



How Podiatrists Can Keep Patients in the Age of Consumerism

It's all about providing the right experience.

BY MARK TERRY

Although consumerism in healthcare may mean different things to different people, in general it relates to a trend among the public in treating their healthcare like they would any other retail business, like buying clothes or going to a restaurant. It could be called a “fast food” approach to healthcare or perhaps the “Amazon-ization” of healthcare, but what it comes down to is a demand for convenience and price transparency.

Early last year, two experts at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, Vivian Ho, director of the institute’s Center for Health and Biosciences, and Anaeze Offodile, a physician at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, published a study titled, “Making ‘Cents’ for the Patient: Improving Health Care Through Consumerism.”

The authors wrote, “We live in a world where an individual’s discretionary choices (food, clothing and travel)

are increasingly driven by convenience and amenability to control—for example, online shopping—and the prevalence of mobile apps. These attitudes will only heighten with future generations and it should come as no surprise

present consumerism movement.”

It can be a bit difficult to determine if this is a which-came-first-the-chicken-or-the-egg situation, but payers are feeding the trend by providing or demanding more patient respon-

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that they greatly influence how people interact with the health care sector. The increasing prevalence of walk-in clinics, patient experience/satisfaction surveys, online physician reviews, telemedicine, and concierge medicine speak to this. More importantly, they add an air of permanence to the

sibility. According to a TransUnion Healthcare study, the average person is now paying \$1,813 in out-of-pocket costs annual for healthcare services.

At least part of the current push for price transparency by federal and state governments is to encourage

Continued on page 62

Consumerism (from page 61)

patients to shop for the best deals. And with increasingly high-deductible healthcare plans, patients are incentivized to look for better deals, even if the reality of pricing posts for healthcare services is so complex and confusing that they won't make much sense to consumers (or anyone else,

affect your mindset and not necessarily in a positive way. Jackson notes, "If you think you are a commodity and buy into that yourself, and you think there's not much difference between you and—not other podiatry practices, necessarily, but orthopedic surgeons and Walmart, and the



Rem Jackson

Significant Components of Customer Service in the Podiatric Practice

Patient Flow and Cycle Time

Patient flow and cycle time is a big part of the patient experience, and was discussed in a previous article, ("Patient Flow and Cycle time in the Podiatric Medical Practice," April/May 2019). Patient flow is how the patients move through your practice. Improving patient flow includes how quickly, efficiently, and effectively your practice meets patient care demand by moving patients through the office.

It's important that you keep the actual flow of patients in and out of the practice as efficiently as possible. No one wants to be kept waiting in the reception area or the examining room. Analyzing the bottlenecks, staffing appropriately, performing triage, and prioritizing services is one way of getting to that point.

Leverage Technology

Technology is probably not the first thing people think of when it

"It's all about the experience. Period. It is about the experience that patients have when interacting with you and your practice."—Jackson

often). Many physicians don't know how much a patient will have to pay for a service until their insurer tells them, and those fees are often based on figures negotiated between the physician and the insurance provider.

So while consumerism is probably driven by an overall trend in society, possibly stimulated by the digital age and convenience of Amazon and other services, it still puts the physician in the position of having to deal with it.

Customer Service

Despite all the discussion of how patients want fast and convenient care, that may simply be frosting on the cake. Peter Wishnie, podiatric physician with Family Foot & Ankle Specialists in Piscataway, NJ, says, "People might want faster and cheaper, but really, I believe, what people do want in a doctor's office is to get better faster. Time is valuable so they want to be seen on time. They want people to listen to them and give them the service they need and show them you really understand their problem."

So much of what *Podiatry Management* discusses and has been written about over the years comes down to customer service. Rem Jackson, president and chief executive officer of Top Practices, in Las Vegas, says, "It's all about the experience. Period. It is about the experience that patients have when interacting with you and your practice."

The entire consumerism issue can

Good Feet Store—if you buy into that you're headed into a downward spiral of increasingly lower profitability, you'll lower your prices, be price-sensitive, you'll worry about it."

The point Jackson makes is that people are more than willing to pay for a better experience—in all things. As he says, "It makes absolutely no sense whatsoever to go to Starbucks to get your coffee. It's stupid. And yet, hundreds of millions of people

Andersen notes that she tries to prescribe affordable medications if she can, but if it's not possible and there are concerns about a patient's coverage, she discusses the GoodRx website and even goes so far as to help them sign up, if necessary.

do it, millions do it every day. Not because it's convenient.... They go to Starbucks for the experience."



Dr. Wishnie

This is something Jane Andersen, DPM, a podiatrist with InStride Chapel Hill Foot & Ankle (North Carolina) agrees with, noting that the super-group she belongs to tries to keep prices competitive, "But we've had people come back, saying, 'You're so much better, it's a better experience than elsewhere.' So part of it is just being a good practitioner and providing good care to your patients no matter what. That's what it boils down to."

comes to customer service. And it's certainly true that it can have the reverse effect. Paying too much attention to your tablet or computer instead of the patient in the examining room can be problematic. But it can also make things easier. And utilizing patient portals and making it easier for patients to fill out forms or make appointments using the website can go a long way to making the patient experience more efficient.

But it doesn't necessarily have to end there. Andersen notes that she tries to prescribe affordable medications if she can, but if it's not possi-

Continued on page 63

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Consumerism (from page 62)

ble and there are concerns about a patient's coverage, she discusses the GoodRx website and even goes so far as to help them sign up, if necessary. "It can be very helpful because you can find some of these drugs are super cheap. It doesn't go to the patient's deductible, but if it's 10 bucks it doesn't matter."

This can also apply, she says, to drugs that aren't pre-approved by the patient's payer. She notes, "Patients appreciate it. Most are happy to send in their GoodRx fee, but some come back and say, 'My insurance covered it and it was only \$10.'"



Dr. Andersen

Wishnie encourages physicians to not forget about the patients when they leave the office. "Call them up the next day to see how they're doing."

Bedside Manner

Again, this is a topic that has been covered in the past ("Are You Losing Patients?" April/May 2018), but it is clearly a big part of both patient care and the customer experience. One approach is to consider the acronym: HEART.

- **Hospitality**—Your patients are your guests. Are your waiting room, exam room and other areas comfortable?
- **Empathy/Enthusiasm**—Put yourself in the patient's shoes—especially if you're a podiatric physician!
- **Attitude**—Everyone in the practice who comes in contact with the patient needs to have an appropriate attitude. Patients should be thankful they chose you and your practice. Appreciate your patients.
- **Respect**—Patients deserve your respect (everyone does), and one way to earn respect is to give respect. Patients, whether they realize it consciously, respond to it.
- **Timeline**—Work hard to stay on schedule. Explain delays to your patients. Apologize if necessary.

Show Your Care

Certainly, this is a bit part of being a healthcare professional, but Wishnie notes that showing empathy is important—from the very first interaction. "It starts off with the first phone call and starts by answering the phones properly. We don't say 'Doctor's office,' or 'Hello, doctor's office,'...we make the patient feel welcome. Get their name immediately. No matter what they ask you, ask for their name and then use their name throughout the conversation to make them feel comfort-

Continued on page 64

Consumerism (from page 63)

able. Show empathy, ‘What appears to be the problem, Mrs. Jones? Heel pain? Oh, I’m sorry, that sounds terrible, Mrs. Jones.’ You’re showing empathy, you’re showing concern, you’re showing that the doctors are

knowledgeable and will take care of the problem quickly.”

This is also a beginning-to-end issue as well. Wishnie encourages physicians to not forget about the patients when they leave the office. “Call them up the next day to see how they’re doing. All new patients

get a follow-up call and a new-patient thank-you letter. Their medical doctors get a letter explaining the treatment program. If they refer another patient, they get a thank-you gift. Treat them like family; like they’re your grandmother—you want to take care of them.”

Know Thy Patients

Everybody’s patient population is different. It may vary depending on the type of patients you treat. For example, if you focus on sports medicine, you’re likely to have a younger population than a practice focusing on the diabetic patient or elderly patients. There may be variations depending on your geographic location as well.

Larry Kosova, DPM, a podiatrist with Family Podiatry Center in Naperville, IL, in the Chicago area, has a generally younger patient population because the focus is on sports medicine, “not necessarily professional, but anything from elementary through collegiate. We do a lot of semi-pro, that kind of thing.”



Dr. Kosova

There is often talk about Millennials being the root cause of consumerism. After all, they’ve lived in the digital age all or almost all of their lives. They’ve never really known a world where you can’t download music, TV, or movies in an instant or have products delivered to their house within a day or two.

Kosova isn’t completely sure it’s entirely a Millennial issue, although that is part of it. “When I started practicing medicine some thirty-one years ago, I thought having a long office visit and really getting to know the patient was the key. So a lot of my office visits went quite long and I really enjoyed that. But nowadays people don’t want that. A lot of my adult patients are my age and we’ll talk about college and what our kids are doing, but the 20 to 30-year-olds really want to get in and out. They let you know right

Continued on page 65

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Consumerism (from page 64)

away they don't have time to chitchat, they want to get their problem fixed."

He sums it up, "Nowadays people want a quality visit rather than a quantity visit. It's nice to get to know people and when I have time, I love to do it, but I definitely see that people want more in a shorter period of time because everyone is time-constrained."

Andersen, on the other hand, notes that where her current practice is located in Durham, NC, most of her patients are doctors, attorneys, and PhDs—that they

“A lot of my patients are my age and we’ll talk about college and what our kids are doing, but the 20 to 30-year olds really want to get in and out.”—Kosova

essentially have the highest per capita PhDs there than anywhere in the country. “These patients really want to have an experience where they get very thorough information and a lot of hand-holding, even if they have to wait. I hear a lot of other doctors whose patients say, ‘This is what you need to do,’ and walk out. That’s not our experience. We probably make less money as a result, because we spend more time with patients, but that’s what is demanded by our environment.”

Don't know what your patients value most? Ask. It could be as simple as handing patients a card to check the boxes or prioritizing what they value most—web-based appointments, appointments within 24 hours, extended evening, early morning, or weekend hours. Who knows? You might be surprised.

Wishnie notes, “Give the clients what they want—except too many opioids. Our policy is: make the patient happy. I think the doctor needs to know what their values are—what’s important to you and what kind of mission are you passing on to your staff so everybody buys into it and then everybody will act accordingly. Make patients happy. Have a friendly office. Help the patients. Give them what they want, and what they need to get them better as quickly as possible for their lifestyle, legally and ethically. You can't make everyone happy but try to. If you make 99.9% of everybody happy, you're doing great.” **PM**



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