

The Path to Patient Centricity

There are four key steps to ensuring that your brand is patient centric. If you integrate these four points into your marketing efforts, information about your brand will become more relevant, actionable and drive more patient engagement and thus be more patient centric. The first step is meeting patients where they are in their journey.



1. Meet patients where they are:

This is by far the most important thing that must be done to improve patient centricity. To gain a thorough understanding of this you need to consider three key elements:

- Where they are in the patient journey
- Their emotional state
- Life issues they must overcome

Where they are in the patient journey: Patient journeys are a hot topic in healthcare. A key fallacy is that they are not always done from a patient's point of view. They tend to only have information about how the patient got on the brand and interacts with the brand. It usually does not include the steps it took for the patient to get to diagnosed not to mention get on the Rx. Being too skimpy on pre-diagnosis could mean missed opportunity to engage with the patient sooner to move them along the process quicker to get on therapy. You should understand when they first noticed something was wrong, what they did, what resources they used and how satisfied were they with these resources? Search for the symptoms, talk to friends of the patient and test-diagnose yourself through a healthcare website.



Understanding this could lead to new areas of engagement with the patient, helping them along the path to diagnoses, and eventually your brand, quicker. Engaging with the patient doesn't always mean sending a brand message. It could mean leveraging an advocacy group to reach them or disease state information that will eventually lead to your brand. Sending a branded message too early may be off-putting and ineffective.

It is equally important to understand the steps a patient takes post-diagnosis, even while waiting for the results. Steps frequently missed are those that do not include the brand or HCP. This will include patient's own investigating to verify additional information that was not presented to them or alternative options to what was presented to them. This becomes an example of a more informed patient who is in charge of their health and values additional opinions and options.

The post-diagnosis patient journey should also include getting the patient to a "steady state", including being compliant and persistent on therapy. Identify what steps in this journey are causing patients to drop off therapy or not utilize it as directed. There could be resources you can employ to ensure retention.



Patient's Emotional State: The emotional state of the patient at any point in the journey must be incorporated into the patient journey and overall communications. This will help the brand be viewed as an empathetic and more understanding resource. Answer the following questions about your patient:

- Are they in denial? This could be true for dreaded diseases like HIV or cancer. How can the brand move them out of this emotional state quicker to make sure they get the treatment they need to save their

lives?

- Are they angry? The brand needs to plan the best way to move them past this so that they can effectively deal with their situation.
- Have they accepted their condition and how they need to live for the best outcomes? This patient is looking for tips to stay on track in their therapy, which can include branded messages.

Acknowledging Life Issues: The brand may not be able to address these issues through a product, but you can be more relevant by acknowledging the issues and providing a list of resources that can help.

Lack of support system: For instance, a patient may not have a caregiver to lean on. What resources are available to help? Consider resources that are available locally as well as those from national organizations. Similarly, a patient's family may not be supportive of dietary changes that need to happen for the patient, such as a low-sodium or diabetic friendly diet. Being more realistic with what patients are actually dealing with will go a long way in advancing patient centricity.

Financial stability: There could also be issues affording the treatment that need to be addressed. Most pharma companies are effective at helping patients navigate reimbursement on more expensive Rx therapies. However, when a patient is in a situation of just failing to meet the criteria for assistance, little help is given. Even if the brand cannot help, they can refer patients to potential resources that may be able to provide assistance.



Really going deep and seeing things from the patient's point-of-view will help you meet them where they are and increase the relevance of your brand communications. Being more relevant means that a patient can better relate to the information being provided and that the information is actually useful to them. This will lead to patients finding your brand to be more valuable, which should lead to higher acquisition and retention.

Now that we covered step one, meeting patients where they were in their treatment journey, the second step is being completely understandable to your audience.



2. Be Understandable:

Often pharma companies struggle with communicating at the appropriate health-literacy level because of Legal, Medical and Regulatory constraints. Brands should strive to stay out of the high school and college literacy levels, aiming for the 6th grade reading level, which the government recommends.

Communicate for the 6th grade reading level, based on government recommendations and industry best

practice. Reading level is influenced primarily by two factors:

- The average length of sentences
- The number of difficult words

The shorter the sentences and the fewer multisyllabic words, the lower the reading level. Listed below are some guidelines that can help¹.

Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the purpose & useful material immediately obvious • Include content that is relevant to readers interest, knowledge & needs • Repeat new concepts & summarize important points • Limit information to amount that is reasonable for intended readers
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group information in meaningful “chunks” • Use order that will make sense to the intended reader • Use headings, subheadings to signal what is coming next • Use specific & informative wording for sections, headings & subheadings
Writing Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write in conversational style in the active voice • Communicate clearly in plain language • Keep sentences simple and relatively short • Choose words that are familiar and culturally appropriate • Use technical terms and acronyms only when readers need to know them
Design Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create clear & obvious path for the eye to follow • Keep a clear & consistent style & structure • Create a clear hierarchy of prominent headings & subheadings • Use formatted bullets • Use photos, illustrations and other visuals to reinforce your key messages

¹ Internet Citation: Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit, 2nd Edition. Content last reviewed February 2015. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD.
<http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/healthlittoolkit2.html>



It should be noted that incorporating these guidelines will make communications longer and possibly more expensive. This should be accounted for in the budgeting process.

Another consideration is to be culturally relevant. If your brand has significant skews to demographics beyond general population, then you need to make materials available that are culturally relevant to improve patient centricity across the patient spectrum. For example, a diabetic patient may be

looking for a healthier meal plan, but currently eats high quantities of rice in their daily routine. Although grilled chicken, green beans and a side of carrots is an appropriate meal for a diabetic, telling the patient to completely eliminate a carb like rice from their diet may not be helpful. Your brand should help them understand how to adapt their accustomed diet to their condition. Instead of elimination, tell them how to incorporate rice, count the carbs, and what they will need to reduce or eliminate to maintain their already set diet.

Although it is a challenge to balance meeting Legal, Medical and Regulatory requirements with providing information that is written for a general audience, making some simple changes such as using shorter sentences and less complex words can be highly effective in making your patient communications more understandable. In addition, providing culturally relevant communications for demographic skews beyond general population is important for driving compliance and persistency across the patient spectrum. Having patient materials that are easy to understand will also be valuable to healthcare professionals (HCP) and can help your brand differentiate itself as a valuable partner for the HCP.

The third step to patient centricity is being a useful brand for patients.



3. Be Useful:

Patients don't label themselves as "disease sufferers." They are a person first that has health issues to contend with. Their disease does not define them. Once you acknowledge this, you can understand that a valuable role from their POV is to help them overcome obstacles from the disease, letting them live life on their terms by addressing the key issues below:

- a. Side effects and how to combat them
- b. Social issues – disease stigma – how to overcome
- c. Where to get additional support
- d. Comorbidities

Provide information that treats the whole person in terms of what they are up against with their disease, rather than just talking about the treatment alone. Multiple Sclerosis drugs are great examples of doing this. For example, Avonex® provides information and resources on how to manage common side-effects to help make Avonex® more tolerable and thus increase patient retention.



For most chronic conditions, patients usually have comorbidities. Although you cannot address these conditions head-on because of regulations in off-label promotion or broadening your indications, you could give a head nod to the obvious solutions. For example most diabetics also have heart disease. Offering recipes that are also low in sodium as well as carbs would be useful options that consider the needs of the whole person.

Taking a more holistic approach and providing information that is relevant, practical and useful concerning all aspects of the disease treatment can set you apart from the competition. Patients are more sophisticated and are having more say in their treatment options. Delivering more value to them through showing that you really understand what they are up against should increase preference for your brand as well as improve compliance and persistency.

The fourth and final step to patient centricity is engaging with your channels and audience effectively.



4. **Be Engaging:**

Engage in the channels where your patients are in a relevant way. For example, in social media, you need to join the conversation, not change it. Coming in and just talking about things that lead to your brand is like a person rudely interrupting an ongoing conversation to talk about themselves. You should provide information that is relevant to living better with their condition which the patient will find valuable. These topics may not be directly linked to your brand, but you're building a relationship in social media. Even with advertising allowed, social media is not simply an advertising platform. Remember the 80/20 rule: 80% of what you do should provide direct value to the patient and only 20% should be about the brand or

something that leads to the brand.

It is still challenging for pharma to engage in social media from a brand standpoint. However, the 2014 FDA's draft guidance on internet and social media allows the brand to only include the most serious risks associated with the drug, along with a balanced representation of the benefits, as long as a hyperlink to a more complete discussion of risk information is included. Now that Twitter allows 280 characters, more effectively communicating to patients in real-time is more possible.

- a. Refer to [“Guidance for Industry Internet/Social Media Platforms with Character Space Limitations— Presenting Risk and Benefit Information for Prescription Drugs and Medical Devices”](#)

The 80/20 rule can also be true in more traditional branded communication that is sent to your audience. Don't just talk about your product; give them relevant information to tackle the health issue in a holistic way. Don't ignore the fact that these are real people, not subjects. Include topics that are relevant to the condition that can help their quality of life, but do not infer that you are trying to broaden your indication or do off-label promotion. That can be a tricky balance that you will need to work with your Legal, Medical and Regulatory team to develop communications that your organization is comfortable with.



Another way to increase engagement is to reward your audience for achieving goals. Incorporating some level of gamification increases engagement because it creates a fun challenge. Let them have fun beating their best score, or have a “celebration” when they hit a specific goal. This could be as simple as a fireworks animation when a goal is achieved. You don’t always have to provide an expensive rewards program.

Improving engagement is often the hardest of the four steps to do. This is because you will have to balance selling the brand and adding value to the patient beyond the product benefits. You may experience push-back on the necessity of doing this. However, if you keep in mind that your goal is to establish a helpful relationship with the patient, you will find that a more engaged patient decides to take your drug and stays on it versus someone who is not engaged.



About the author: RD Shanklin & Associates is a healthcare & life sciences marketing strategy consultancy focused on driving profitable growth through enhancing customer insights, strategic & tactical planning, marketing and commercial strategy.

Regina Shanklin is the founder and principal consultant for the organization. She is a marketing executive with over 20 years of delivering business results while generating strong return-on-investment (ROI). Regina has a diverse marketing background and has driven results in the Healthcare, Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) and Advertising industries.