



Consumer Engagement:

Sustaining organizations,
achieving better outcomes and
empowering communities



People are, as always, the top priority in healthcare. But oftentimes effectively engaging with consumers can prove to be difficult, expensive and scattershot. Nevertheless, maintaining positive consumer engagement is core to any successful healthcare organization.

Simply put: outreach is good for business. McKinsey reporting and analysis shows that consumers who are more satisfied with their healthcare experiences are less likely to defer care, which results in fewer emergency visits and better health outcomes overall. Improved consumer engagement can thus lead to a healthier population and lower healthcare costs¹.

Whether you're tracking quality measures for payers or applying for a behavioral health grant, your success depends on demonstrating exceptional care. That's why healthcare organizations must put people first, whatever their business model or strategy.

There are many ways to approach care outcomes. In recent years, models like value-based care, whole-person care and population health management have emerged across healthcare sectors. Another strategy that deserves more attention is **consumer engagement**. We believe this should be a top initiative for any healthcare provider, and this paper will demonstrate how to implement and integrate consumer engagement solutions into your organization's strategy.

1. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare/our-insights/driving-growth-through-consumer-centricity-in-healthcare>



By putting metrics in place and holding themselves accountable, the team discovered where their problems were—and took the first step toward providing value-based care.

What Is Consumer Engagement?

Grumen et al. define **consumer engagement** as “actions individuals must take to obtain the greatest benefit from the healthcare services available to them”². In other words, healthcare isn’t simply the provider’s responsibility. To obtain the best outcomes, consumers must act as well.

Although it’s difficult to disagree with this philosophy, implementation is less clear. How can providers and organizations inspire individuals to take specific, measured actions that will result in better outcomes? This question becomes especially crucial when dealing with **consumer engagement as a business model**. For example, if my organization has a value-based care arrangement, how do clinicians and administrators ensure that consumers co-create the outcomes needed for growth and sustainability?

Successful consumer engagement must be:

- Integrated into clinical operational models and supported by leadership
- Integrated with the EHR with two-way communication and access to digital tools
- Driven in part by the increase in risk-based contracting and value-based care models

To be clear, providers have always been concerned with keeping consumers engaged in care, getting the help they need throughout the treatment process. People have self-determination; it’s their choice to seek and fully engage in care. And consumers feel empowered when they proactively and deliberately take charge of their own health³. But for a number of reasons we will discuss, engagement has become a major strategic focus for organizations—because now, providers and payers are being held accountable **financially and operationally** for keeping people engaged. This reminds us to double our efforts and keep individuals from dropping out of care prematurely. Engagement matters.

Why Does Consumer Engagement Matter?

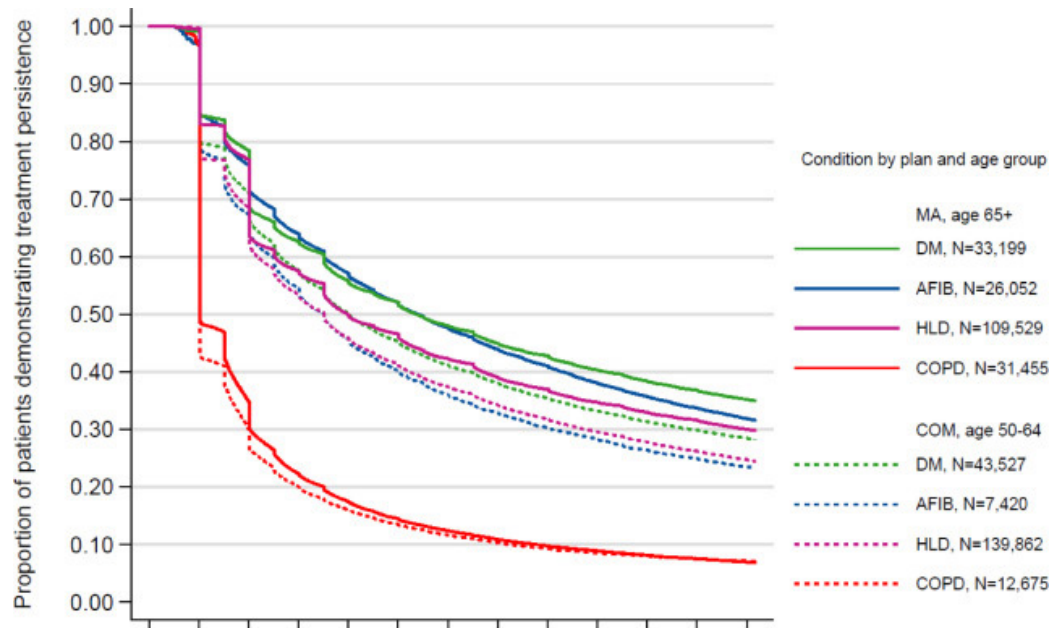
Healthcare is most effective when viewed from a strengths perspective. Providers are not gatekeepers to healthcare—providers are partners who **empower** consumers to manage their own health. This can lead to better relationships between consumers and providers, decreased recurrence, reduced hospitalizations and lower cost of care. In other words, **the greatest benefit of consumer engagement should be to the consumer**.

2. <https://dokumen.pub/information-technology-for-patient-empowerment-in-health-care-9781614514343-9781614515920.html>

3. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/life-sciences-health-care/us-dchs-consumer-engagement-healthcare.pdf>

Other examples include enhanced treatment outcomes (Carmen et al., 2013), reduced stigma for behavioral health (Henderson et al., 2008), increased empowerment (Shrank et al., 2015), improved communication and trust (Epstein & Street, 2011), and cost savings and resource efficiency (Hibbard & Green, 2013).

Despite all these benefits, consumer engagement is an ongoing challenge for providers. This is known as the **adherence problem**, and it affects psychotherapy, medical delivery systems and addiction treatment alike. As illustrated in the graph below⁴, each of these areas has the same declining curve in consumer engagement as the result of attrition, noncompliance and relapse across a wide range of independent variables.



In other words, it doesn't matter what treatment or care modality we measure. Consumers across populations will tend to disengage from care prematurely at the rate depicted on this graph, varying from days (e.g., taking a ten-day prescription of antibiotics) to months (e.g., relapse from heroin, smoking or alcohol, or an episode of outpatient psychotherapy).

Let's go back to the heading of this section: why does consumer engagement matter? Because, as studies have shown, **it decreases as time goes on**. Optimal care outcomes are dependent on consumers who feel empowered and manage their own treatment. But for that to happen, consumer engagement patterns must change.

It's likely that consumer behavior has always trended away from engagement. Consider clients who fail to complete addiction treatment programs or relapse into substance use. Likewise, many people with severe mental illness are hospitalized repeatedly throughout their lives. What's bringing the numbers to our attention is the recent emergence of **value-based care** as a financial model.

4. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0002934320300310#fig0002>

As you may know, reimbursement in healthcare has historically been **fee for service** (consumer pays based on the volume of services, just as they would pay more for a larger grocery order) and **managed care** (payers reimbursed a fixed amount and anything left over was profit for providers).

Value-based care is a model in which providers are paid based not on the number of services, but on outcomes—in other words, **how efficient and effective a given service is**. An outcome is not successful if a consumer comes back for treatment multiple times.

This means consumer engagement now directly affects the financial stability of your organization. Those who discontinue treatment early often relapse with more serious problems that require more expensive treatment—such as emergency or inpatient care. Reversing the negative trend and promoting consumer engagement is an obvious way to solve this problem.

The Good News

Studies show that **people want to be more engaged in their healthcare**⁵.

- 61% of people want to hear more from their doctors
- 83% of consumers want to make health and wellness improvements

So, the question is, how can we reverse behavioral trends and **maintain** consumer engagement over time? We will devote the rest of this paper to answering that question.

The Role of Technology

Sometimes, the best tools for human connection are digital. In the case of consumer engagement, patient-provider

technology solutions offer a personalized approach to care, which helps consumers feel connected to the process. In fact, this kind of technology is increasingly expected since the pandemic. People want to interact with their providers outside of a physical office.

Of course, true engagement requires a broader approach than just patient platforms. Providers need transparent communication, flexible technology and streamlined workflows to obtain buy-in from consumers and support staff. Some examples of effective customer engagement technology are:

- Mobile apps and browser-based solutions
- Telehealth
- Online resources – information provided with 24/7 access from reliable sources

One exciting breakthrough in technology is remote patient monitoring (RPM) – an ambulatory, noninvasive digital technology that captures and transmits patient data in real-time for care delivery and disease management. This innovative capability is rapidly being embedded into our healthcare delivery system, in both physical health and human services⁶.

It's also important to think about data. Although it's not a direct consumer engagement tool, it gives providers information they need to make personalized decisions for each individual. Data also creates an efficient workflow that can support your organization—for example, reduction in documentation time, faster intakes and assessments and quality reporting. Data also provides integration with various grants that enable the adoption of new evidence-based practices. And, it can be used to assess the impact of any new technology, with the goal of improving client outcomes and clinician efficiency.

5. <https://www.techtarget.com/patientengagement/news/366584837/61-of-Patients-Want-Better-Patient-Engagement-in-2022#:~:text=The%20good%20news%20is%2083%20percent%20of%20healthcare,to%20counter%20with%20stronger%20patient%20engagement%20and%20activation.>

6. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41746-022-00663-0#Sec15>

Five Outcomes from Consumer Engagement

Let's dive into how consumer engagement improves outcomes across five key dimensions. These are primarily examples from human services, which leverage technology and remove barriers to help individuals feel connected to their providers.

Access to Care

People engage with their providers when obstacles, real or perceived, are eliminated. This is often referred to as **removing friction**. It's important to remember that certain populations have systemic barriers to care—for example transportation. Expanding service areas outside the office can help these consumers feel included and inspire them to take an active role in their wellbeing. For instance, community clinics and telehealth are effective, strengths-based tools to empower and engage consumers.

On-demand telehealth has transformed healthcare since the pandemic—from policy to the role of payers. In fact, telehealth users have more than doubled at organizations like Emergence Health Network (EHN), where, according to the organization, up to 50% of visits today are virtual. "Permanent flexibilities around telehealth emerged during the pandemic," said Robert Freres, Chief of Information Technology, Emergence Health Network. "Consumers want it and they like it." In 2020, EHN provided just 6.12% of services via telehealth. In 2023, that number jumped to 25.2%. In addition, EHN delivered more than half of their services over the phone in order to offer services despite the in-person limitations of the pandemic. Phone services decreased to just over 16% in 2023, due to the benefits of seeing people face-to-face, yet virtually, via telehealth. These stats demonstrate the sustainable transformation healthcare has experienced over the last couple of years due to the adoption of telehealth.

Across the healthcare continuum, subsidized services continue to change, expand, shrink or come to a close. Organizations are encouraged to maintain a strategy of constant awareness of and adaptation to changes in the healthcare market to avoid falling behind on what is and perhaps is not an active consumer-facing service.

Accessibility has been a huge factor in the push to expand telehealth offerings. The very definition of accessibility is removing barriers. For example, Outreach in New York offers translators for telehealth appointments, due to the region's high immigrant population. "Telehealth has been very helpful for us in reaching marginalized individuals," said Kelsey Silver, Assistant VP of Quality and Data Analytics, Outreach. And in the context of risk assessment and population health management, these are precisely the individuals we need to engage.

Understandably, some people will feel more connected to their providers through in-person visits. It's important to give consumers both options because every relationship is different. In-person and virtual services are often seen as mutually exclusive, but they should be complementary.

For instance, older consumers may prefer in-person visits—but still have barriers to care. For this reason, Outreach provides a transportation service, which also serves to reduce traumatization during intake.

"We have a mobile van we park at the courthouse, which has heavily impacted client engagement for those who are nervous because they've just been mandated to treatment," said Kelsey Silver. "Normally it would be difficult, almost traumatizing for them to engage in an assessment process for substance use or mental health. Instead, this van has a couch with telehealth straight to their intake assessment. We hold that space for safety and positive rapport." Silver adds that clinicians have been closely trained to reduce trauma and build rapport

during assessment. This has resulted in a high conversation rate from intake to actual admission—reversing the trend of the adherence graph.

Patient self-scheduling also empowers individuals to access care on their own terms. By reducing the need for customer support staff and enabling around-the-clock access to appointment scheduling, self-scheduling has the ability to enhance consumer satisfaction, reduce labor costs and lower no-show rates⁷.

Just because you offer life-saving therapies doesn't mean consumers will show up. Outreach has demonstrated critical and creative thinking to increase engagement, as have other organizations in behavioral health.

Health Equity

Driven in part by the increase in risk-based contracting and requirements for Certified Community Behavioral Health Centers (CCBHC), providers are increasingly relying on data to segment populations and proactively measure risks. These are extremely effective ways to increase engagement—by anticipating problems in advance and reaching out to consumers proactively.

For this strategy to work, you must have enough aggregated data from different providers in one view. For example, the state of Missouri has a single-view platform which allows them to share electronic health records (EHR) statewide. As a result, they can make decisions from a statewide view—and they can also enable gap-free transitions and referrals, which keep the consumer engaged in the process.

Digital therapeutics which result from population data analysis have proven effective across demographic groups, resulting in care equity for consumers regardless of income, race, sex, age and education⁸. This is because evidence-based practices that rely on demographic data can be tailored for different sociocultural

contexts⁹. Customizing virtual care to a client's culture means they're more likely to relate and remain engaged with treatment.

Data and technology have incredible power to address the barriers of affordability, geographic location, knowledge, and other limitation. In other words, these tools can help you move beyond engagement as a “one-size-fits-all” concept to a truly effective and evidence-based strategy for addressing **your** consumers and breaking down the barriers they face.

Reduced Hospitalizations

Effective consumer engagement significantly contributes to reduced hospitalizations by proactively addressing health concerns before they escalate. When healthcare providers reach out to patients consistently and meaningfully—such as through follow-ups, reminders or personalized health advice—patients are more likely to adhere to treatment plans, medication schedules and lifestyle recommendations. This proactive outreach helps in detecting early signs of deterioration, enabling timely interventions that can prevent conditions from worsening to the point of requiring hospitalization. For example, engaging patients within 30 days post-discharge has been shown to significantly lower readmission rates, particularly among populations at elevated risk of non-compliance, such as those with substance use disorders.

Consumer engagement strategies that leverage data from multiple sources—like electronic health records (EHRs), demographic data and social determinants of health—also enable providers to identify patients who are at risk of hospitalization due to non-medical factors like lack of transportation or unstable housing. By addressing these underlying barriers through targeted outreach and community partnerships, healthcare organizations can better manage patient populations and reduce hospitalizations. This approach not

7. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9382371/>

8. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29792241/>

9. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6131163/>

only improves health outcomes but also alleviates the financial strain associated with frequent inpatient stays.

Similarly, digital tools and technologies play a vital role in sustaining patient engagement outside of the traditional clinical setting. Digital therapeutics, mobile health applications and virtual care services offer continuous support and monitoring, encouraging patients to actively participate in their health management. These platforms can send automated alerts to both patients and providers when signs of health deterioration are detected, facilitating prompt intervention that can avert hospitalization. By integrating these tools with personalized outreach efforts, healthcare organizations create a comprehensive engagement strategy that effectively reduces the need for hospital-based care.

Improved Social Care

Social care means providing better service to individuals, families and caregivers¹⁰. Social Determinants of Health are factors that predict outcomes among groups—social care is acting on that information to generate real-life improvements.

Although the healthcare industry has historically been focused on efficiency and cost-effectiveness, social care emphasizes that meaningful change must be *proactive*. In other words, we must focus on prevention—not just treatment of symptoms—if we want results.

Proactive healthcare **requires consumer engagement**. It's reasonable enough to expect an individual to invest in their healthcare when confronted by an illness; but this model requires them to take an active interest even if there is nothing wrong.

One way to accomplish this is to eliminate missed appointments. No-shows and scheduling inefficiencies cost the U.S. healthcare system more than \$150 billion a year¹¹. Growing research has shown that

some health institutions and clinics may not be properly addressing frequent consumer cancellations or rescheduling, and therefore bear some responsibility for these increasing costs.

The reality is, it's hard for organizations to keep up with scheduling changes. That's why the Jewish Board began automating client reminders. This not only decreases staff burden, but it also gives consumers direct contact and personalized engagement.

This same technology allows for secure, HIPAA-compliant direct messaging, push notifications and reminders, e-signing of documents, assessment and consent forms, and electronic scheduling. All consumers need is their cell phones to get ready for their appointments. Which means they're more likely to show up—and take ownership.

Recently, another aspect of preventive care has gained traction with the help of the CCBHC model. Crisis intervention, represented nationally by the 988 Crisis Line, prevents suicide and other acute events before they happen. Again, true preventive care starts with data and social determinants of health, so providers know where to focus their attention. If a crisis is imminent, tools like telehealth can ensure that consumer needs are met across care settings.

Finally, one last preventive technique worth mentioning is engaging individuals before and after treatment. For instance, La Frontera has a team dedicated entirely to intake, so clients are quickly engaged upon first contact.

Provider Satisfaction and Efficiency

Let's be realistic. Consumer engagement programs lead to better health outcomes—but they require a lot of work. And staffing can be a challenge in today's market.

While it may not be practical to hire a whole intake team, there are valuable tools to help increase engagement *without* swelling your headcount.

10. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/future-of-social-care.html>

11. <https://www.hcinnovationgroup.com/clinical-it/article/13008175/missed-appointments-cost-the-us-healthcare-system-150b-each-year>

One example is an AI documentation tool, which helps clinicians finish notes in 50% less time, while improving engagement in virtual sessions. “If you’re in a service deficit because your clinicians are taking so much time to document, what’s going to happen to your engagement? You’re going to lose those clients,” said Kelsey Silver of Outreach. “Using technology so that clinicians get more time with the client is beneficial for us, but incredibly important for client engagement as well.”

It’s important to make the way providers interact with consumers flexible, customized and convenient. “One challenge a lot of organizations face is how disjointed things can be, with an application for everything,” said Robert F. of EHN. His solution is to have one platform that integrates telehealth, documentation, billing and payments—creating efficiencies on both sides. Clinicians don’t enjoy paperwork and administrative hassle. When those inefficiencies are removed, they can spend their time engaging **with consumers**. (Digital Therapies can also minimize the time providers spend performing administrative tasks and increase the time spent with patients.) As Robert F. said, “A focus on consumer engagement makes things better for everyone.”

Integration creates efficiency, which leads to better engagement and provider/consumer relationships. A growing number of organizations are integrating all their systems digitally, using one EHR. Having all services in one system improves operations, and it doesn’t require a large staff. La Frontera noted that their consumer adoption rate is higher now that all aspects of treatment are integrated in one platform.

This also allows organizations to become more data driven—which creates even more efficiency. Data entry is faster, duplication is reduced, and all outcomes are both measurable and reportable. Bells is proven to reduce documentation time by up to 60% and save individual staff up to 5.2 hours a week¹². This also has implications for grant writing, payer reimbursement, value-based care, data-sharing among providers and population health management, as discussed earlier.

Measuring Success in Consumer Engagement

Consumers want to feel like their opinions matter. If we want them to take ownership of their healthcare, we need to encourage them to share their experiences. EHN uses waiting-room time to administer surveys and solicit feedback using tablets. (Not all individuals are tech-savvy, so it’s easier if they don’t have to download an app.) These tablets can also be used to automate survey follow-up, for those consumers who use email and text.

Collecting timely feedback allows you to make improvements in the consumer experience. And when individuals see that you’re listening to them, **engagement only increases more**. That means increased attendance rates, increased adherence to treatment plans and improved outcomes.

12. <https://www.ntst.com/carefabric/careguidance-solutions/ai-documentation-assistant>

Conclusion

Improving consumer engagement can be a major opportunity for behavioral health providers since it requires them to think differently about those who receive their services. Over time, Americans have moved from a disease-based model to a strengths-based perspective when it comes to individuals with mental health diagnoses or substance use. Our consumers are autonomous people with the right to self-determination—and studies show that they will exercise this self-determination if barriers are removed. Using the methods outlined in this paper, including the breakthroughs in technology, we can replace barriers with provider-consumer relationships. We can reverse the adherence problem and create better outcomes.

But it can't happen without a commitment—and not just to increasing engagement numbers. Numbers can fluctuate based on trends; but a culture of engagement will empower consumers and transform your organization.

“You need to make consumer engagement part of your DNA. Otherwise, it doesn't work.”

—Robert F., EHN

About Netsmart

Netsmart is an industry-leading healthcare technology organization empowering providers to deliver value-based care to the individuals and communities they serve. The [Netsmart CareFabric®](#) platform serves as a unified, connected framework of solutions and services for human services, post-acute, payer and public sector communities. Together with our clients and Marketplace vendors, we develop and deliver innovative technology, including electronic health records (EHRs), interoperability, analytics, augmented intelligence (AI), population health management and telehealth solutions and services that assist organizations in transforming the care they deliver. The result has helped make a positive impact on the lives of more than 147 million individuals.

For more than 55 years, Netsmart has helped provider organizations in their efforts to improve the health and wellbeing of the communities we collectively serve. To learn more, visit [ntst.com](https://www.ntst.com) and connect with us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#) or [X](#).