Leveraging Telehealth for a More Consumer-Centric Healthcare Experience

By Jessica Duke

Telehealth programs seem to be popping up everywhere with employers offering services to their employees, healthcare systems implementing programs and national telehealth providers creating standalone offerings. The number of telemedicine consultations will reach 160 million cases by 2020, a 700 percent increase from 2015 and 77 percent of consumers say they'd be more likely to choose a doctor who offers telehealth than to choose one who isn't using the technology. However, despite this interest, just 18 percent of consumers have used this type of service and telehealth has yet to become the go-to place for care.

As consumers seek out healthcare experiences that more closely align to the experiences they have in other industries in terms of ease of access, instantaneous answers and transparency, telehealth programs constructed in the right fashion, provide an opportunity to do just that.

Addressing Consumer Needs and Desires

Telehealth programs can address consumers' core needs in a way that traditional care delivery settings can't. To do so, organizations must first truly understand what their consumers want, beyond just quality of care and a good experience at your facility, by thinking about their lifestyle.

Consumers don't want to be sick nor do they want to spend a significant amount of time seeking out care. If that they are sick or injured, they want as few disruptions to daily life as possible. Essentially, the less they need healthcare the better. The lifestyles of many consumers make accessing care less of a priority or challenging to comply with. For instance, an individual with a chronic illness wants to make their follow-up appointments but a demanding job and family requires frequent cancellations. A caregiver wants to be present at a loved one's appointment but struggles to balance providing care with other family responsibilities. An individual receives surgery, but doesn't go to follow up appointments because they can't take the time to travel to the physician's office.

So, with that in mind, telehealth can be looked at as more than on-demand urgent care appointments, but as an integrated component of the care continuum.

Telehealth is a chance to meet people where they're at, whether that's at home, office, school or another location to ensure they're receiving the care they need. Ultimately keeping them well or making it easier for them to get well with minimal disruption to their daily life. This means that staying healthy isn't a burden but fits consumers' lifestyles.

Telehealth Creates Consumer-Centricity

Telehealth offerings cover a wide range of services, settings and types of care. Telehealth has been applied across specialties and disciplines, in an inpatient and outpatient setting as well as scheduled and on-demand appointments.

For organizations that don't have a large array of telehealth services, assessing where to begin offering telehealth or how to expand should be looked at in a consumer-centric fashion. A few examples of consumer-centric telehealth services include:

- Virtual sleep studies performed at home offer minimal disruption to daily routines and enable those who can't be away from home to receive this test.

- Lactation consultations for new moms via secure mobile apps help them overcome breastfeeding challenges at the time they need assistance and from nearly any location.

- Tele-intensive care units allow patients to receive higher levels of care without being transferred to another facility, so they can stay close to home. This is especially valuable in rural settings.

- Remote patient monitoring enables patients to record critical health information and share it with a physician virtually, so they can monitor their condition without a formal appointment.

The list of innovative concepts go on and on, but that doesn't mean every organization must offer every service. Instead, look at your consumer population, their goals and objectives and truly understand what's preventing consumers from complying with

physician recommendations such as returning for follow-up care, completing a recommended protocol or even seeking out care when they're well.

Get Consumer-Centric Offerings to Catch On

Consumers are interested in telehealth but remain skeptical. For providers, this is a significant barrier that must be addressed. Although a telehealth visit saves on average $100 per visit, 66 percent of consumers are unsure if telehealth services are covered by their insurance. As a result, it's critical for providers to help their consumers gain awareness before the consumer is in a moment where they need care.

To increase adoption, a platform that is consumer-centric is also key. Lessons from other organizations can provide guidance on making telehealth more mainstream.

- **Use on-demand services as a launching point for continuous relationships.** Platforms should be more than just a transactional stop for the visit. Instead, just like e-commerce sites offer recommendations for future purchases, the platforms should showcase other service offerings like nutrition counseling, therapy or urgent care that align with a consumer's lifestyle. This can increase awareness of the services available while also making it easier for them to access this care when they need it.

- **Support adoption of the platform.** The adoption of Apple's iPhone, in part, is due to Apple's customer service. At their stores, Apple's customer service representatives don't just sell phones, but they work with customers to set up their phone in a way that meets their needs and respond to questions via online chat services for future follow up. Similarly, in-person assistance with creating a telehealth account and explanations of the telehealth offerings at your organizations as well as online support to troubleshoot challenges could help customers feel more comfortable and understand how to leverage the new technology.

- **Build trust.** Casper not only changed the way that mattresses are sold, but they've changed the kind of mattresses we buy. With a simple shopping experience, great customer service, easy to follow videos and prominently displayed reviews, Casper has made adoption easy by building trust with consumers. In a similar fashion, healthcare organizations can not only change how care is provided but instill confidence in consumers that new type of care is right for them by applying the tactics used by Casper.

- **Extend the brand online.** Ulta started out as a brick-and-mortar retailer but has extended its brand online so that the online experience rivals that of the in-store experience. Not only does their website leverage the same branding as their stores, but consumers can expect the same type of service. For instance, in-store customers can try on makeup while their GlamLab app allows consumers to test out makeup from a mobile device. Similarly, the telehealth experience needs to feel as similar as possible to the traditional experience. To start this requires a branded telehealth platform. Additionally, efforts should be made to make online appointments feel as similar to an in-person experience as possible.

Telehealth is not only beneficial for consumers by designing care delivery in a way that better meets their lifestyle, but it will be increasingly important as organizations take on risk. 52 percent of all Kaiser Permanente member encounters with the system took place virtually. Since 95 percent of their patients are covered on a capitated basis, the lower cost of virtual care drives down costs for Kaiser and helps patients stay well.

Telehealth holds the promise of significant changes within the healthcare industry. As new telehealth offerings and programs come to the forefront, healthcare organizations are recognizing telehealth as an opportunity to attract and retain consumers. To do so, making every aspect of telehealth from the initial sign-on to appointment and follow-up care as consumer-centric as possible will be key for adoption of this offering.

Key Takeaways

To develop telehealth solutions that create more consumer-centric healthcare offerings, you must:

Think differently.

Evaluate barriers and challenges that make care access or care compliance challenging.

Plan differently.

As you look to expand programs and services, do so with the consumer in mind. Look at ways that you could make healthcare more accessible or seamless for consumers and how telehealth can help with that.

Act differently.

Discuss telehealth offerings and insurance coverage with consumers to eliminate concerns regarding the cost of care, telehealth processes and access with consumers to increase awareness about this option for healthcare.

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