

Health Care 2016: The Year Of Customer Connections

Four critical areas of focus for every health care marketer, and how to make it happen!

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Spurred by the convergence of the Affordable Care Act, an extraordinary medical technology revolution, and our new on-demand, sharing economy mindset, America's health care ecosystem is now set up to revolve around the customer. Under the aura of *health care consumerism*, individuals have increased responsibility for personal financial and clinical decisions. At the same time, we're seeing consolidation and cross-pollination across every sector of the industry: payers and providers, life sciences and technology, and even medicine and marketing. The next few years are likely to be the most turbulent period in the health care industry's history.

In 2016, several "known unknowns" will shape health care's landscape: Obamacare rule changes, national elections, debt ceiling, and federal interest rate moves, and most likely, more structural reorganization in the health care sector. Consider that three health insurance companies will cover 132 million people and government-based health care programs will cover 104 million Americans. Two retail pharmacies will likely have well over 95 percent market share. Large hospital systems will employ most of the nation's physicians. And consumer companies such as Apple, Walmart, Google, and Amazon are morphing into health care companies. Caught in the middle of this massive realignment, and often lost in the shuffle, is the customer.

It's abundantly clear that this environment of health care *retailization* and *uberization* is transforming every aspect of the customer relationship. As health care consumerism changes the role of the individual, responsibility lies inside the industry to provide the resources and support to help consumers make smart, value-based personal choices. If this happens, everyone wins because engaged, connected health care consumers will demand more value from their health care interactions, resulting in better care and better outcomes.

Customer Connections: Four Essential Themes for 2016

In 2016, there are four essential themes, or areas of focus, that will serve to influence product or service preference and determine brand strength with health care consumers. Think about each in terms of focusing your organization on where it is today and where it wants to be in 18-24 months, and then use the information to guide you on building an actionable roadmap to help you make customer connections happen.

Theme 1: Connected Insights

Inform strategy with deep insights to understand customers better than your competitors do.

Attracting potential customers and keeping existing ones loyal means speaking to them on their terms and through channels they prefer. For marketers, this starts with the customer and the knowledge of how they want to engage. This information comes from data-driven insights.

For many, data—both big and small—is overwhelming. There’s a blizzard of data and it’s coming faster than ever. Further complicating things is that some of the data isn’t accurate, and it’s usually not organized. To avoid such pitfalls, companies across all health care verticals need to structure and optimize their vast bank of information. From baseline demographics to lifestyle attributes to purchasing habits to attitudes about health behavior, if it’s not actionable, it’s not of value.

The more you know about customers, the better you’ll be at connecting your brand with their values. The brass ring is taking in data, structuring it, and creating insights to inform strategy and drive in-market tactics. On an individual level, constructing a complete snapshot or holistic view of the customer is critical to attract, acquire, and retain the most desirable customers for your business.

Here’s how to make it happen:

- Create an enterprise data science strategy that’s integrated and connected across functions.
- Formalize processes to collect, analyze, and measure internal and external customer data sources.
- Pay attention to your customers throughout their lifecycle, by market, product line, and sales channel.
- Make it personal and scalable—be timely, be relevant, and be consistent—know your customers 360°.

A company-wide agile data strategy allows for a more personalized, lower-cost customer relationship that improves bottom-line performance and boosts customer lifetime value. For health care consumers, this approach bolsters every aspect of customer communication, from marketing and sales to population health management. The more predictive the insight, the better the result: accuracy of targeting, individualization of communication, and relevancy of outreach channel.

Theme 2: Connected Communications

Meet customers at their moment of need by synchronizing across channels.

Consumers need to be able to find the information they seek in the medium they prefer, at the time of their choosing. In 2016, successful marketers must concentrate on addressing customer needs in real time with communication assets that speak directly to them. At the same time, marketers must also incorporate a robust learning agenda supported by analytics to learn from these interactions—every visit, click, conversation, and call.

This “right customer, right message, right time, and right channel” approach means creating and distributing relevant content to attract, acquire, and engage a target audience to drive meaningful, often immediate customer action. Make it about “ME” because my interest and loyalty is won or lost in seconds. In today’s “omnichannel” world—offline, experiential, mobile, social, email, Web, and retail—content needs to integrate across the marketing continuum. Content marketing is the bond between brand and direct marketing. A robust content management strategy is truly the only way to enter and survive the new communication landscape where brand, product, and service awareness is only as good as your search engine ranking.

Mobile, for example, which has overtaken desktop, is a powerful channel that offers immediacy of messaging. Similarly, social media cut across every aspect of the customer relationship. Health care companies are using social networks to establish connected *communities of care* to improve communication and establish more intimate customer engagement.

Here's how to make it happen:

- Use an omnichannel approach to marketing to broaden audience reach and improve engagement.
- Make marketing dollars accountable as brand and direct-response disciplines converge.
- Create content that is shareable, fresh, unique, and above all, worth reading.
- Validate in-market messaging and channel selection using a test, learn, and measure process.

Health care communications have to empower consumers by connecting them to micro-moments that matter and inspire them to take action. Relevance is not only an expectation from consumers, it is demanded. In crowded, “sea of sameness” markets, personalized information is critical to engaging consumers and bringing a brand alive. In other words, communicate with customers in ways that attract interest, gain consideration, and scream, “This is a company you want to do business with!”

Theme 3: Connected experiences

Engage, empower, and help customers throughout the relationship lifecycle.

Today's health care customers are confused and frustrated. They're tired of health care's chaos. With an abundance of financial and clinical choice, everything looks the same: products are standardized, price comparisons are readily available, and services are undifferentiated. Health care markets have been commoditized and consumer trust is at an all-time low across sectors: payers on affordability, providers on accessibility, pharmaceutical companies on pricing, and government on bureaucracy.

Health care consumers are ready to be proactive. They want companies to communicate with them and provide answers clearly and honestly. Becoming a trusted health care brand means making customers the center of attention in a way that traverses the complete customer journey and ultimately does the right thing for their health.

In turn, if there's an expectation that consumers stay involved in their health care decisions, there needs to be a willingness to engage. Every customer touchpoint must drive an integrated communication stream that deepens engagement through seamless, value-based interactions. Achieving the right channel interface for customers lifts engagement and promotes loyalty.

Here's how to make it happen:

- Map your customers' journey by looking inside-out (what you do) and outside-in (what they want).
- Break down silos to organize people, processes, and technology around experiences across customer lifecycle.
- Obtain buy-in and sponsorship from the C-suite to establish a customer-first corporate culture.
- Keep an “open door” for customer reviews and feedback to continuously improve interactions.

Health care brands are now inseparable from their ability to engage the customer, deliver superior interactions, and establish a relationship built on trust. Consumers will pay more for a better customer experience, and they'll also switch brands quickly because of bad experience. Provide customers a reason to participate and stay loyal: Guide them through health care's maze of choice and reward them with an experience built on respect and advocacy.

Theme 4: Connected health

Leverage technology to support customers as they take ownership of their health care.

In the next five years, it's estimated that more than 50 billion devices will be wirelessly connected as part of the Internet of Things (IoT). By the end of 2016, 28 percent of consumers will own a wearable device. The "Internet of Health Care Things" is expected to be more than a third of this multitrillion-dollar technology explosion. Connected health means communication between patients and providers is now a data-driven, personalized, interactive dialogue where communication is remote and portable.

Connected devices and consumer mobile applications have created a collision between health care technology, science, and consumerism. From wearable and ingestible sensors to prescription-ready remote online eye exams to nanorobotics, digital health and the quantified-self era has captured the imagination of health care professionals and consumers. The empowered health care journey has arrived!

With digital expectations being set by convenience-based commercial experiences and ease-of-use e-commerce outside the health care industry, it's now assumed that any desired information or service is available on any device at a person's moment of need. An expectation of digital self-service! Anytime—anywhere health care customers will be more informed, smarter consumers setting a high bar for performance. They will push health companies to deliver measurable value. For example, given the accelerated adoption of virtual care and telemedicine, there is significant change in the traditional face-to-face patient-physician relationship, including an expectation to speak or Skype with a doctor, NOW.

How to make it happen:

- Establish a technology innovation and investment strategy linked to corporate goals and customer realities.
- Avoid "crapplications." Have digital purpose: inform, instruct, record, display, guide, or remind.
- Closely track policies and regulation (e.g., ethics, privacy, security) as digital health rules change quickly.
- Formalize evidence and metric-based business cases around usability, ROI, and consumer engageability.

A majority of clinicians believe health applications encourage patients to take more personal responsibility for their health. In fact, doctors are now prescribing apps for specific conditions. At the same time, more than half of Americans say they are willing to monitor their health with connected devices that automatically send information to their doctors or caregivers. This rare meeting-of-the-minds can surely be leveraged to achieve better care at lower cost.

Positioning Yourself for Success at This Crossroads of Change

As health care companies navigate the complex network of customer connections, it means getting out from under the weight of an industry built on bureaucracy. Slow movers or even fast followers will have difficulty keeping up with those eager to capitalize on opportunities of change. Intolerance of disruptive innovation or "that's the way we've always done it" corporate cultures mean certain demise. Those willing to think about their business in ways that look very different from today's health care enterprise will come out on top.

Survival in a transforming health care market being fueled by a wave of consumerism and shifting infrastructure means anticipating and embracing change while simultaneously optimizing today's core business is a difficult balance to achieve. More important, it means creating a consumer-centric health care system built on [wellness and prevention](#) rather than sickness. Success depends on taking a strategic "long view" supported by an ability to make insight-driven decisions, adopt new business assumptions, and champion a plan of integrated customer connections.

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