



# THE RIGHT KIND OF DIGITAL FRONT DOOR

By Mark Boudreau, *Healthfully*, Chief Operating Officer

Like so many concepts in healthcare, the digital front door (DFD) has acquired “buzzword” status with numerous meanings. In a previous article in this series, I identified a strategy for engaging patients and consumers right from the outset of their health journey. Market research firm IDC refers to “all the touch points where providers and payers can digitally interact with patients or members to drive better access, engagement, and experiences across the service continuum.”<sup>1</sup> DFD unites the goals of consumer convenience and clinical quality.

Embedded in these broad definitions are a number of requirements that an effective, meaningful front door needs to encompass if it is to be an actionable framework. This article briefly elaborates on three essential components of the right front door for today’s health systems, hospitals, and other provider organizations.

## ONE, NOT MULTIPLE FRONT DOORS

One of the great potentials of digital health is its ability to transcend boundaries efficiently and create an omnichannel for patients and consumers. Unfortunately, many health systems have multiple apps and portals to engage patients and consumers. One digital front door is central to offering a unified, seamless patient experience by guiding all participants to a spectrum of necessary destinations, including:



**Across care settings and organizations.** Today’s health systems have become multifaceted and often complex organization structures, providing care in disparate inpatient, outpatient, and community settings. The digital front door must guide consumers to all of these as needed. As IDC observes, it should not simply be a pointer to traditional bricks and mortar locations, but must accommodate digital and physical pathways to be effective.



**Across the stages of the health journey.** Achieving and maintaining health is also a temporal journey with multiple steps. The Digital Healthcare Collaborative has observed that there are at least three core patient journeys that must be addressed: Acute care, chronic care, and wellness.<sup>2</sup> Each has its distinct steps and characteristics. In recent years, these paths have been expanded to incorporate a broad range of mental health, community care, and wellness activity in recognition of the critical role played by social determinants of health.

<sup>1</sup> M.Shegawi, “How COVID 19 has forced providers to innovate and accelerate their digital front door,” *IDC presentation, Modern Healthcare webinar*, August 6, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Stone Mantel/Digital Healthcare Collaborative, *Systems and Healthcare*, May 2020.



To help consumers and caregivers navigate these journeys, the DFD needs to be comprehensive in scope rather than being a point solution. Integration with appropriate clinical and administrative systems is an important element of the solution, as are tools that foster ongoing communication and collaboration.

## SMART FRONT DOOR: SERVICE CHOICE VS. CURATED SERVICES

A prominent goal in recent years has been to simplify the process of seeking and obtaining care – providing what has been termed “convenient care.” This movement has been spurred by the emergence of non-traditional healthcare competitors such as Walmart, Amazon, urgent care centers, and others who offer convenient experiences that consumers



increasingly expect in all transactions. The DFD thus must do more than simply offer access; it must offer choice for those that want to explore service possibilities, as well as be able to curate service destinations based on needs. It should guide individuals to the right places through an easily understandable and efficiently executable path. The right front door offers intelligent navigation, powered by and leveraging data-driven and experience-based algorithms.

## CAPABILITY TO “WIDEN THE DOOR”

Delivering high quality care demands effective coordination. So too on a broader scale does effective population health management. In addition, health equity is much in the spotlight now, underscoring the need to rectify deficiencies in offering access to health and wellness to all who require it. All of these objectives point to implementing a front door that becomes progressively wider to maximize access through:



**Accessibility to a broad population.** The digital front door must be deployed, accepted and used not only by patients, but also caregivers, family, friends, and other interested partners.



**App “stickiness.”** Many patient portals and apps lack the convenience or value to induce steady usage. That makes them ineffective at growing – and keeping – a user base. The right DFD overcomes this obstacle by offering a design and an approach that is broadly appealing and promotes a 365 day relationship.



**Connection with the community.** Healthcare must meet people at their point of need. Wellness depends on support and rewards from the individual’s circle of care and broader nexus of community connection.

## FINDING THE RIGHT DIGITAL FRONT DOOR

With so many solutions labelling themselves a Digital Front Door, the options may seem overwhelming. Consider the following imperatives for selecting a consumer-driven Digital Front Door:

- **Apply the essential requirements described in this article** as a judgement yardstick for any solutions. Many will come up short on capabilities to address one or more of these necessary elements.
- **Determine fit with the organization's strategy.** Adopting available “front door” offerings from legacy solution providers such as EHR modules, existing independent patient portals, or a host of patient health apps may involve a tradeoff in which the more traditional clinical point of view is prioritized at the expense of the digital experience consumers expect. Not all clinical solution providers are willing to truly disrupt their legacy patient engagement approaches to align closely with each hospital or health system's unique directions regarding market competition, customer-centricity, innovation in care delivery, cost control, and other strategic variables.
- **Prioritize a flexible platform.** Between the uncertainty surrounding the trajectory of the COVID-19 crisis and the long-run changes occurring in healthcare, organizations will be facing a dynamic landscape for some time. They need a platform that offers maximum flexibility in features, execution, and business models, giving them the agility to engage consumers in new ways.



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