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5 ways to boost patient loyalty

A guide for delivering exceptional patient experiences

Consumerization has been one of the most powerful healthcare disruptors of the past decade. Empowered by pricing incentives, greater competition, and exceptional cross-industry experiences, today's patients are taking a much more active role in making treatment decisions.

Consumer expectations have only increased as a result of COVID-19, with 60% of patients wanting to use technology more for communicating with healthcare providers and managing their care[1].

With technology now at the forefront of the patient experience, healthcare providers have been forced to adopt a digital-first approach to managing care.

Healthcare organizations who are willing to adapt to increasingly consumer-oriented market demands have the opportunity to deliver exceptional experiences that will drive long-term patient loyalty.

The first step to driving loyalty is capturing patient feedback. However, many organizations still rely on paper surveys or first-generation digital technologies that require long periods of data aggregation and processing to derive insight. These legacy technologies can't transmit actionable and meaningful feedback to front-line care providers who have the power to change patient experiences in real time, and thus ultimately struggle to impact patient loyalty. At best, they provide a snapshot of the average patient's satisfaction.

"Focusing on the patient experience throughout their entire journey is key," says Julie Keller, co-founder and co-leader of Medallia's healthcare practice. Julie has

spent nearly a decade working with adult and pediatric oncology populations on experience and outcomes. "The patient journey comprises signals — i.e., how many missed appointments they've had, how many times they've contacted patient accounts, their feedback on their encounters — and the patient experience, which is about delivering the right services at the right time to meet patient expectations."

Taking it one step further, Keller says, "Patient loyalty is the outcome of a patient's experience and the amount of effort they felt they had to put forth to engage with your organization. Do they come to your organization for every healthcare service, for every check-up, for every lab draw? Do they refer friends and families? Have they called patient accounts three times because they got hit with a surprise bill?" One thing we know is that regardless of industry, it costs significantly less to retain an existing customer than it does to attract a new one.[1] The bottom line is that patient loyalty is the critical component in protecting and improving market share.

With patient loyalty up for grabs, healthcare providers should understand, in real time, how their patients experience every interaction along the continuum of care.

In fact, Forrester Consulting found that 32% of the consumers will walk away from a brand they love — after just one bad experience.[2] And unfortunately, consumers are all too willing to take this mindset with them to the doctor's office, emergency room, or pharmacy.

To improve customer sentiment in healthcare, consider these 5 ways to boost patient loyalty:

1. Engage patients on their terms

Communication tools that were heavily used in the past are no longer the tools that patients prefer today. By relying on email may mean your request for feedback goes unchecked until the experience is out of the patient's mind.

According to recent Medallia research,[3] **consumers report that 65% of their feedback is provided via mobile device.** But it isn't just mobile that is important. Your signal collection toolkit needs to include a range of methods and instruments — text, SMS, messaging apps — that are integrated on the back end to create one source of truth and to catch patients when and how they want to engage.

Often, short surveys that collect some data at multiple points in the journey are far more beneficial than a long survey at the end of the journey (for example, when discharged from a hospital stay) that typically goes unanswered. Belinda Simmons, head of Medallia's Healthcare practice, says that her clients will often automatically push short satisfaction surveys (with as few as three questions) to patients immediately following an encounter. If the results show an unsatisfactory experience, an alert is sent for someone to follow up in the moment. This approach ensures organizations are acting and addressing their concerns in real time.

2. Activate your employees

Staff closest to patients have the greatest impact on care delivered — a fact that is difficult to argue against. Indeed, employees are the change agents that ultimately deliver the experiences that influence your organization's brand. Here are a few ways you can maximize their impact:

- **Democratize feedback**
  Many people enter the medical profession because they have a deep-seated desire to improve the lives of others. Providing staff with access to relevant and timely customer feedback can help them understand how their actions contribute to a patient's experience in order to improve future interactions.

- **Employee ideas**
  While you may be getting a strong signal from customers and internal systems indicating where problems exist, your employees can be the single best source of truth for how to fix those problems. Capturing ideas and suggestions across your entire organization, acknowledging them, and evaluating them with transparency encourages engagement and action.

- **Employee satisfaction**
  Ensuring employees are satisfied with their work environment, conditions, and relationships allows them to focus on what matters most — providing the best possible patient care. Continuously monitoring, measuring, and analyzing employee satisfaction scores can help you keep a pulse on how your staff is feeling and proactively intervene, when and where appropriate.

3. Prioritize service recovery

A healthcare setting can be hectic and does not always lend itself to following up on patient feedback. But consider this: **52% of consumers stated that a negative experience they had in the past year could have been improved if they had the opportunity to give real-time feedback** and had the company took immediate action.

It's not enough just to generate feedback. What can build loyalty is actually doing something with that feedback — via timely responses and meaningful actions.

"With real-time data in the hands of somebody who can actually take action, you have the opportunity to improve patient experience," Simmons noted. "Staff can call or text an unsatisfied patient and say, 'Hey, I'm sorry, but can you come back in? What's a good day for you?' which shows that you really care about their experience."

If we break down Simmons' sentiment further, there are two elements of prioritization at play:

- Investing in technology that can effectively capture and route feedback to the appropriate person who can address the specific problem area(s) and make a lasting impact for the patient;
- Building service recovery into the workflows of your frontline teams.

4. Identify root causes — not just symptoms

> The care experience is often not a single event, but a set of connected moments — both clinical and non-clinical — that together form the experience. While the sum of these moments determines how the patient views the experience, any single moment can have an impact.

In fact, a recent McKinsey and Co. article asserts there are many "mini-journeys" throughout the care experience.[4] In the same article, they urge practitioners to consider the factors with the strongest influence on each mini-journey, and assert that they often vary by market and patient segment (e.g., expectant mothers, cardiovascular patients, emergency room patients).

Organizations should look beyond the individual to find patterns across patient journeys, identifying which patients are similar and how experiences compare by segments in order to understand where poor experiences stem from.

Example:
You've received intermittent low satisfaction scores regarding office visits in obstetrics & gynecology. By breaking that experience into smaller journeys — pre-visit (scheduling & consultation), visit (facilities & clinical interactions), and post-visit (lab,

documentation, follow-ups) — you could discover the low scores are most often associated with the visit.

By analyzing the verbatim text in the feedback, you uncover that the waiting room furniture is uncomfortable. However, the feedback is inconsistent making it difficult to determine if the furniture should be replaced even though those that are dissatisfied are emphatic in their position.

> Through further segmentation, you find the majority of expecting mothers find the waiting room chairs uncomfortable. You implement a new standard that expecting mothers are to be offered a pillow while they wait and see the visit feedback start to improve.

As you can see, an aggregate view of journeys can reveal where anomalies occur so you can drill down and pinpoint the root causes of the negative experiences.

5. Ensure patients feel heard

The most crucial step in building patient loyalty is making them feel heard. By providing patients with a voice, they can be reassured that their providers are invested in their health and well being.

On the other hand, if they don't feel heard, they may continue to seek an outlet to air their frustrations. And make no mistake, other patients and potential patients are listening.

A PwC study[5] shows that the reputation of healthcare organizations is shaped by personal experiences, peer recommendations, and word-of-mouth. While only about 20% of consumers attributed their choices of retailers, hospitality, and travel services on peer recommendations and personal experience, more than double that number (42%) said those experiences directly influenced their choice of a healthcare provider.

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Keller and Simmons also urge healthcare organizations to recognize the power of social media in building — or undermining — perceptions and loyalty. Many forward-thinking providers and payers are linking experience surveys to social media reviews to build volume as a hedge against that one "really bad" rating on a review site. **"There may be lots of patients who had a very positive experience with your organization, but who just need a nudge to provide social feedback,"** Simmons said.

Conclusion

With changing times and greater patient expectations, patient loyalty is more important now than ever before.

Your organization should feel empowered to create exceptional experiences that boost patient loyalty.

By strategically leveraging technology to drive convenience, communication and quality, you can cement the bonds needed to maintain enduring patient relationships in the face of emerging competition, increasing price sensitivity, and market disruptors.

As a reminder, these are the five ways to directly boost loyalty: engage patients on their own terms, activate your employees, prioritize service recovery, identify root causes of dissatisfaction, and above all, ensure that your patients feel heard. To achieve these goals, it's recommended that organizations partner with a technology leader in patient and employee experience that will offer the right mix of product innovation and industry expertise to drive your organization forward.

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About Medallia

Medallia is the pioneer and market leader in Experience Management. Medallia's award-winning SaaS platform, the Medallia Experience Cloud, leads the market in the understanding and management of experience for customers, employees and citizens. Medallia captures experience signals created on daily journeys in person, digital and IoT interactions and applies proprietary AI technology to reveal personalized and predictive insights that can drive action with tremendous business results. Using Medallia Experience Cloud, customers can reduce churn, turn detractors into promoters and buyers, and create in-the-moment cross-sell and up-sell opportunities, providing clear and potent returns on investment. Medallia has offices worldwide, including Silicon Valley, Buenos Aires, London, New York, Tel Aviv and McLean, Virginia. Learn more at www.medallia.com.

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