Co-Founder; Chief Strategy Officer
Cancer Treatment Centers of America

Kristin Ebert
VP, Platform & Experience Transformation
Mercy

Cindy Russo
Chief Operating Officer & Vice President System Operations
Central Maine Health

Breanna Banks
Director of Clinical Education
Centerstone Research Institute

Alan Kramer
AVP, Health System Emerging Strategies
UT Southwestern

Ashley Newton
Chief Operating Officer
Centerstone's Research Institute

Adolphe Edward
Chief Executive Officer
El Centro Regional Medical Center

Elizabeth Jaggers
Director, UI Physicians
University of Iowa Health Care

Kristen Jacobsen
VP, Marketing and Development
RevSpring

IMPROVING THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

In an era when medical care is so often provided by an evolving constellation of primary care providers, specialists and labs from various networks, hospitals and offices, there are no easy answers to the complex questions and issues surrounding patient billing, or the patient experience overall. However, there are some very effective strategies and technologies that can be applied to improve the process and the patient experience. These include:

- Presenting comprehensive payment information to patients from the outset of care
- Communicating with patients in their channel(s) of choice
- Utilizing integrated payment systems
- Leveraging advanced analytics to pinpoint patient preferences

All of these actions can lead to better financial outcomes, and create a more positive and informed patient experience, too. As Moderator Greg Caressi of Frost & Sullivan stated, “Patients with a better knowledge of their financial liabilities through online tools before treatment are more likely to remain highly satisfied with their care and overall patient experience.” Providing essential care and payment information upfront, as well as guided access to online tools, can help ensure a more informed and positive experience.

Improving Customer Experience and Collections Through Price Transparency & Analytics

Patients with a better knowledge of their financial liabilities provided through online tools before treatment are more likely to remain highly satisfied with their care and overall patient experience, nproving provider loyalty. Providing this higher level of customer experience not only improves provider organization financial results, it also improves customer satisfaction and competitive positioning.

ALIGN THE VIRTUAL AND THE PHYSICAL

Healthcare providers should strive to align the virtual and physical patient experience across the care continuum, and smooth out as many issues as possible along the way. An omnichannel service model can help organizations achieve this. With this approach, relevant information is communicated in the patient's preferred channel through any device, at any point in time. Importantly, patient data is centralized, and patients can choose how they would like to communicate and when, with the flexibility of choosing email when convenient and text at another time, for example.

> When the Think Tank participants were asked, "*How would you describe your current patient communication process?*" **seventy percent** of the respondents stated that their organizations were using a multi-channel model, with patients receiving information such as appointment reminders and bills through different channels.

As the participants shared, patients typically received printed bills for some services, and digital messages for others; in most cases, these channels are not automatically connected, so if a person responds on one channel, that information is not available to other forms of communication going out from the provider or their billing service. Several noted that these communications were not synchronized or integrated between different systems, leaving much room for improvement.

There is an ongoing need for patient communications to be personalized whenever possible. One way to address this is to ask the patient what their preferred communication method is, and to interact with them in that channel. Smart organizations will take this further and use data and behavioral analytics to determine the channel that the patient best responds to. As Kristen Jacobsen, Vice President, Marketing and Development, RevSpring, stated, "It's helpful to use data analytics to look at actual patient behaviors. For instance, a patient may say they prefer emails, but actually respond better to texts. Improved operational efficiencies and a better patient experience can be achieved with intelligent use of analytics and AI as well."

FOSTERING DIGITAL ADOPTION

As we move to an increasingly digitized world, healthcare providers must foster ways to communicate with patients digitally, for convenience, to improve response rates and to save on outreach costs. Digital tools are often the best way to acquire and centralize patient information, and to obtain the closest thing possible to a 360 degree view of the patient experience. Some healthcare organizations are beginning to achieve this. For example, Alan Kramer, Assistant Vice President, Health System Emerging Strategies at UT Southwestern Medical Center, shared that his healthcare network had attained excellent results with a strategy that included frequent web and social media communications, as well as video interviews conducted by the CEO. His organization also had a very high MyChart adoption rate.

> When the Virtual Think Tank participants were asked, "*At what point is patient consent gathered for digital communications?*" the responses were very varied. While **35%** said "At point of service," **17%** said, "Permission was gathered before service," and another **17%** said, "At multiple and varying touchpoints."

Ideally, organizations should gather information at all touchpoints as necessary, as this is convenient for patients. This also increases the likelihood that critical information will be gathered. What is crucial is that this information be recorded in a centralized data repository and be accessible along the spectrum of service as well as across communication systems.

WORK TOWARDS COHESIVE AND CONSISTENT PATIENT COMMUNICATIONS

> Another key question posed to the participants was, *"How consistent is your patient communication process from pre-service, point of service, to post-service, as well as across channels (print, email, text, IVR, call center, etc.)?* Notably, none of the respondents said that there was no need for improvement in the process. **52%** said that the communication process was somewhat consistent, and **35%** said it was very consistent, with another **11%** reporting that it was not consistent at all."

Bringing together different stakeholders to address their different methods of contacting and billing patients was discussed as a strategy to address this. Consolidating call centers under the same leadership was another suggested action. The complexity of gathering care estimates upfront, often across hospital networks, state lines and different providers was noted, as well as the challenge of integrating call centers, EHR records and CRM systems. As Scott Nygaard, Chief Operating Officer, Lee Health, noted, "I would say we've got the right concepts, but we have a long way to go to make it a seamless or unified experience."

Starting with comprehensive billing information, including medical cost estimates, can help. As Rachel Schweers, Co-Founder and Chief Strategy Officer, Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA), stated, "I think one of the biggest challenges in this area that I think CTC has done very well with, is onboarding its stakeholders...then making sure that patients feel that cohesive message." The participants agreed that obtaining a single view of the patient experience, including tracking financial obligations from the start, was highly desirable. Most agreed that it would be best to have all data, including billing information, in one system.

UNIFY THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

When asked whether the patient experience felt like one brand, a whopping 70% of those polled said no. Not terribly surprising, considering the numerous and different entities that make up healthcare today. As Kristen Jacobsen stated, “You probably have an estimation vendor, an appointment reminder vendor, you may have one for statements, one for digital engagement, or other call center vendors…now you need to bring them together to look cohesive…not an easy thing to do!”

> Participants were also asked, “*Do you provide cost estimations at point of service?*” In response, **41%** said “No,” **35%** said “Yes, and it’s working well,” and another **23%** said, “Yes, and patients are confused,

The difficulty of providing an accurate cost estimate was articulated by Scott Nygaard when he said, “It’s confusing because it ties into their own benefits design, co-pays and deductibles, and the things that aren’t always plated…and then, if there’s a complication…we have no way of integrating all those different players inside an institution.” This sentiment was echoed by others.

Although it can be difficult to fully estimate final medical charges, there are ways to improve the process. Care providers can and should strive for clarity in communications, emphasize when charges are estimates, (and subject to change); and keep their patients informed about changes in costs along their healthcare journey. Updating patients as clearly and frequently as possible is always desirable.

CONCLUSION

The overarching question posed to the healthcare thought leaders throughout the Virtual Think Tanks was: How to Bridge the Patient Digital Experience Gap in Healthcare? Based on the discussions and insights shared, the answer seems clear: Create a patient strategy that encapsulates a single view of the patient experience, one that includes care and payment history. Communicate clearly from the start, and provide all available data as well as payment options (i.e. a payment plan) whenever possible. Work towards transparency, consistency and clarity in all communications. Tie the data together, so different stakeholders are working from the same set of communication insights. Leverage analytics to improve customer responsiveness and communication effectiveness.

Ideally, this patient strategy leverages a centralized data repository, digital tools and advanced analytics for optimal efficiency and care. The benefits of this approach can include savings and efficiencies gained from digital communications, improved cash flow, and higher levels of patient engagement and satisfaction. As so many healthcare journeys can be uncertain and complex, streamlining the experience with clear and consistent communications, financial and otherwise, will improve customer retention, help to improve satisfaction scores and increase the competitive positioning of the organization.

NEXT STEPS

- **Schedule a meeting with our global team** to experience our thought leadership and to integrate your ideas, opportunities and challenges into the discussion.
- Interested in learning more about the topics covered in this white paper? Call us at 877.GoFrost and reference the paper you're interested in. We'll have an analyst get in touch with you.
- Visit our **Digital Transformation** web page.
- Attend one of our **Growth Innovation & Leadership (GIL)** events to unearth hidden growth opportunities.

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