Mapping the **PATIENT JOURNEY** to Maximize Engagement

TIME TO READ
8 – 10 MINUTES

THE TAKEAWAY

HOW TO DELIVER A "MEMORABLE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE" BY HELPING PRACTICES MANAGE THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE AND DEVELOP A "CONTINUUM OF CARE."

As part of an ongoing commitment to help hearing healthcare providers achieve their business goals, CareCredit continues to develop educational resources featuring industry experts sharing valuable insights — from delivering a memorable patient experience, to managing patient relationships, to rethinking the financial conversation. In this whitepaper Jim Fedio, Director of Professional Development at Fuel Medical Group, shares how his company uses mapping to maximize engagement at each step of the patient journey.

Q What can practices do to maximize patient engagement and deliver a more memorable experience?

Delivering a memorable patient experience is all about creating an experience patients will rave about. Often that means going above and beyond your job. For example, you can be a wizard at navigating your Electronic Health Records system and scheduling patients, or the most efficient medical assistant in all of healthcare, or a member of the front office that can handle multiple priorities at once — which is all great and important, but at the end of the day, that's not what patients are evaluating or what they will take away from the experience.

> *"It's not about completing the task. It's about taking the time to engage, to go "off script" and try and get to know your patients."*

When it comes to engagement, patients want a real connection. When they contact your office for the first time, they want the scheduler to say, "I'm so sorry you're dealing with this issue right now, but I'm glad you called us so that we can get you back to feeling better." When they arrive for their appointment, they want the front office person to take a moment and truly welcome them to the practice. It's not about completing the task. It's about taking the time to engage, to go "off script" and try and get to know your patients. When we take advantage of those little opportunities within the patient journey to really connect, it can have a huge impact.

continued >>

Q How can practices better manage the patient experience and develop a comprehensive continuum of care?

Using methodology we developed at Fuel Medical Group, we've found that mapping the patient journey is a really great way to help practices manage the patient experience throughout the entire continuum of care. That continuum of care starts when the patient picks up the phone to schedule an appointment. It includes checking that patient in, their time spent in the waiting room, patient intake and testing, reviewing their test results and communicating a plan of care, all the way through to check out and billing. Hopefully the journey ends with them giving you a patient referral.

The entire time the patient is progressing through that process, they're on a journey of their own, and that journey is in their head. Mapping the complete patient journey really helps to diagram what the patient is thinking, what questions they're asking themselves, and most importantly how they feel. Once we understand how the patient feels it really helps us gauge their level of engagement as they move through the continuum of care. I think the best way to think of it is like a process map from the patient's perspective. Once the patient's perspective is charted, it's easy to identify areas or touch points where we can work with that practice to help better enhance the patient experience from the patient's perspective.

> *"Mapping the complete patient journey really helps to diagram what the patient is thinking, what questions they're asking themselves, and most importantly how they feel."*

Q Are there common issues practices experience when it comes to patient engagement?

Because every practice is different, the sticking points can really vary from practice to practice. However, the most common misunderstanding we find is that practices often don't think to look upstream to proactively deal with concerns that might happen later in the journey. What we found is that if you identify and address the patient's feelings and values early in the process, it increases compliance with treatment plans.

Another thing to keep in mind is that patients today are shopping for healthcare the same way they would any other goods or service. We like to think of people calling a practice for the first time as consumers. Because if you think about it, before a person walks into your practice and becomes a patient, they are a consumer first. So, when they're calling you for that first time, a lot of individuals are evaluating the quality of care based on that initial phone call. They're making decisions whether they want to see you or not. What may be surprising is that research shows that the evaluation determining if a patient is going to work with a provider is not being done at the end of the appointment. That decision is being made much earlier in the continuum of care. So, the initial contact with the practice can really affect a patient's decision to move forward or not.

Q Is there something practices can do to positively inform a patient's decision about their experience?

Absolutely. When a patient interacts with your practice, they are constantly evaluating their experience. And their emotions are going to influence the way they evaluate the situation. Think of it this way: if a patient is frustrated or feels uncertain or is overwhelmed, they're going to evaluate their experience very differently than if they were feeling significant or certain, or if they were feeling confident. Think about your own experience as a customer. Lets say, you show up at a restaurant and find out your reservation is lost and the host acts indifferent to the issue. Once you get seated, the poor server has a lot of unhappiness they're going to have to contend with before they really get a chance to make a good impression. Based on what happened with the host, that server's job has just become a whole lot harder. It's no different in healthcare. But in healthcare, I think it's even more difficult because most providers don't often have a lot of time with that patient to make up for lost ground. One of the things we need to make sure happens is that by the time a patient gets to the provider, they feel confident and certain that they're in the right place.

Q What can practices do to proactively manage negative patient feelings?

The biggest emotion we see providers having to manage more than any other is the feeling of uncertainty. "Am I in the right place?" "Should I come back?" "Do I trust this person?" "Will this make a difference?" "What happens next?" "Can I afford this now?" If all these questions are not managed on

continued >>

behalf of that patient early in the journey, it becomes like a snowball, and just keeps getting bigger and bigger. Eventually, it creates a feeling of uncertainty and research shows that the emotion of uncertainty acts like a pause button in a person's mind. As a result, the person will choose not to act or will decide to "wait and think about it." Often that decision or that stall is coming out of the fact that they're feeling uncertain. So, this is the one emotion that can be and should be addressed very early on in the patient's journey.

The good news is it's a very simple emotion to address early. How do we do that? It's little things. When a patient schedules, what we like to teach the front office teams we work with is after you've booked the appointment, let the patient know what the next two steps are going to be. Tell them that when you arrive, parking might be difficult. When you walk in, you're going to see that reception desk at the back and look for me, and I'll be there to check you in. Anything that you can do to set up what's going to happen next. Remember we've been doing this for a long time, and so we know the process inside and out, but it's a new experience for patients coming to a practice for the first time. When they don't know what happens next, if they don't know who they're seeing, that starts that whole snowball of questions of am in the right place. Do these people have my best interests in mind?

Q Research shows cost is often cited as a barrier to patients moving forward with care so how do you recommend practices address cost or uncertainty when it comes to affordability?

Cost concerns can show up in many different touch points throughout the patient journey. They can show up at scheduling, while the medical assistant is rooming the patient, when the patient learns they need additional testing, when you're discussing the treatment plan with the patient and, of course, when the patient is checking out. My guess would be that if you were to bring your entire organization together and survey your staff, every single person has had to address the uncertainty of cost at some point, no matter what their role is in the organization. So, to be able to say, we have a means to help patients manage the cost of their healthcare, like the CareCredit credit card, can reduce that barrier of uncertainty. We've also learned that it's important for practices to display visual information or signage about solutions like CareCredit throughout the entire patient's visit. Because what we also know from mapping the patient journey is that patients want information to be easily accessible.

The nice thing about having a solution like CareCredit available is that it's such an easy answer. It doesn't take a lot of time and you don't need to be super knowledgeable about the different financing options. When you can simply say we have options for patients, and here's a brochure about the CareCredit credit card.

Q How can a practice effectively monitor or track the patient journey?

We've learned the best resource to monitor and track the patient's journey is the people who are really managing those engagements. I'll give you a quick example. One of the things a practice that we worked with recently wanted to do is address patient complaints about long wait times. The management team got together and over several months invested a lot of time and money trying to improve patient satisfaction scores when it came to wait times, but they were unsuccessful. Finally at their wit's end, they decided to take the problem to their frontline staff and what they learned was that patients weren't really complaining about the wait time. The patients expected to wait a little bit when it came to healthcare, but what the patients were complaining about is that no one seemed to care.

All they had to do to address this issue was just change up the way they engaged with their patients. If a patient showed up and the provider was running behind, the front office person would say, "I just want to let you know that Dr. Jones is running about 45 minutes behind, but he's expecting you." Then when the medical assistant would come to take the patient back for rooming, they would thank the patient for their patience. Then when the provider would come in to see the patient, they would apologize to that patient for the inconvenience. With those simple changes, their patient satisfaction scores improved significantly. That's why we recommend to our practices that they run workshops to gain perspective and insights

> ***"Have the entire organization come together and talk about that patient experience at each phase of the journey and make recommendations that will really enhance the experience."***

continued >>

from everyone in the practice. Have the entire organization come together and talk about that patient experience at each phase of the journey and make recommendations that will really enhance the experience.

Q Are there any other tips for practices looking for ways to maximize the patient experience?

I would also say don't be afraid to look outside our industry for solutions. Think about it: if your goal is to differentiate yourself or get ahead of the competition, but you continue to look at the competition to see how they're doing things, you're going to end up being just like them. I believe one of the advantages we have in healthcare is that there are already a lot of organizations out there that have spent a lot of time trying to figure out the customer psychology so, there's a lot of opportunity for us to learn what has worked for other organizations outside of healthcare. Once you discover what they've done to successfully enhance the customer experience, it just takes a little bit of creativity to adapt some of those ideas into our industry.

In fact, some of the best ideas we've incorporated have come from outside of healthcare. Remember as consumers, we're always being conditioned to think differently. Take for example Uber and what that organization has done. You call up for a ride, the driver's picture pops up along with exactly what time they're going to pick you up and when you're going to be dropped off. You can even see how far away the car is from picking you up on your app. Now, think about a person sitting in a waiting room who has no idea where they are in the queue. Then they see someone who comes in after them and gets called back before they do. Now they're sitting there wondering, where am I? Did they forget about me? We are at a point in healthcare where we need to start managing those "consumer" expectations, which have shifted over the last couple of years.

That shifting perspective impacts how patients look at and manage their hearing health. At Fuel Medical Group, the good news is that statistically, we know that a significantly high percentage of patients are willing to pay more or will go out of their way for an exceptional patient experience. All we have to do is make sure we provide it.

Things you can do in your practice today

- Map your current patient journey to identify areas of focus.
- Look upstream on your patient journey to find concerns to address early.
- Find ways to develop real connections with your patients using empathy.
- Look outside your industry for innovative strategies that can help enhance your patient journey.

CareCredit can help you manage uncertainty along your patient journey. Each patient has unique financial and lifestyle needs. The more options you can offer, the more likely patients may be able to move forward with care.

To learn more about how having financing options in your practice can enhance your patient journey, call us at **800.859.9975** (option 1).

CareCredit®
Making care possible...today.