

CHANGING BEHAVIORS WITH THE GAMIFICATION OF HEALTHCARE

By Bret Wagner, Kevin Thornberg

The psychology of games is well understood. Offering incentives in the context of a positive experience generates better engagement and builds loyalty. The effectiveness of games helps explain why the [global healthcare gamification market](#) is expected to reach \$13.5 billion by 2025.

Wearables such as Fitbit, Apple Watch and apps aimed at tracking and rewarding exercise, diet and general wellness were the first mainstream iterations of health gamification. The next generation of gamification in healthcare will tackle more in-depth monitoring and management of chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes.

Gamification sits at the intersection of two of the most significant assets in healthcare — people and technology. It is a natural complement to existing digital tools including electronic health records (EHRs), patient portals and big data analytics, with the potential to transform preventive care, consumer engagement and the employee experience.

Behavior Change is Behind Gamification Wins

Gamification in healthcare is not just about making wellness more fun. Healthcare is a serious business. The process and rewards must be driven by outcomes. When considering how

to engage complex and high-risk patient populations or burned out staff, the problem healthcare organizations are trying to solve is behavior change.

Empowering Consumers

Digital tools that incentivize healthy behavior, from medication adherence to following discharge instructions, provide a way to personalize and put consumers in control of their care plan.

For example, Medisafe, a medication reminder app with more than 5 million users, [reports](#) that two-thirds of hypertension, diabetes and depression patients using their app began adhering to their medications by using the company's tool. Users can personalize their in-app experience with colors, themes and music and earn rewards for tracking medications and other health inputs.

With technology to connect with patients beyond single episodes of care and motivate them outside the four walls of a facility, providers can start to change healthcare quality and outcomes.

Engaging Physicians and Employees

In the provider setting, technologies such as patient population management tools that plug directly into the EHR are changing how healthcare organizations operationalize and track care management. Consider, for example, [chronic care management \(CCM\) services](#) and the need to track non-face-to-face encounters with patients.

For providers and payers, billions of dollars of reimbursement are at stake as risk-based payment models gain traction. Adding gamification to existing tools could boost physician and case

manager engagement in technology used to track patients in an effort to keep people healthy and more accurately predict who is at highest risk.

Even fundamental initiatives from safety to financial operations can be reimaged with gamification. In one health system's [hand hygiene program](#), hospital units formed teams and competed for the best results in reducing common HAIs. The units using gamification reported results significantly better than the control group with a 69% larger drop in C. diff and a 27% larger drop in overall HAIs. In another functional area, [Sharp Healthcare](#) attributes improved revenue cycle performance to better employee performance and engagement spurred by gamification.

Gamification Prioritizes the Consumer Experience

Incorporating game elements such as scoreboards and competitive incentives into the healthcare experience is one path to more consumer-centric care. While gamification isn't the answer to everything, there are tenets of the concept that can foster the care and caregiving experience healthcare consumers and employees expect:

- **Understanding of the consumer:** Using consumer insights to get to know patients beyond their electronic health record elevates both the consumer experience and clinical outcomes.
- **Personalized and adaptive service:** It's essential to create a differentiated experience and a way to follow consumers as their health needs shift due to age, illness, pregnancy or other life events.
- **Community-driven:** Creating a sense of community and pairing that with efforts such as online resource groups provides an outlet for education, emotional support and accountability to keep people on track toward achieving their health goals.

- **Goal setting and rewards:** With gamification, positive outcomes tie to actions. Implemented strategically, the positive reinforcement inherent in game design can fuel everything from medication adherence to provider trust to brand loyalty.

Organizations should be aware of typical pitfalls and start small with pilot projects and partnerships that will allow systems to remain agile as healthcare changes and [interoperability becomes critically important](#).

As healthcare organizations look to the future, gamification provides a mechanism to improve business operations, increase engagement and create better consumer experiences.

Key Takeaways

Gamification in healthcare has the potential to bring together people and technology to change health outcomes. To take advantage of gamification, healthcare leaders must:

Think differently.

Consider the value proposition of using gamification to engage consumers and employees in a way that permanently changes their behavior.

Plan differently.

Evaluate how gamification can be used as a complementary tool to other technologies such as the CRM or EHR.

Act differently.

Choose a population of consumers, physicians or employees to pilot a gamification program.



huronconsultinggroup.com

© 2019 Huron Consulting Group Inc. and affiliates. Huron is a global consultancy and not a CPA firm, and does not provide attest services, audits, or other engagements in accordance with standards established by the AICPA or auditing standards promulgated by the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board ("PCAOB"). Huron is not a law firm; it does not offer, and is not authorized to provide, legal advice or counseling in any jurisdiction. Huron is the trading name of Pope Woodhead & Associates Ltd.