

New Report: Patient Experience Is Key to Brand Loyalty

By Diana Mahoney

Patient loyalty has been called the “new marketing” in health care. Cultivating enduring relationships with patients—and thus establishing loyalty to the health system brand—is good for patients and for business. For patients, a consistent relationship with the same provider reduces the opportunity for fragmented care. On the business side, loyal patients are the source of word-of-mouth referrals, potential new patients and an increased bottom line.

Unlike traditional marketing strategies, however, loyalty can’t be planned or purchased. It must be earned. And the process starts well before patients walk through the door, when consumers query family, friends and search engines to gather information about patients’ experiences with a given care provider to determine whether there’s a fit, explained Chrissy Daniels, partner in Strategic Consulting at Press Ganey.

This word-of-mouth insight into the patient experience influences brand loyalty more than conventional marketing tools such as mailings, billboards or television, print or radio advertising, according to research reported in a new white paper, [Consumerism: The Role of Patient Experience in Brand Management and Patient Acquisition](#).

“The ubiquitous nature of consumer reviews in all aspects of life has begun extending to health care, and consumers’ comfort level with the digital platform in particular is a major tipping point,” Daniels said, noting that the growing reliance on online reviews as a primary driver of provider choice disrupts traditional approaches to patient acquisition and retention.

To understand the decision-making behavior of health care consumers and the influence of patient experience on that behavior, Press Ganey researchers surveyed a nationwide sample of more than 1,000 household health care decision makers. They sought answers to four key questions.

1. How does patient experience compare with traditional marketing strategies with respect to predicting brand loyalty?
2. How frequently do patients research prospective new physicians and referrals online before scheduling an appointment, and when they do, what tools are they using and what are they looking for?
3. Do patients look beyond the physician ratings and review the comments from other patients?
4. Do positive or negative comments have more weight in the final decision?

Among the findings, the data indicate that the influence of patient experience on brand loyalty is five times greater than the influence of traditional brand promotional strategies. Also, before accepting a referral to specialty care from their own physician, nearly three-quarters of respondents look at the physician’s Web page, read online patient reviews or enter the physician’s name into a search engine.

Of those patients who look to online physician ratings, nearly two-thirds say both positive and negative reviews are valuable in their decision-making process. “Consumers look to negative feedback to identify patterns that might keep them from selecting a provider or lead them to do more research to see if the patterns persist,” the authors write. Positive feedback, on the other hand, “helps consumers select a provider or feel more comfortable with a decision that’s already been made.”

AT A GLANCE

- A new [report](#) explores the decision-making behaviors of health care consumers and provides insight into the critical role of patient experience in brand management and patient acquisition and retention.
- In a survey of more than 1,000 household health care decision makers nationwide, 71% of patients report consulting online physician reviews before booking an appointment with a provider.
- The findings also show that patient experience is five times more likely to influence brand loyalty than conventional marketing tools such as billboards or television, print or radio ads.

When it comes to researching a prospective new provider, 71% seek information from online reviews before talking to family and friends or seeking a referral from providers—confirming the high value they place on the experiences of other patients.

Given the strong association between patient experience and consumer loyalty as well as consumers' use of online reviews to inform their decision making, "health systems that openly share physician review data on their websites using the patient experience data they collect for benchmarking are making an important investment in the competitive viability of the organization," according to the report.

In addition to transparency of patient experience outcomes, health care organizations should strive to give every patient a voice by leveraging delivery of surveys via text and email in addition to standard outreach, identifying factors that drive and erode loyalty to enable targeted improvement strategies, and using natural language processing to analyze and aggregate comments to gain insight into and proactively manage experience and brand, Daniels suggested.

"Our research demonstrates that the most effective way to influence patient loyalty is through the care experience," Daniels stressed. "By gaining a deep understanding of what drives patient experience, systems can align the mission of delivering safe, high-quality, patient-centered care with the business of acquiring and retaining patients."