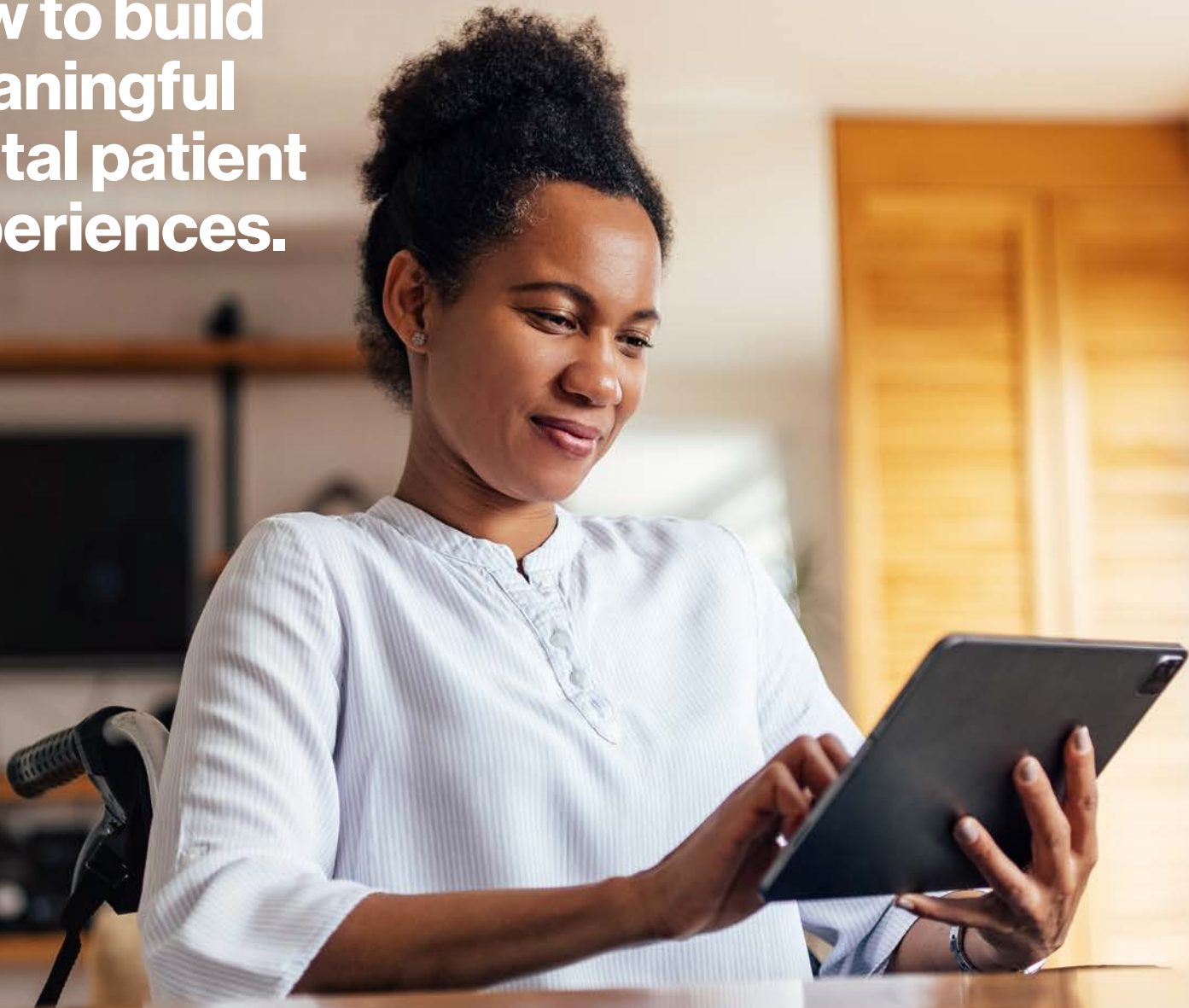# Meet patients at the digital front door.

How to build meaningful digital patient experiences.

verizon✓

The opportunity behind the digital front door

A hospital or medical practice's digital presence is often its first interaction with a new patient, and can be a significant factor in how patients choose a healthcare provider and stay engaged throughout their care journey. Providers that leverage the right digital tools will ensure smooth handoffs at every step of that journey, and deliver the best care possible for each patient's unique needs.

They will also be able to meet changing patient expectations. A Redpoint Global survey found that 80% of consumers now prefer to interact with providers digitally and have high standards for the quality of those interactions.[1] In addition, as many as "60 percent of consumers express interest in a set of broader virtual health solutions, such as a 'digital front door,'" McKinsey has found.[2]

The health insurance industry is optimizing the digital front door by making apps and websites more user-friendly and personalized. This became a key differentiator after the Affordable Care Act laid the groundwork for linking patient satisfaction to reimbursement, and it has now become a consumer expectation.

Hospitals and practices are also shifting in that direction, both to better engage patients and out of necessity, as healthcare is reshaped by rising consumerism and demand for cutting-edge technologies. Both the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) as well as Press Ganey Scores have amplified the impact of patient experience on hospital choice, making it critical to ensure a positive experience from the moment a patient enters the hospital through their post-discharge recovery.[4]

Hospitals and health systems are now competing based on their ability to deliver customization, flexibility and convenience. "This includes ease of navigating the health system, finding the right provider, making an appointment, and getting answers to billing questions and other inquiries," says Lea Sims, marketing strategy lead for Verizon's healthcare, insurance and life sciences practice.

Research has shown patient satisfaction is linked to hospital profitability, with more than half of US healthcare consumers stating their choice of hospital would be affected by poor electronic communication.[3,5]

This is true for practices as well, with 41% of consumers saying the ability to communicate with a provider in their preferred channel would influence their choice to see that provider.[1] One in four consumers ranked provider engagement across web, mobile, text, email and phone channels as the most important factor, while 11% cited how easy providers are to contact across messaging platforms.[1]

Younger and wealthier consumers are especially likely to turn first to digital channels and to have higher expectations for them, driving increasing demand for improved digital experiences.[1]

The virtual healthcare revolution

While the shift toward greater consumerism and use of digital technologies in healthcare began before the pandemic, COVID-19 pushed both into high gear. In the first two months of the pandemic, the average healthcare organization made two years' worth of digital advancements.[6]

Providers ramped up the shift toward decentralizing care away from hospitals and into clinics, ambulatory surgical centers and the home whenever possible. Patients welcomed these changes, and many consumers tried at-home alternatives, including online and omnichannel engagement during the pandemic.[7] In fact, delivery of routine care via primary care providers has dropped since 2020 (56% in 2021 versus 62% in 2020), while the use of online resources (19% versus 12%) has increased.[8]

As a result, providers have a growing ability to reach patients at home via mobile apps, websites and artificial intelligence-enabled chatbots that intuitively respond to questions, determine whether a patient is in immediate need of an in-person or telehealth appointment, and even arrange care.

> **Research has shown patient satisfaction is linked to hospital profitability, with more than half of US healthcare consumers stating their choice of hospital would be affected by poor electronic communication.**

> ## We're seeing a lot of interesting use of portals and outreach to … reengage patients and say, 'It's time for you to come back in so that we can monitor your health.'
>
> **C. Daniels, chief experience officer, Press Ganey**

"To meet patient expectations, these technologies must seamlessly steward patients to their next level of support, Sims says, ensuring they are not lost along the digital journey and facilitating a solid handshake and handoff at each step, just as there would be inside a healthcare facility," Sims said. Providers also need to leverage data in a way that keeps customers engaged. Just as patients shopping online get an email when they leave an item in their shopping cart without checking out, providers can check in and offer assistance to patients who only make it partway through a presurgical scheduling process.

"Digital technologies also create an opportunity to learn about and address patient symptoms sooner, prioritizing the most urgent cases for in-person care and allowing targeted use of telemedicine," says Peter Tomfohrde, business development and strategy leader for Verizon. Tomfohrde notes that providers can leverage cutting-edge technologies, such as using speech analytics when a patient calls about symptoms or test results, that would allow them to prioritize patients based on the patient's own sense of urgency. "Some healthcare systems are going to adopt these tools and deliver a great patient experience, and they are going to establish themselves as the go-to providers," Tomfohrde says.

While many hospitals and health systems haven't realized the full promise of the new digital healthcare experience, some are taking the right steps to make their digital front doors a user-friendly entry point for patients.

"We're seeing a lot of interesting use of portals and outreach to … reengage patients and say, 'It's time for you to come back in so that we can monitor your health,'" says Chrissy Daniels, MS, chief experience officer at Press Ganey.[9]

Opening the front door

The digital front door should be anchored by the foundations of customer experience design and customer journey mapping, and it should leverage customer/patient preference and behavior data to build customized, meaningful experiences.

The ideal front door experience should start with an "address," or ability to be found. Healthcare organizations should think about search engine optimization and how easy their website and digital resources are to find, as well as how their patients feel about downloading an app versus using a website.

They should also consider their "welcome mat," or accessibility. Digital resources should be accessible, welcoming, streamlined and navigable, whether via web browser or mobile app. Resources should be personalized whenever possible with patient-relevant information and should offer virtual agent support.

Finally, healthcare organizations should optimize their "home tour," or the ease with which the patient can navigate the site to get to the right resources. They should be seamlessly shuttled between live agents, appointment schedulers and other site features.

"Organizations that want to create the best digital patient experience will spend time committing the patient journey to writing and identifying opportunities to improve it," Sims says. Providers must map out the journey — from reporting symptoms, to making an initial appointment, to referrals and follow-up. They must determine where patients are getting stuck or frustrated, or abandoning the journey. Looking for opportunities for long-term improvements in this process is more important than seeking low-hanging fruit to get immediate results, Sims notes.

Designing your front door

Hospitals and health systems designing their digital patient resources should begin by assembling key stakeholders, outlining existing digital touch points and identifying any gaps.[6] They should aim to address several key areas of the customer experience:

Customer access and navigation, including toll-free/inbound access, interactive voice response, call routing, etc.

Customer engagement, including virtual agents, chatbots and digital assistants.

Customer service, including use of contact centers.

Omnichannel essentials

Omnichannel essentials for patient engagement should include:[10]

- AI-based chatbots that can triage patient inquiries.

- Self-management tools for chronic diseases.

- Digital patient intake forms and check-in.

- Online appointment scheduling.

- Online bill payment system.

- Intuitive and user-friendly search features and website flow.

- Educational resources for patients.

- Mobile optimization.

- Telehealth options, with all the necessary records available to the provider.

Data security is essential. Health systems should offer identity and security solutions, such as voice authentication, that support a secure digital conversation. These technologies also require a secure and reliable network, such as 5G, both in the hospital and in the home. A HIMSS survey of IT leaders in US healthcare found 40% consider 5G a critical main form of communication in providing patient care.[11]

A stronger connection

The new healthcare experience will revolve around optimized, consumer-centric care that begins on a website or app and ensures patients find what they need as quickly as possible, whether they are looking for test results, symptom information or to make an appointment. The best of these tools will enhance patient engagement, satisfaction and confidence in the healthcare system.

For example, SurveyMonkey found that the 59% of healthcare consumers who reported having more confidence in their doctors since COVID-19 specifically cited their provider's use of digital communication tools, among other factors.[12]

New tools and technologies can also help achieve enhanced health outcomes, as studies show that when patients are satisfied, they are more likely to follow their treatment regime, as well as attend outpatient appointments.[13]

Hospitals and health systems that embrace these ideas will lay the groundwork to be leaders in defining the hospital of the future. These facilities will be streamlined, mobile, agile and focused on the most acute cases that need the most intervention. They will be able to quickly expand ICUs and isolation areas, and to move patients and everything connected to them to different areas more safely. This will require wireless connections that are adaptable to an influx of patients and will allow smaller numbers of staff to work more efficiently while maintaining data security and high-quality care.

For both hospitals and practices, the best results will be seen when care is connected, personalized and, most importantly, easy.
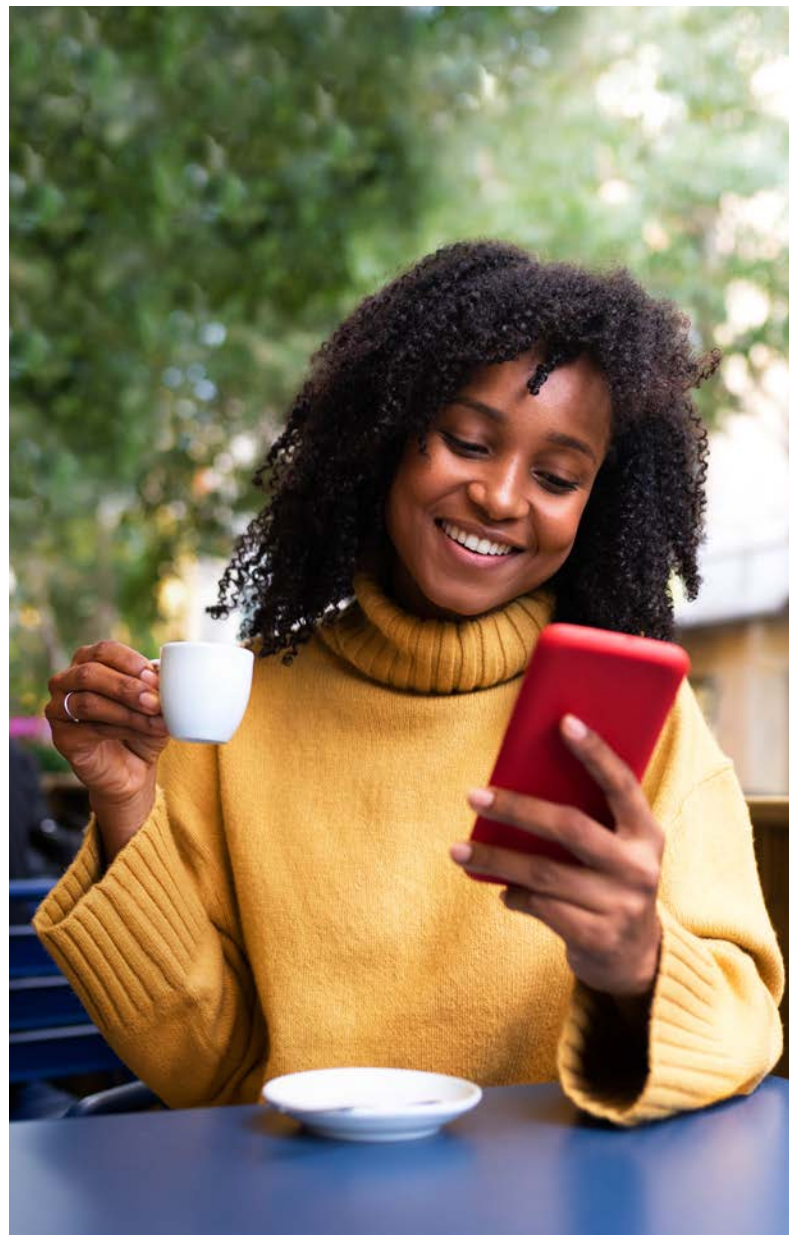
References

1. Gordon, D. New survey shows consumers expect better healthcare experiences but are often disappointed. Forbes. Dec. 7, 2021. https://www.forbes.com/sites/debgordon/2021/12/07/new-survey-shows-consumers-expect—better-healthcare-experiences-but-are-often-disappointed/?sh=4358b62e73f6

2. Verizon business streamlines patient care with advances to BlueJeans Telehealth. Verizon. Aug. 11, 2021. https://www.verizon.com/about/news/verizon-business-patient-care-advances-bluejeans-telehealth

3. Richter, J., Muhlestein, D. Patient experience and hospital profitability: Is there a link? Health Care Management Review. July/September 2017. https://journals.lww.com/hcmrjournal/Abstract/2017/07000/Patient_experience_and_hospital_profitability__Is.7.aspx

4. HCAHPS: Patients' Perspectives of Care Survey. CMS. Dec. 1, 2021. https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Quality-Initiatives-Patient-Assessment-Instruments/HospitalQualityInits/HospitalHCAHPS

5. Kahn, C., Salzberg, C. The next generation of measuring patient experience. Health Affairs. March 8, 2019. https://www.healthaffairs.org/do/10.1377/forefront.20190307.766083/full/

6. Heath, S. Key steps for opening the digital front door, digital transformation. Patient Engagement HIT. June 21, 2021. https://patientengagementhit.com/news/key-steps-for-opening-the-digital-front-door-digital-transformation

7. Cordina, J., Levin, E., Ramish, A., Seshan, N. How COVID-19 has changed the way US consumers think about healthcare. McKinsey. June 4, 2021. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/how-covid-19-has-changed-the-way-us-consumers-think-about-healthcare

8. Lagasse, J. Pandemic boosting healthcare consumerism, CVS Health finds. Healthcare Finance. July 13, 2021. https://www.healthcarefinancenews.com/news/pandemic-boosting-healthcare-consumerism-cvs-health-finds

9. Heath, S. Charting the future of patient experience and technology. Patient Engagement HIT. Feb. 12, 2021. https://patientengagementhit.com/features/charting-the-future-of-patient-experience-and-technology

10. Heath, S. What are omnichannel patient engagement technologies? Patient Engagement HIT. July 13, 2021. https://patientengagementhit.com/news/what-are-omnichannel-patient-engagement-technologies

11. 5G in healthcare. HIMSS/Verizon survey. June 2021.

12. McKeon, J. COVID-19 patient-provider communication lacking for 50% of US adults. Patient Engagement HIT. Aug. 12, 2021. https://patientengagementhit.com/news/covid-19-patient-provider-communication-lacking-for-50-of-us-adults

13. Patient satisfaction surveys. NEJM Catalyst. Jan. 1, 2018. https://catalyst.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/CAT.18.0288

verizon✓