

# Storm Born Strategies: Driving Innovation in the Time of COVID-19

By Ryan Donohue, NRC Health

Innovation never happens on an island. We may envision our next big thing conjured up in a lab where it can be tested and tweaked before (or if) it hits operations, but reality denies such a fantasy. Let's examine COVID-19 and the telemedicine boom. For years healthcare providers adopted telemedicine at a pace that would make a glacier look fast. While other industries harnessed technology to transform their offering, healthcare demanded that you show up, sit down, and fill out endless forms. The virus blew the doors off in-person visits and immediately tested those slow-moving telemedicine initiatives. Any remaining opposition to virtual care was violently shushed.

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In March 2020 alone, telemedicine visits in the U.S. more than doubled.<sup>1</sup> Jefferson Health in Philadelphia, PA reported more telemedicine visits in spring 2020 than the previous five years combined.<sup>2</sup> This rapidly changing situation invokes one of my favorite management



phrases: "sometimes you have to fix the airplane while you fly it." 2020 was the poster child for fix-while-you-fly. Providers who grew and adapted to challenging circumstances quickly reaped the rewards of ingenuity and resilience: loyal, satisfied patients.

We all want to make healthcare a better place. Unless you're planning to start a brand-new hospital from scratch, you're up in the air with everyone else. COVID-19 continues to disrupt our industry in previously unimaginable ways. It would be easy to hunker down, to mothball any innovation attempts until we're out of the fog. But when will that be? And while time stands still, we should think about where we want to go when it starts moving again. To get there, let's use the strategic compass we never knew we had: the people we serve. Our patients. Our consumers. The recipients of our innovation and the victims of our stagnation.

## Resetting Our Strategic Plan to Include Consumers

2020 brought everything to its knees. Including our carefully plotted strategy plan. We can pick back up and resume pretending we know what will happen in the next five years or craft a more agile, short-term plan with consumers as the inspiration. If 2020 contains a silver lining, it is that we have received some well-earned goodwill with the masses. The positive press for healthcare workers and their employers cannot be overstated. Nor will it fade fast. There is a newfound appreciation for what healthcare providers offer our society. A rediscovered purpose. We should first pause to revel in the power of being recognized in this way, and then we should move decisively to channel it into a revised post-COVID strategy.

Enter consumers. Willing collaborators on innovation, consumers seek change in nearly all aspects of healthcare. We know access, engagement, and value top their wish list. What can we

## Key Board Takeaways

### Advancing Consumer-Centered Innovation during COVID-19:

- The board uniquely represents an outside view and must take up the mantle of consumers and patients to ensure innovation is centered on those who receive care; newer board members are more adept at conveying this "outsider view" and should be given the chance to provide input.
- "Healthcare heroes" is a watershed moment for healthcare to flip negative perceptions and start a fresh conversation with consumers about the importance of healthcare and the value it brings.
- Scrap the old strategic plan; the board should be revisiting the organization's future in light of technological expansion and what consumers want (both virtually and physically) in the near term.
- Employees are a vital source of insight and can serve as an early sounding board for consumer-centered innovation; they also hunger to be included and will support initiatives that they feel include their perspective in the development process.
- Don't stick to your guns post-COVID and assume healthcare will return to normal. It's unlikely anything—even healthcare—will revert to its pre-pandemic conditions entirely.

do to improve consumer access to our care system? How can we better engage them once they have entered that system? How do we ensure they have seen, felt, and internalized the value we have provided once they have left? And perhaps most importantly, how do we ensure they will come back to us when they need care again?

Consider the common thread of consumer demands: technology. The vast majority of U.S. consumers have witnessed the tech revolution in other industries. They have experienced these other products and services more than healthcare. When they do visit their doctor or stay in a hospital, they expect tech. So, if you have contemplated offering online scheduling, posting physician ratings and reviews, creating a seamless smartphone app to better educate and inform your future patients, and you're wondering if now's the time

<sup>1</sup> Kat Jercich, "CDC: Telehealth visits more than doubled in March 2020," *Healthcare IT News*, November 2, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen K. Klasko, M.D., M.B.A., Healthcare Economics Summit, August 2020.

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to finish those? It is. Do them. These advancements are getting more affordable and less prone to error all the time. Easy wins.

As consumers emerge from their burrows, there will be a desire to go places again. Yet some 2020 rituals will remain. We should feed off the virtual component of care that has touched so many while enhancing the physical experience where our revenue generating power largely still resides. Our ability to straddle these worlds will have a lot to do with future success in the eyes of our patients.

If in doubt about what consumers want, ask them. When NRC Health's consumer survey, known as Market Insights, asked which innovations they wish their providers would pursue, consumers pegged tech-based improvements in five of the top six (see exhibit below).

### The Hybridization of Virtual and Physical Healthcare

The last thing we want is consumers fresh off a friction-free telemedicine visit to get dumped into an undesirable physical experience. The power of a physician consultation from the couch can be drained by an arduous experience in a stuffy old doctor's office. Now that we have a better-established suite of virtual offerings, we can begin to intentionally meld them with our physical offerings. Consumers look for three things:

- Continuity of brand/image (how things look/feel matters)

- Continuity of customer service (how you are treated shouldn't vary between settings)
- Continuity of value (an affordable first experience can be wiped out by eventual sticker shock)



Consider Apple: their Web site is impeccably stylish yet refreshingly useful. They categorize their products along the top, walk you through configuration and comparison, and offer a speedy one-page buy. If you do stumble, their chat support seemingly descends from the sky with the exact answer you need. What if you walked into their store and found a dusty labyrinth littered with confusing models and shady pricing structures? What if the few people manning the store were unhelpful or insisted you stick to their way or the highway? You'd say: "I've been had! That shiny Web site was merely a mirage!" You don't separate the experiences. They're part of one long journey.

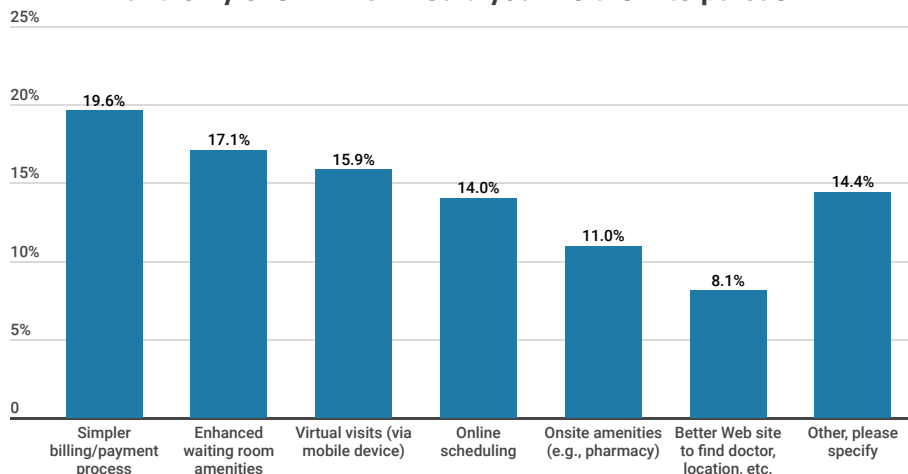
Our challenge is ensuring these virtual and physical worlds feel like they orbit the same sun. Because they should. And if we achieve some level of consistency, we have reshaped the consumer journey of care to feel more like one straight path instead of a winding, broken road. Consumers who feel they have one seamless (or close to it) journey are more likely to take that journey again and more likely to advocate that family, friends, and anyone else in their sphere of influence follow their lead.

While time stands still, we should think about where we want to go when it starts moving again. To get there, let's use the strategic compass we never knew we had: the people we serve.

No matter how wonderful we believe an innovation can be, it must be delivered by our employees. They are the perfect test audience. They too, are consumers. We should ask them what they want next, from both the employee and consumer perspective. We should bounce our ideas off them in surveys and workshops. This isn't expensive but requires intention to ask, listen, and be willing to act on good ideas shared. And we might be surprised by what we hear.

Let's enjoy the goodwill heaped upon our caregivers and celebrate the positive virtual experiences our consumers and patients have received. Times have been insanely challenging. But let's not overlook the power to keep this momentum rolling when the fog of COVID-19 breaks. When it does, we risk stumbling out and falling behind our consumers once again. Instead, let's allow those we serve to lead us to what's next. If we listen along the way, we will ensure our strategies and innovations are lighting the path for our patients to a better healthcare world. Wouldn't that be a great place to land our plane?

### If your local hospital could pursue one of the following improvements—and only one—which would you like them to pursue?



Source: NRC Health's Market Insights survey of consumers, 2018, n size = 19,778.

*The Governance Institute thanks Ryan Donohue, Corporate Director, Program Development, NRC Health, and Governance Institute Advisor, for contributing this article. He can be reached at [rdonohue@nrchealth.com](mailto:rdonohue@nrchealth.com).*