

Strengthening Your Consumer-Based Platform: A 5-Part Series — Part 2 Convenience

While the U.S. House of Representatives' recent passage of the American Health Care Act adds to uncertainty in the legislative and regulatory environment, the underlying dynamics that have driven the rise in healthcare "consumerism" will continue to reward providers that develop effective consumer-based platforms. Earlier this year, we [noted](#) the importance of such consumerism—once largely confined to conceptual discussion, that now has become an urgent competitive reality for healthcare providers. In that article, we identified five key principles of a strong consumer-based platform:



- Accessibility
- Convenience
- Affordability
- Transparency
- Tailored Care

In this article, the second in a five-part series, we take a closer look at the importance of **patient and consumer convenience**.

As discussed in Part I, consumers have experienced an unprecedented and technology-driven expansion in access and expectations related to the consumption of information and the ability to compare similar services. According to a recent [article](#) in *Catalyst*, a publication from the *New England Journal of Medicine*, healthier, younger, wealthier, and urban populations demonstrate a higher propensity to seek convenient care. Providers need a plan to retain the business of these patients. New technology, coupled with the accelerating shift to outpatient care settings, necessitates that successful planning will center on "meeting patients where they are."

Facility type, location, and service mix certainly play an important role in this discussion, but the concept of convenient care extends beyond these traditional planning elements to include consideration of how providers may offer extended hours, minimal wait times, and low out-of-pocket costs for low-acuity conditions (*e.g.*, sinusitis, bronchitis, ear infection). The renewed popularity of urgent-care centers and retail clinics, telehealth kiosks, and online video visits are all representative of this emerging approach to convenient care offerings.

As healthcare providers contemplate options to strengthen their convenient care offerings, they may consider:

- **Investigating partnerships with convenient care specialists.** Many health systems do not have the expertise, technology, or infrastructure to effectively deploy convenient care models, so seeking partners with those capabilities may be a way to attract patients and grow care delivery networks without requiring significant upfront capital. Large and established players, like the Cleveland Clinic, have found value in utilizing specialist companies and platforms to provide telehealth capabilities as part of their "24-hour online healthcare" initiative, partnering with American Well to offer online video visits for certain ailments. Health systems may also seek to partner directly with convenient care providers via joint venturing or lease of retail clinic, urgent care, or telehealth operations' technology and facilities.

- **Seeking affiliations to expand access to convenient care services.** Many convenient care clinics (CCCs) are willing to support chronic disease management for conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and obesity in well-managed patients. This may take pressure off other health system access points (ED, etc.) and allow hospitals to focus on patients with complex conditions. A recent example of such an affiliation is the partnership between Target Clinics and Kaiser Permanente in Southern California. Target and Kaiser Permanente teamed up to expand the level of services offered in Target Clinics by staffing some clinics with Kaiser Permanente nurse practitioners and providing access to physicians for telemedicine consultations.
- **Examining convenient care pricing strategies to attract price-sensitive consumers.** Offering the right services at convenient times in the right location is only the start of the discussion. Consumers expect competitive pricing for convenient care offerings, and increasingly embrace price transparency for the purpose of comparison shopping. Health systems have often struggled to field competitive pricing for comparable routine and low-acuity service offerings, such as health checks, immunizations, and imaging. While this continues to pose a challenge that makes partnership with pure-play convenient care providers attractive, some health systems are experimenting with deliberate price discounting strategies. In the next installment of this series, we will look at these strategies in greater detail.
- **Evaluating micro-hospitals to fill gaps in access to care.** To achieve greater proximity and convenience for patients, some health systems are bridging the gap between free-standing emergency clinics and full-scale hospital facilities through the deployment of micro-hospitals (also known as “small-format facilities”). While the exact services offered in micro-hospitals may vary significantly based on the objectives of the parent-system and the demographics of its market, they typically involve co-location of outpatient and ambulatory services targeted to achieve maximum convenience from a full-service access point. Correctly conceived and deployed, micro-hospitals could potentially extend and fill gaps in health system networks, promote care coordination (with parent-system facilities), and offer convenient and affordable services to consumers.
- **Capitalizing on convenient care offerings for strategic and brand differentiation.** Seeking to leverage technology and changing consumer expectations, the Henry Ford Health System has sought to differentiate its brand by offering “radically convenient” access to primary care services. It has pursued this approach with a multi-access-point strategy it refers to as “Call, Click, or Come In.” This strategy offers patients the option of non-emergency medical advice over the phone, integration of online appointments, results and provider communication, and clinic availability during non-traditional hours through its own walk-in clinics and a partnership with CVS MinuteClinics at 17 additional locations. It recently opened its own one-stop, small-format facility in downtown Detroit, focused on serving a technology-savvy millennial population (truly an example of “meeting patients where they are”).

Technology, consumer-oriented regulatory mandates, and the continued growth of retail medicine will likely continue to accelerate trends that make convenient care offerings an important element of provider planning and strategy. As demonstrated by the variety of approaches explored in this article, there is no one approach that suits every provider and market. For all that is exciting, new, and possible in making care more convenient for patients, the basic principles are likely to remain unchanged. As providers consider their convenient care offerings, they would do well to return to the central premise: how do we provide the services that patients are seeking within a timeframe that meets their needs at an affordable price?

In part three of our series on healthcare consumerism, we will build upon our discussion of convenient care offerings to take a closer look at the principle of affordability as it relates to evolving healthcare consumer trends and preferences.

For more information about developing effective consumer-based platforms, contact [David McMillan](#), [Scott Clay](#), or [Chris Beckham](#) at PYA, (800) 270-9629.