

Changing Patient Behavior Through Evidence-Based Communication

Technology-based patient navigation has grown tremendously over the years. In an age where targeted ads and algorithms envelop our digital footprint, healthcare consumers have come to expect the same level of personalization from their health system. Despite the flooding of digital personalization elsewhere, many patients feel the information they receive from their provider is too general and not tailored enough for their personal care needs.

There has been an upsurge of interest in personalizing and tailoring healthcare-related messaging in hopes of improving both patient experiences and patient outcomes. Researchers have identified positive direct links between perceived effective communication in automated messages, appointment attendance, improved health outcomes, and increased patient satisfaction.

As healthcare systems are constantly trying to tackle the multi-headed monster that is patient navigation, they are quickly discovering that added personnel and generic, lifeless message content are ill-suited to empathize and personalize their outreach efforts at scale. Upfront Healthcare Service's patient navigation platform is a combined solution which applies health communication, a cognitive science, to message content to align individual patient needs within their health system.

Background

Healthcare-related digital communication is often robotic and repetitive. Think of appointment reminders, prescription refill alerts, even patient portals; they are stiff, hard to navigate, and rarely answer patients' questions. When patients need specific direction, support, and help, they are instead met with ambiguity and disconnection. This contributes to low patient satisfaction and can catalyze low-value care (we will come back to this). Most importantly, standard, run-of-the-mill messaging is easily overlooked and lacks motivating, behavior-changing content. Especially in the ever-changing healthcare landscape, and even more so during the time of COVID, direct-message content needs to be tailored and empathetic; it should build trust and reduce uncertainty for patients so they can get the quality care they need.

While there is evidence that dry, impersonal message content does yield some improved patient engagement, one could argue that it leaves a lot to be desired. A simple SMS appointment reminder (often limited in character count) cannot explain to a patient why their annual wellness visit is important; it will not help the patient find transportation to the clinic or connect them to someone who can confirm their insurance will cover this appointment. As it stands, run-of-the-mill healthcare messaging scrapes the proverbial bottom of the patient activation barrel. Since behavior change and patient navigation rely on patient activation, this is a problem.

Patient activation is not a new concept in the healthcare industry. It is widely associated with better health outcomes and healthcare experiences, fewer readmissions, and can be considered a **pillar of patient-centered and value-based care**. Not to be confused with patient engagement, patient activation is what happens when patients have the knowledge, skill, and self-efficacy to be engaged with their care. If patients are not engaged, they are not activated. If patients are not activated, they are likely less motivated to show up to their appointment, adhere to medication protocol, schedule follow-up visits, and appropriately use healthcare services; they cannot be navigated.

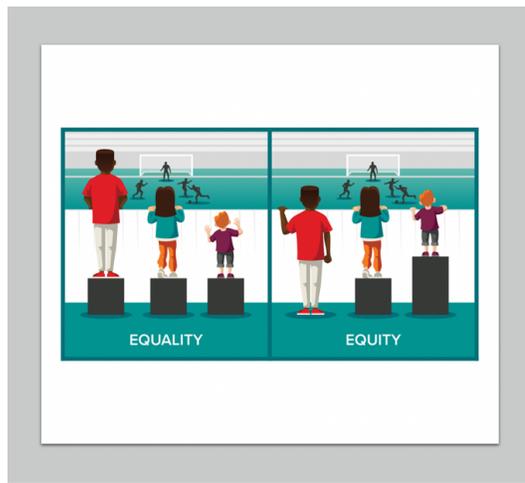
One of the biggest challenges health systems face is digital patient navigation lacks humanization.

Strategy & Solution(s)

So, what do we mean by humanization in the context of patient navigation? To “humanize” means to make something humane, kind, or gentle. At Upfront Healthcare Services, we digitally humanize our patient-facing platform through data-backed personalization experience. Through our understanding of the patient’s demographic background, socioeconomic challenges (if any), and wellness needs, we curate a digital, omnichannel communication experience for patients. To minimize monotony and maintain relevance, we communicate only based on their engagement level and facilitate appropriate use of healthcare.

Take Mary and Earl, for example. Mary is a 70-year-old Medicare patient living in the suburbs. Earl is a 45-year-old father of three living in the city. Mary and Earl have vastly different healthcare needs, timelines, and destinations. Mary receives the following appointment reminder for an upcoming wellness visit: “You have an upcoming appointment at Healthy Healthcare System on October 24, 2020 at 1p.m. Reply 1 to Confirm, 2 to Cancel.” Earl also has an upcoming wellness visit and receives the following SMS message: “Hi Earl. Dr. Doctor would like you to know it is time to come in for your Annual Wellness Visit. Click the link to learn more and schedule.”

Which patient do you think is more likely to think about their annual wellness visit; who is going to feel their health system recognizes them as an individual and understands their personal care needs? Mary can press 1 and that is the end of it. Earl, on the other hand, clicks the link and is taken to an information highway about his health, COVID-safe protocols, transportation information, and even has an option to schedule annual wellness visits for each of his children. Earl’s health literacy increases, uncertainty is eased, and Earl is confident his health system is versed in his care needs, and his family’s too.



So, how do we take all these components and successfully navigate patients and drive behavior change? How can we ensure patients have an experience more like Earl’s? The answer lies in applying data-backed **personalization** and **health communication** to the content and framing of messages.

At its core, our technology embodies proactive communication which builds trust and books visits. It achieves a balance between humanizing patient activation and stimulating the business end of things (like retaining patients, eliminating inefficient processes, creating brand recognition, helping recoup revenue, etc.) The marriage of health communication with data and analytics creates a space where each individual patient is guided through their personal care journey, ultimately improving their patient experience.

Through Upfront, healthcare systems can overstep healthcare message fatigue and drive patients’ engagement within the digital platform. From reminder SMS messages to custom microsites, our solution serves as a **care traffic control system**, seamlessly educating, informing, and directing patients to the safest and most relevant care options.

Remember earlier when we mentioned how personalized content can help avoid low-quality care? This is what we were talking about. Using metrics, we identify patient needs and care gaps; from there, language is decoded and transformed, resulting in content which creates access, minimizes uncertainties, and empowers and educates patients so they can **live well**.

Conclusion

Healthcare is undergoing significant changes focused on patient-centered care and the patient experience. Both are considered linchpins of quality healthcare and, as such, health systems and providers are working to identify areas where they can make a positive impact. Effective communication has been recognized as one of the most important aspects of patient activation and thus, patient navigation.

Much of healthcare-related patient communication and outreach is composed of dry, impersonal content which fails to motivate behavior change in patients. It often lacks information driving patients to be better informed and more engaged with their personal care, which can lead to a patient's health trending opposite of what it should be. As more hospitals and health systems address the issue of improving patient communication efforts, there is an emerging need for a scalable, personalized, strategic messaging technology. Providing healthcare organizations with a solution which can humanize, personalize, and navigate patients through message content will improve organizational performance and patient satisfaction.

The science behind personalized navigation makes care accessible by providing relevant content & navigation to each person *when, how, and where* they need it, embedded in the *why it matters*.

Upfront Healthcare Solutions is unique in its emphasis on partnership of metrics and health communication to drive patient navigation and improve the patient experience, like we have with Earl. Designed to be adaptable, personable, strategic, and scalable, Upfront offers a proven, scientifically approached solution for any healthcare system seeking to provide high-quality care and improve the health and well-being of their patients and communities.

A Note on Health Equity and Access

The obvious benefit in using health communication principles to change behavior is increased visit adherence. The subtle and unnoticed ingredient to this recipe of success: making healthcare accessible. Sustaining behavior change at the individual level requires a deep dive into social determinants of health. Our experts design content that addresses health beliefs at the community level and, as a result, builds a trusted relationship between our client partners and their patients.

Using a research-driven approach, our language directly tackles misconceptions and beliefs at the demographic level. This has a significant impact in making healthcare equitable because we truly make every patient feel like the only patient. Going back to Mary and Earl from above, what holds Mary back from completing her appointment can be wildly different than what holds Earl back. Most of these beliefs arise from the historic disparities in our healthcare system which has rightfully so, created a prevalence of mistrust in the system. While there has been an improvement and certainly a lot of attention to said inequalities, it is our responsibility as health communication experts to ensure every patient knows and believes that they deserve appropriate healthcare. This we have found is a far more authenticated approach rather than traditional forms of communicating such as entertainment education or media promotion.

At a high level, there are a few key concepts we look for to gain a better understanding of an individual's health beliefs: behavioral characteristics of a culture, patient-provider relationships, and stigma. One can argue that perhaps all these fall under the culture category. While that is partially true, studying culture has a much larger agenda which involves history, politics, migration, etc. These findings often get falsely confused and rolled up in to culture. The science of behavior change enables us to think about what makes life and healthcare meaningful to our audience. For example, we consider food habits, family values, social pressure, and mental health stigma when designing content to make healthcare feel accessible. That is the beauty of our strategy. We empower patients by empathizing with their needs and bring healthcare within arm's reach. This is how humanizing healthcare works.

About the Authors



Julia Weigle, MS
Manager of Health Communications and Content Strategy

Julia leads content creation to promote behavior change for an array of our solutions. She is a key consultant for our clients and partners with them to execute powerful content. Her latest passion and successes at Upfront include product design as it relates to content strategy.

She leverages 10 years of experience in operations, communications, and medical education roles at large, academic health organizations such as Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education. Additionally, she is an active member of the Society for Health Communication.

Julia holds a Master of Science in Health Communication from Northwestern University and a Bachelor of Science in Journalism from West Virginia University.



Nisha Dholakia, MS
Director of Health Communications and Content Strategy

Nisha leads the research, strategy, and best practices for our patient-facing content and solutions. Her latest passion is using an evidence-based approach to implement content that is up to date with the field of health communications.

She comes with 15 years of health care experience in care coordination, clinical practice management, cultural competency education, revenue cycle, & referral management. She is an east coast native and started her career at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. Nisha transitioned to health-technology with a focus on patient education after earning her Master of Science in Health Communication from Northwestern University.

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