Long Form: Blog

Is Health Content the True "King" of Patient Engagement?

"Content is king" is a widely-known adage among marketers and businesspeople. Although there is some debate about the phrase's origins, it was most famously written in an essay by Bill Gates in 1996. Gates used the term in a forecast about the future of the Internet as a marketplace for monetized content, stating "Content is where I expect much of the real money will be made on the Internet, just as it was in broadcasting."

Twenty-six years later, it appears he was spot on about content becoming the all-mighty ruler of the Internet kingdom. Not only have many people made a lot of money selling content on the internet, but any marketer worth their salt knows that a quality content strategy is essential for engaging customers,

growing a business, and of course, ranking on Google. The next obvious question is, why does this matter to you, the healthcare provider, and what place does content have in healthcare and patient engagement?

At its core, content marketing aims to engage and delight customers. The connection to healthcare begins to take shape when we focus on the concept of engagement. Why should engaging consumers be all that different than engaging patients? The answer is, it's not - in fact, it's becoming more similar with every passing day.

The healthcare system is retreating from its traditional, paternalistic roots, and patients are moving away from blind loyalty and dependence on their doctors. We are seeing a gradual transformation from the conventional role of patient to empowered healthcare consumers. With this growth of healthcare consumerism, the analogy between marketers engaging consumers and health systems engaging patients is quite timely.

So if patients are, in fact, consumers of healthcare, they are also your customers - customers with increasingly high expectations for quality healthcare experiences, digital convenience, and engaging information. They are also customers with other options. Never before have we seen so many patients "shopping" for the providers and experiences they desire.

Now more than ever, the pressure is on for healthcare providers to engage their potential customers to drive business and make the changes that facilitate outcome improvements. These new pressures have the healthcare system realizing the importance of complex concepts like patient engagement and patient activation. These concepts are at the center of initiatives at most healthcare organizations because emerging research supports their role in improving care plan adherence and, subsequently, health outcomes. Better health outcomes result in fewer hospitalizations, health complications, and ER visits - all of which support healthcare's unfolding value-based care model.

The widely held belief is that engaged patients better adhere to their care plans and enjoy superior health outcomes. But what is patient activation, and how does it relate to engagement? The CDC defines patient activation as "the knowledge, skills, and confidence to become actively engaged in their health care." Patient activation depends on several factors but is, at its core, heavily influenced by health literacy.

According to a 2020 brief by United Health Group, there are wide variations in health literacy across the United States. The report says, "In the lowest health literacy level counties, between 36 and 59 percent of the population is

predicted to have limited health literacy." So, in some regions of the country, nearly half of people are at risk for poorer health outcomes secondary to inadequate health literacy.

The brief also cites the conclusions of research into health literacy and outcomes in Medicare beneficiaries. Medicare beneficiaries in counties with higher health literacy had better health outcomes in the form of fewer hospitalizations, fewer readmissions, fewer ED visits, and reduced costs per beneficiary. Much like engagement and activation, improving health literacy correlates positively with improved health outcomes.

So, let's recap the unfolding trickle effect here: **improved health literacy = improved patient activation = improved patient engagement = improved health outcomes.** The next obvious question is what can we do to improve health literacy? The answer is multifactorial, but one major piece of the answer is, you guessed it, content.

Now that we've established the numerous reasons for healthcare to embrace content as king let's examine the components of a content strategy to engage healthcare consumers.

Historically, content in healthcare has been both piecemeal and in print - handouts, brochures, discharge instructions, etc. At one time or another, most of us have probably gone to the doctor's office, received a diagnosis, talked to the doctor for less than five minutes, and walked out with a general handout or pamphlet. Or, if we were lucky to get something more personalized, we might've walked out with handwritten instructions or, more comically, stick-figure drawings.

Considering the stereotypical but often true problems with handwriting in the medical profession, we can give this content strategy an A for effort and a C for execution. More importantly is, what happens to the content once we get home and start going about our lives again? Inevitably, the life of hard-copy content is short - it gets lost, it gets dropped in the pile of other uninteresting flyers, or it gets (purposefully or accidentally) thrown in the trash.

This story illustrates that simply having content is not enough. The quality and adaptability of the content, the delivery method, and the consumer experience all matter. A comprehensive healthcare content strategy is more complex than you may think and arguably more complex than most content strategies in the marketing world. Let's consider the following essential pieces of your content strategy as it applies to healthcare:
1. Evidence-based Health & Wellness Content

2. Interactive, Engaging Content

3. Equitable Content

4. A Content Management System

5. Content Personalization Capabilities

6. A User-friendly Content Delivery Mechanism

7. Dynamic Content Libraries

1. Evidence-based Health and Wellness Content

We've already established that Bill Gates's prediction was correct - content is all over the internet. But what we also know is that not all content is created equal. The majority of the content on the internet is un-vetted and not evidence-based. Herein lies the dangers of Dr. Google - which can very quickly send health consumers down the wrong path. Because of the nature of healthcare and the impact this content will have on health decision-making, it must be evidence-based.

2. Interactive, Engaging Content

Standard healthcare educational materials are typically static and require little effort on the part of the consumer beyond a quick read. We all know that simply reading something once is rarely enough to learn or understand it. Making content interactive is key to enhancing engagement and promoting meaningful learning experiences that will actually impact health literacy.

3. Equitable Content

Improving health literacy is both an individual and a population health endeavor. No matter how small or large, a hospital or health system's patient population is likely to be diverse in culture, education level, healthcare experiences, and health literacy. For this reason, a content strategy must include provisions for content adaptation. Content should be available in multiple languages and multiple reading levels. As a general rule, the suggestion is that patient education materials are available in the 3rd-5th grade reading level. Finally, consider the benefits of having multi-media capabilities, including audio, video, text, and visual imagery, to support different learning styles.

4. A Content Management System

Remember when we said it isn't enough to have content? You'll also want a way to manage, organize, and maintain content. A content management system that allows you to seamlessly build new content, update existing content, and organize content into libraries ensures that you can make your strategy a repeatable process for years to come.

5. Content Personalization Capabilities

Patients want more from their healthcare. They also want to be treated as individuals, which requires content personalization capabilities. Every patient is after a personalized care experience, and it's no secret that "one-size fits all" does not often apply to healthcare journeys. Some content is applicable across large populations, but often, care planning requires customizable content for a specific patient or use case.

6. An Accessible, User-Friendly Delivery System

So now you have content, you can organize it, and you can customize it - but how will you deliver it? Knowing the common fate of printed handouts, we can all agree that there must be a better way. Consider the benefits of implementing a digital patient-facing application or platform that will not only house your content but beautifully present it in a way that is engaging and delightful for health consumers. For content to do its job to improve health literacy, it must be easily accessible, so make sure it's available on your patient's smartphone.

7. Dynamic Content

Healthcare is constantly changing, which means the content must change with it. A static healthcare content library will not cut it. Procedures for regular review, revision, and addition of content are required to accomplish this. With a living, breathing content strategy, you can keep information up-to-date and continuously engage patients.

Why Implement a Content Strategy for Patient Engagement

When done right, a developed content strategy has the power to engage patients or health consumers across the continuum of care and at any stage of interaction with the healthcare system. Consider these examples. Patients who need routine care can engage with content about the importance of preventative screenings. Patients recovering from surgery or acute illness can use relevant content to guide them through the recovery process once they get home. Patients who need close monitoring can report their health status or satisfaction with interactive content. Any health consumer interested in a healthier lifestyle can learn how to start a new fitness program or change their diet from a trusted, evidence-based health and wellness content library.

The point is that the sky's the limit to using content to engage your patients. All healthcare systems are different and may utilize their content variably. Ultimately, as long as the content serves to educate, empower, and engage your patients, you've significantly elevated the value of the patient experience in your organization.

So why does it seem that healthcare is so behind in prioritizing content compared to the marketing industry? Patients are becoming more autonomous, informed, and demanding (in a good way). But this transition has been considerably delayed compared to consumerism in other industries, which might be the reason for the lag. This rise in medical consumerism encourages us to look at patients differently, asking ourselves what health consumers want and how we can leverage this to grow our business.

Another potential reason for the delay is the need for quality, evidence-based content. The creation of this content is not nearly as simple as much of the content that engages consumers in buying other products. Also, consider the sheer operational complexity of the healthcare industry. Clinical workflows, documentation, IT systems, and patient communication are historically quite complicated. We are seeing many improvements in these areas with the rise of the digital health industry. But, even with these improvements, there are still many unanswered questions about patient engagement.

Everyone wants to know what gets patients engaged in their care and keeps them engaged over time. Both Healthcare providers and tech companies are still trying to figure out the secret sauce for patient engagement. Perhaps we should be taking some pointers from the marketing industry to figure out the missing ingredients for healthcare engagement. After all, our ability to

surprise, delight, and engage patients, much like general consumers, seems to rely heavily on high-quality content.

At Fitango Health, all of our solutions integrate active patient engagement tools with a health content management system (H-CMS). Our H-CMS facilitates all components of a comprehensive content strategy for healthcare as outlined above and is designed to be a one-stop-shop solution for your content strategy and patient engagement.

Our digital health technology allows clinicians to build and "prescribe" general health & wellness or custom care plan content. Because our content is interactive, it engages patients, encourages real-time progress reporting, and enhances active learning. Our platform also has the flexibility to ensure equitable content across patient populations. Our content delivery system is accessible, easy-to-use, and sure to delight your patients. If you're interested in implementing a content strategy to support your patient engagement initiatives - let's talk about how we might be able to help!