

Advance Consumer-Centric Care by Leveraging the Supply Chain and Patient Portal

By Russell Lombardo

The pace of disruption in healthcare is not slowing down. Consumers are demanding more convenience and value that empowers them to be healthy. To remain relevant, generate growth and own their future, healthcare organizations must position themselves as innovative market leaders focused on the consumer experience.

By exploring new business models and services that create a consumer-centric healthcare experience, organizations can drive consumer loyalty and the bottom line. While the supply chain may not be the first place you look to enhance the customer experience, combining that infrastructure with existing patient portal technology presents an opportunity for savvy leaders to differentiate their organizations.

Differentiation Through Innovation in Direct-to-Consumer Capabilities

Optimizing your supply chain operations is typically viewed in terms of reducing costs and improving efficiency. However, by rethinking your supply chain

capabilities, there is potential to provide a service that centralizes the ordering of medical supplies, medications and durable medical equipment (DME) within the patient portal and delivers items directly to a patient's home or bedside prior to discharge in cases where length of stay is more predictable. Consumers get what they need, when and where they need it as they transition between care settings.

Allowing for medical supplies to be ordered directly in the patient portal offers a streamlined way to take care of patients after they leave the hospital, clinic or even the physician's office. Consider the example of a patient preparing for discharge following a total knee replacement in the hospital. Typically, they would be sent home with minimal supplies for wound care, ice packs, drug prescriptions (to be dropped off or picked up) and instructions for other supplies. The patient or family could face multiple stops for supplies after leaving the hospital, knowing that the supplies will likely run out in a matter of days. Often the exact items needed are scribbled down or buried in discharge paperwork, leaving beleaguered patients and families struggling to find the supplies they need to recover at home.

If supply orders could be connected to the electronic health record (EHR) and placed within the patient portal, numerous [possibilities for improving the consumer experience](#) begin to emerge. For common procedures, pre-packed bundles and order sets

could be established, streamlining the process while providing a personalized feel. Additionally, consumers don't want to stand in a store and stare at a wall of unfamiliar medical supplies only to make the wrong choice. By curating a personalized list of supplies and distributing the products directly to the consumer, patients get the same trusted gauze pads, bandages, tape and other products provided in the hospital or clinic.

With slightly more integration, insurance and prescriptions for medications and other commonly prescribed DME such as oxygen equipment, walkers and nebulizers could be managed through the patient portal ordering process as well. These types of door-to-door services such as [Pillpack](#) (an Amazon-owned online pharmacy), [Uber Health](#) and burgeoning home health partnerships like that of [UPS and Merck](#) are growing the definition of home-based healthcare.

An effective supply delivery service begins shifting an organization's mindset to the potential of partnerships or direct service in home health. Most healthcare organizations have existing infrastructure that is well-suited to this type of endeavor, including:

- **Group pricing:** With GPOs and bulk buys, prices can remain competitive for consumers while still potentially generating a modest revenue stream for health systems.
- **Discounted shipping:** Most hospitals now have discounted or favorable shipping rates.
- **Staff and distribution processes:** The staff and skill set to pick, pull, pack and ship items already exists within the healthcare organization or would require minor tweaks to existing workstreams.
- **Technology and systems:** While there would be some investment in standing up an ordering system within the patient portal, many supply chain managers already use similar technology for front-end supply ordering. The total outlay should be minimal as organizations are already making large investments of time and capital in [solving issues around portals, EHRs and interoperability](#).

The real value proposition is in the opportunity for improved clinical outcomes and a better consumer experience that results from having the supplies consumers need to heal at home. Organizations can start small with pre-set packages of supplies for common procedures, building up to customization and automation that will yield greater value. The potential is only limited by your portal's capability. Over time, you can track supplies and potentially begin to tie certain supply sets to discharges or other predictive analytics tied to clinical outcomes.

Investing in Personalization

Personalizing the care experience is essential to retaining consumers and [starts with using technology](#) to understand and engage your consumers. Leveraging your patient portal and supply chain to order and deliver medications, supplies and even DMEs provides not only convenience but a new level of personalization for the consumer and their caregivers.

As care for the aging population falls to younger family members and caregivers, the number of digitally savvy consumers can only grow. Making the investments now presents the opportunity to attract and grow your consumer base.

Privacy Matters

Not surprisingly, [Amazon is already venturing into consumer-centric efforts](#) to get medical supplies to patients. The online retailer, along with app technology partner [Xealth](#), are piloting programs with several health systems in which providers can curate medical supply lists for consumers to order online. While the convenience of the effort is evident, there are immediate [privacy concerns](#). Most consumers understand that their order histories, and in many cases even the products they view, are not totally private, but they do expect companies to use their info prudently. When it comes to medical supplies, that tolerance for lack of privacy could be diminished.

For health systems setting up e-commerce systems that plug directly into their protected patient portals, the concern should be minimized.

From the prescribing clinician all the way through to the staff pulling and shipping supplies, health system staff are bound by patient privacy regulations. For consumers, concerns about their personal data being leveraged for targeting or advertising are alleviated by ordering directly through their healthcare provider. They get a streamlined, convenient experience without divulging potentially sensitive purchase data. For healthcare providers, the privacy risk is lessened by keeping the operations in house.

Another Touchpoint in the Continuum

Restricting patient care to the four walls of the hospital puts you on a fast track to losing touch with consumers. Providing a patient-portal-based and efficient way to get supplies and medications to patients is an extension of the hospital stay or office visit. Whether in the acute or ambulatory setting, the consumer experience is not limited to a single episode of care. By extending the supply chain outside the hospital or physician office and into the home, healthcare organizations are creating another critical touchpoint with consumers that builds loyalty.

Strategic differentiation can come from unlikely places within a business such as the supply chain and patient portal. By providing convenient access to healthcare resources organizations can create a more seamless care experience as consumers move between care settings.

Key Takeaways

By leveraging the existing supply chain infrastructure and patient portal to create direct-to-consumer capabilities, organizations can get ahead of the market and elevate the consumer experience.

Think differently.

Define the value proposition for leveraging the efficiency of your patient portal and supply chain.

Plan differently.

Align technology to improve the consumer experience and differentiate your organization as modern and innovative.

Act differently.

Drive growth by providing an exceptional consumer experience that builds loyalty.



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