



NOVEMBER 8, 2017

Examining the Healthcare Consumerism Movement

By [Stefanie McLeod](#) in [Customer Relationship Management](#) [Healthcare Marketing](#)



The state and climate of healthcare has changed drastically over the last few years, spurring an ideological debate as to whether healthcare is [a right](#), not a business, or [a business](#), not a right.

But now a new assertion has entered the ring: You should treat your patients like customers. Why? Due to major changes in the healthcare market, such as higher deductibles and copayments, network narrowing and greater insight into performance and costs, patients are taking a more active role in the healthcare decision-making process, transforming them into consumers. A recent [McKinsey study](#) found that patients now directly control \$330 billion annually in out-of-pocket healthcare expenses and their decisions have the potential to affect 61 percent of all healthcare spending.

So, what are these powerful consumers looking for in a healthcare provider? The same things they look for in any other business:

- **Great customer service:** Think customer service takes a back seat to the quality of medical care? Think again. A study published in the [Journal of Medical Practice Management](#) reveals that 96 percent of patient complaints are related to customer service, while only 4 percent are about the quality of clinical care or misdiagnoses.
- **An understanding of their needs:** A health-related visit can be a scary and stressful time. More than anything else, patients want to be heard and respected. Healthcare consulting firm [Press Ganey Associates](#) studied more than 3.5 million medical practice encounters and found that one of the top three answers to the question, "What makes people recommend either their doctor or practice?" was whether providers and staff showed concern for their worries. (The other top answers were confidence in their provider and teamwork between clinicians.)
- **An easy payment experience:** Convenience is king nowadays. In a time when [56 percent](#) (or 8.2 billion) of bills are paid online—72 percent of them on billers' websites—patients are no longer interested in making in-person payments or navigating complicated billing systems.
- **Enhanced value:** It's no secret that healthcare is expensive. In fact, a [study by CMS](#) projected that healthcare spending reached nearly \$3.4 trillion in 2016 and will reach nearly \$5.5 trillion by 2025. So, it doesn't come as a great shock that the majority of patients are willing to "shop around" for affordable care with programs like [SmartShopper](#). This incentive-based program recommends cost-effective locations for expensive healthcare services like MRIs and surgical procedures *and* rewards them with a check for their trouble.

What do healthcare practices have to gain by embracing this consumerism initiative? A satisfied patient base that will give you those all too elusive [word-of-mouth recommendations](#) and remain loyal—even in these uncertain times. In fact, when [McKinsey](#) asked what consumers would do if their primary care provider was no longer in-network on their insurance plan, those respondents reporting high satisfaction levels were 20 percent *less* likely to switch providers than those with low satisfaction levels, even if it cost them more in the end. Now, *that's* the kind of loyalty money alone can't buy.



STEFANIE MCLEOD
ASSOCIATE COPYWRITER