

Building Trust in Healthcare: The Role of Communication and Personalisation



Healthcare is unlike any other industry. When patients seek medical care, they are not simply purchasing a product or service with clear expectations. Instead, they invest emotionally, physically, and financially in an often uncertain outcome. The unpredictability of healthcare makes it challenging to establish trust with patients, especially before they experience care. As healthcare evolves, fostering trust requires more than traditional marketing strategies—it necessitates a deep understanding of patient needs, effective communication, and the integration of personalised care. This article explores insights from healthcare leaders on how communication, branding, and personalisation can help healthcare systems build patient trust.

Understanding the System: Preparing Patients for Healthcare Experiences

Healthcare is a complex and often overwhelming system for patients to navigate, especially during times of illness or stress. A key challenge for healthcare organisations is helping patients and their families understand the process before they even need it. Jennifer Bollinger, Senior Vice President and Chief Consumer and Brand Officer at Sutter Health, highlighted a personal experience that reflects the need for clearer communication in hospitals. Patients and their families often feel lost or ignored in a medical environment, unsure of who to approach or what to expect.

This lack of guidance can lead to frustration, which erodes trust in the healthcare system. Healthcare organisations must set clear expectations from the outset, ensuring that patients and their families understand the roles of medical staff and how to advocate for themselves when necessary. Providing transparent, proactive communication can help mitigate confusion and fear, which are often barriers to trust. It is not just about promoting a brand identity but creating one that embodies trustworthiness through action. This requires healthcare communicators to be deeply embedded in the operational aspects of care delivery, ensuring that what is communicated aligns with the patient's experience.

Personalisation and Modern Expectations: Bridging the Gap

Today's patients, particularly younger generations, expect more than the traditional healthcare model can offer. They are accustomed to personalised, on-demand services in other industries and expect the same level of service in healthcare. As Angharad Bhardwaj, Director of Communications at WelbeHealth, pointed out, younger patients demand transparency and personalised messaging. They quickly spot generic or automated responses, which can alienate them from a healthcare system that already feels impersonal and bureaucratic.

Healthcare systems must adapt to meet these expectations to build trust with modern patients. This includes rethinking how healthcare services are delivered and communicated. For example, relying on phone calls for scheduling and updates can feel outdated to patients who are used to digital communication. Providing options like push notifications, apps, or live chat services can enhance the patient experience by aligning with their preferred communication methods.

Moreover, it's not just about technology but about genuinely understanding the patient's needs and preferences. Personalisation in healthcare extends beyond convenience; it's about making patients feel seen, heard, and valued. Healthcare organisations must listen to their patients and adapt their services accordingly, whether that means explaining medical procedures in simpler terms or providing updates in real-time to ease anxiety. Trust is built when patients feel that their individual concerns are being addressed, not just as medical cases but as people.

Empowering Healthcare Teams: The Key to Effective Communication

Effective communication in healthcare is not just the responsibility of marketing and communications teams. It must involve the entire healthcare organisation, particularly frontline staff interacting with patients daily. Molly Luton, Chief Marketing and Communications Officer at Ballad Health,

emphasised the importance of empowering healthcare teams to make decisions in real time and provide feedback to leadership.

This empowerment is critical in ensuring that patients receive the care and information they need when they need it. Often, healthcare professionals are bound by strict protocols that leave little room for individualised care. However, by allowing teams to deviate from standard responses when necessary, healthcare systems can better meet the needs of their patients. For instance, if a patient or family member seems confused by medical jargon, staff should feel empowered to simplify the message or ask follow-up questions to ensure understanding.

Moreover, healthcare leadership must create a culture of encouraging and valuing staff feedback. If a frontline worker notices a communication gap or identifies an unmet patient need, they should have a clear communication channel to decision-makers. This feedback loop is essential for continual improvement in both care delivery and patient satisfaction. When healthcare workers feel supported and valued, they are more likely to provide compassionate, personalised care, which is a critical factor in building patient trust.

Conclusion

In the ever-evolving healthcare landscape, trust is the cornerstone of successful patient-provider relationships. However, establishing trust is a complex challenge in an industry where outcomes are uncertain and patient expectations are shifting rapidly. As healthcare systems strive to meet the needs of modern patients, they must prioritise clear, proactive communication and the personalisation of care. Patients want to feel understood, heard, and valued at every step of their healthcare journey, from the initial consultation to the final follow-up.

Building trust requires more than just effective branding; it demands a holistic approach that integrates communication, operations, and patient feedback into the fabric of the healthcare system. Healthcare leaders must work to empower their teams, listen to patient concerns, and continuously adapt their services to meet the evolving expectations of their patient base. In doing so, they can foster the trust necessary for a robust and lasting relationship between healthcare providers and their patients, ultimately leading to better outcomes and a more patient-centred approach to care.

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