



Five Ways Successful Health Systems Reinvent Customer Relationships

By Steve Jackson, President, NRC Health

We now live in a consumer-driven healthcare economy. High-deductible plans, rising out-of-pocket costs, and experiences from other industries set a higher bar each year for the delivery of healthcare services. Large and small, leading health systems are finding that a robust voice of the customer (VOC) program is becoming essential in matching their services to an ever-growing list of customer expectations for care that is easier to access, less costly, and produces better outcomes. With nearly 50 percent of patients frustrated by their healthcare experience, understanding what matters most to patients is critical to creating a frictionless delivery system.¹

Whereas patient experience teams have historically been structured as compliance-oriented departments to meet government required mandates (such as the CAHPS program), forward-thinking health systems are now leveraging out-of-industry ideas, resources, and new tools to reinvent the customer experience and gain a durable competitive advantage in the markets they serve.

The benefits of an enhanced focus on customer experience have proven beneficial to both the bottom line and improving population health. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that over a consumer's lifetime, individuals will direct on average more than \$1.3 million of healthcare spending. Capturing lifetime loyalty is essential in both today's fee-for-service world and tomorrow's value-based care environment where loyalty to a health system and provider has been shown to reduce unnecessary readmissions and lower healthcare costs.

Here are five ways market leaders are reinventing VOC programs:

1. **They see the whole experience.** Too often health systems only evaluate the patient experience at the conclusion of a

clinical encounter. Using traditional surveys, including tools like the CAHPS instrument, a retrospective review of the clinical encounter is captured. But this approach often provides organizations with an incomplete view. It leaves out critical touchpoints in the consumer's journey, both online and off-line, including key moments related to health system awareness, physician selection, scheduling, and of increasing importance, patient billing. At Bellin Health in Green Bay, Wisconsin, executives have broken down departmental silos that prevented seeing the patient experience holistically. Joining a number of like-minded organizations, patient experience is now structured under marketing and strategy to see the entirety of the patient experience from prospective patient to loyal customer.

2. **They build relationships, not transactions, with patients.** Many healthcare customers have experienced feeling as if it is their first interaction with a healthcare brand regardless of how many times they have been seen by an organization. Research consistently shows today's consumer wants to be known, understood, and supported on their journey to well-being. Whether it be in the EMR or CRM, forward-looking health systems are now aggregating the multiple touchpoints they have with patients to form a "lifetime rating" and using these insights to increase care coordination and direct the next best action for patients and families based on their knowledge of individual needs.
3. **They don't just listen, they act.** As organizations transition from sampling a portion of their population to offering 100 percent of their customers the opportunity to leave feedback, it becomes more

¹ NRC Health's Market Insights survey, 2012–2016.

important than ever to ensure a structured process exists to perform service recovery. University of Missouri Health Care in Columbia, Missouri, focuses on an additional experience measure: the Net Promotor Score. Any patient who leaves a score rating the hospital between a zero and six (on an 11-point scale) is immediately triaged for follow up by a nurse manager or a service line leader. Each call seeks to learn more about the experience and how the hospital can improve service, as well as to build connections with patients that lead to better care and higher patient engagement. While limited studies exist in healthcare on the benefits of service recovery, early acknowledgement and an apology for a lapse in care has been linked to reduced malpractice risk.

4. **They blend coaching, learning, and continuous improvement with data.** Data without coaching doesn't generally garner the necessary results, but many organizations continue to send out scorecards to frontline staff and expect the patient experience performance will simply improve. Enlightened VOC teams have come to realize that the path to a great customer experience starts with their staff. Sentara Healthcare, which operates more than 200 sites of care and 12 hospitals that employ over 3,800 medical staff, has curated hours of online coaching tips and a best-practice community that provides inspiration to enhance patient-centered care that accompanies their VOC insights. The health system has found that building better connections with patients can also combat issues related to clinician burnout affecting many caregivers across the country.
5. **They convert positive patient experiences into brand strength.** Online ratings and reviews are now prolific in nearly every industry and trusted as much as a personal recommendation. As

organizations continuously improve the patient experience, many are finding that sharing their patient experience results online in the form of five-star ratings builds consumer trust, protects the online reputation of their physicians, and can result in improved new patient acquisition performance by standing out in search engine optimization (SEO). At Intermountain Healthcare, the average rating for across 2,750 physicians is a 4.7 out of 5.0. Since becoming transparent with their results, Intermountain has published more than 500,000 validated patient ratings. Today, more than 100 health systems across the country have taken an early lead in building consumer trust through transparency.

As healthcare becomes more competitive and patient expectations continue to rise, now is the time for boards and executives to reevaluate their VOC strategy. In thinking like the aforementioned leaders, these are the types of questions being asked on their quest to achieve human understanding:

- Have we removed internal silos that prevent our health system from seeing the patient's journey comprehensively?
- Do we understand our customer segments and their expectations of our health system?
- Do we have a single metric across all care settings and service lines that scores the experience of our customers?
- Have we designed the experience for our clinicians in a way that enables them to deliver a great customer experience?
- Is the customer experience seamless between the online and off-line environment?

Taking the time to ensure that the customer's voice is heard and drives the future of the health system is critical in today's healthcare environment.

The Governance Institute thanks Steve Jackson, President of NRC Health, for contributing this article. He can be reached at sjackson@nrchealth.com.

