

The Best Exotic Marigold Hospital: Learning digital lessons from the hospitality industry to personalize the healthcare experience

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A colleague of mine recently relayed to me her delight with a recent hotel experience. It wasn't the hotel itself (though it was very nice) that pleased her, or even the friendly staff (though they were, indeed, helpful and friendly). What got her attention was the hotel's app.

Using the app, she was able to make a reservation and choose her room. Then, while she was waiting at the airport for her luggage, she checked into her room and received a digital key, which meant she could bypass the lobby desk and go straight to her room.

What is remarkable about this app is that it made the experience feel pleasant and personal for my colleague, but also increased the productivity of the hotel staff. Instead of spending time checking in guests and creating key cards, the staff can spend their time making sure guests feel welcome and taking care of their individual requests and needs. By removing people from the administrative process, the hotel was able to make the guest experience more welcoming and friendly.

Healthcare environments can learn some important lessons from the hospitality industry, as well as retail and travel websites. By taking service staff out of tasks that are more efficiently done by computers, these industries

are able to personalize the customer experience, improve accuracy of data entry and cut their costs.

For companies in the hospitality, retail and travel industries, efficiency, accuracy and cost control is directly related to their ability to compete successfully for customers. But just as important is the customer experience. These industries have learned that a customer irritated by the friction in the buying/checking in process is a customer who will seek out other options in the future. While some customers will put up with a poor experience to cut costs if they must, as soon as those customers find an affordable option that is less irritating, they are gone. And, importantly, companies are no longer being compared just to the competition in their own market — now their competition is any optimal experience from any industry. If our online interaction with Amazon is friction-free, then we want and expect the same experience from everyone else.

Inconvenient, inefficient and impersonal: why patients are getting impatient

Think about the average visit to a primary care physician. How did the patient make the appointment? By phone, most likely. And unless the physician is unusual, the patient also navigated a confusing interactive voice response system, waited on hold for a while, or left a message and played telephone tag with a scheduler. When the patient arrived, he or she probably sat in the waiting room filling out paperwork and then just waited. By the time the patient got back home or to work, the person probably invested two to three hours to get 15 minutes (or less) with a physician (or a physician assistant or advance practice nurse). And much of that time was tedious — driving, finding a parking space, filling out the same forms yet again and waiting. None of it is convenient, personal or efficient use of patient or staff time. In fact, with the phones ringing and staff checking in the patients, handing out

and taking back in the forms and entering data, the staff have very little time for making a personal connection with the patients.

And think of the time in the waiting area. Patients are sitting there twiddling their thumbs. Could that time be put to better use if the staff weren't busy with administrative details? For example, could the staff give the patients a tablet (either digital or paper) to write down question they want to be sure to ask the doctor? Could a staff member spend time talking with a diabetic patient, going over any questions about diet, exercise and other routine education recommendations?

And how about those forms? A shareable, interoperable digital version would be far better than a paper form, allowing the patient to simply update the information on file rather than writing it all out over again. It would also eliminate the need for staff to enter the data into the computer, thereby eliminating the possibility of staff data entry errors.

Some physicians have made progress — using their patient portals or digital tablets in the waiting area for completing patient forms. If they are really advanced, they may even allow patients to schedule an appointment online and communicate with patients by secure messaging through their portal.

But by and large, convenience for the patient and efficient use of staff time aren't major considerations in administrative workflows, because many of those workflows were designed before the advent of digital apps.

Many hospitals are also stuck in the pre-digital age, at least when it comes to patient convenience and communications. The administrative portion of outpatient appointments at many hospitals mirror the physician office administrative experience: inefficient, inconvenient and impersonal.

But as consumers use digital tools to make life easier in other realms they are

beginning to ask why physicians and hospitals aren't using these tools.

And it's a question patients *should* be asking, because these tools can demonstrably improve the patient experience, reduce barriers to care, improve communications and patient engagement and lower costs. If used thoughtfully and with consideration for generational differences, many digital tools can also improve outcomes, by reducing barriers to access and improving communication between patients and the care team.

A generation of digital healthcare tools designed for patient engagement

Some physicians and hospitals are put off by digital tools, in part because their experiences with other technologies have been negative. Many have seen the phenomenon of care team members interacting more with the EHR than with the patient in front of them. To many, digital means distance from the patient, not patient engagement.

But these new digital tools are different. They are designed specifically for reducing administrative friction and for personalizing the customer/patient experience. They can liberate both the care team and patient from tedious administrative tasks and make more efficient use of everybody's time.

Which means these digital tools can bring caregivers closer to patients, giving them more time to listen to, educate and engage patients. As physicians, we can learn from the digital experience of other industries to use technology to create a more patient-centered healthcare system.

I'll be speaking at [HIMSS on this topic](#) on February 20 at 1:30 p.m., Session 43 in room 320 — Chafen Theatre. Joining me on stage will be Nathalie Corredor, senior vice president of corporate strategy at Hilton, and she will share lessons learned using digital tools to delight customers and create a

more cost-efficient system. Please join us!

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