The 'Frankenstein' app problem: 3 reasons hospital apps fail + 3 tips for success

For healthcare organizations, delivering an outstanding patient experience, boosting loyalty and driving revenue growth is a dream combination — and having the right mobile and digital strategy plays an important part in achieving it.

However, the healthcare technology landscape is plagued by digital apps that offer only single point solutions, such as appointment scheduling or wayfinding, that are of limited value to users. Today's healthcare consumers want care experiences to mirror the tech-driven experiences they encounter in most other aspects of their life. Successful hospital apps must bring together many features that complement each other, anticipate the patient journey and provide guidance and companionship each step of the way.

During a Gozio Health-sponsored featured session at Becker's Patient Experience + Marketing Virtual Event in February, Joshua Titus, CEO of Gozio Health, discussed why hospital mobile apps often fail and offered strategies to reverse this trend by delivering critical features in intuitive, user-friendly ways.

The urgency of offering highly engaging digital patient experiences

Hospitals and health systems are keenly aware of the value of mobile platforms as an entry point to, and an essential component of, a patient-centric approach to healthcare. The relevance of mobile solutions globally is closely linked to the importance of providing high-quality digital experiences, with healthcare being a vivid use case: Most patients feel no obligation to be loyal to a provider that doesn't offer a satisfactory digital experience, according to Mr. Titus. "We look at [people] as patients while they are receiving care, but before and after that, they are consumers who have choices," he said.

Patient engagement apps often fall short of expectations

Mindful of the evolving consumer mindset, healthcare organizations are racing to develop digital solutions that facilitate the patient journey. "Unfortunately, [the tech's] DNA often is not set up to meet that need very well," Mr. Titus said. This unpreparedness leads to apps that miss the mark because not enough strategic thought has gone into their design and implementation.

There are three main reasons why hospital apps fail to gain adoption and earn customer trust. They:

1. **Consist of a single feature**, such as a wayfinding assistance app, that accomplishes too little given the complexity of today's health systems and patient journeys.
2. **Have a high barrier to entry**, such as login and authentication requirements, before the user can do or access anything.
3. **Provide a poor user experience** because of the way they mix and match multiple features without a common thread between them.

Mr. Titus referred to many digital offerings as "Frankenstein apps."

"These are apps where it feels like different parts were just glued together and the experience is completely disjointed because none of it belongs together." He added that web-based apps that are not optimized for mobile are commonly associated with poor user experiences. "It gives you a very low-cost, shallow mobile user experience that is unfriendly — no one wants to 'pinch-zoom' to fill out a form on their phone — that's the fastest way to an uninstall. It doesn't engage them."

A successful mobile strategy begins with a holistic understanding of patient needs

To bridge the gap between intention and impact, and to gain adoption, hospital apps must address two key aspects. They must be useful enough for a critical mass of people to rely on them with high enough frequency (the so-called "stickiness" factor), and their usage must help fulfill key institutional initiatives and metrics, such as reducing missed appointments or revenue leakage.

So how can healthcare organizations ensure digital solutions aimed at easing the patient journey live up to their purpose? Mr. Titus highlighted three keys to success.

1. Offer digital companionship

The best hospital apps serve as end-to-end digital companions across the patient journey: they help patients locate providers within their catchment area and schedule appointments, provide navigation assistance from the home to the parking lot and to the point of care, list options for in-network follow-up care and enable access to medical records, test results, balances and bills. "Imagine you have a visit to the hospital coming up and a nurse of 20 years from that system says, 'I'm going to jump in the car with you today, [and] we're going to do this visit together,'" Mr. Titus said, referencing to the type of coordinated support that consumers expect hospitals apps to offer.

In 2017, Raleigh, N.C.-based WakeMed adopted this outlook while integrating a seamless digital patient experience anchored in Gozio's customizable, end-to-end mobile platform. The effort culminated in building the organization's All Access App. In addition to wayfinding, this app enabled geo-fenced provider search, provided information on ED wait times, offered the ability to reserve a spot at urgent care, shared guidance on preparing for the birth of a child, gave access to medical records and enabled a pathway for secure communication with the healthcare team.

"WakeMed wanted to create that handholding digital-companion experience and wanted to answer, from the user's point of view, 'What's in it for me?'" Mr. Titus said. Within two years, the app had registered half a million user sessions and 6,000 active users a month.

2. Use data insights

To develop apps that truly cater to user needs, health systems must use data that reflects users' pain points, concerns and desired features as well as the organization's goals and key performance indicators. "Make sure you build what needs to actually be built, despite what we think we should build," Mr. Titus said. He cited Atlanta-based Piedmont Healthcare as an example. The 16-hospital health system's PiedmontNow App was designed to orient users and increase access to care by positioning mobile appointment scheduling front and center to the app's home screen. This drove adoption of the app and also helped Piedmont accomplish a key organizational objective of improving click-to-fulfillment of appointment conversion rates.

3. Prioritize flexibility

The third essential aspect is not building a static app but rather a dynamic configuration of features and capabilities that can adapt rapidly to changing circumstances.

 "When I say, 'Do not build an app,' what I'm saying is adopt a platform where a major component is a mobile offering," Mr. Titus said. "When you have a platform, you have all these different pieces that you can plug into it — different data streams, different apps you may want to tuck in, different offerings. The environment does not sit still for us to enjoy our success; we have to be nimble. [A platform lets you] prioritize flexibility."

San Antonio-based University Health, which comprises a 700-bed teaching hospital and multiple surgery centers and outpatient clinics, is a testament to this strategy. In 2019, the health system adopted a platform-based digital solution to simplify appointment scheduling and patient access to medical records, in addition to its existing wayfinding feature. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and priorities shifted to needs such as accessing information on opening hours, closures, protocols, testing and vaccination appointments, the organization was able to quickly pivot its mobile app to address those priorities. The agility built into the app design enabled it to send targeted push notifications to residents while serving as a clearinghouse for coronavirus-related information.

Conclusion

In their quest to provide outstanding patient experiences, health systems' guiding purpose and ambition should be reaching a critical mass of users, achieving a frictionless, all-encompassing digital experience and acquiring the capability to make data-driven changes in real time. "When you think about making the hospital experience better, you tend to think about the patient experience inside of the hospital or the clinical environment," Mr. Titus said. "But look at it from the patient point of view. You may be surprised at what you find. Make sure you address those things." ●