

Do You Need Custom Mobile App for Your Urgent Care?



It might seem like a popular idea right now to create a custom mobile app for your urgent care center. But just because something is trendy doesn't make it right for your walk-in clinic.

You need to consider the time, energy, and money that goes into creating an app, and weigh those factors against the likelihood of its success. Will a mobile app truly draw more users to your urgent care center, or would it sit on the patient's phone for a few weeks before they slide it over to the fateful "uninstall" icon?

Think about some of the most popular custom mobile apps out there, probably ones you have on your phone: Amazon, Groupon, Target's Cartwheel, Walgreens, and Walmart. These companies generate frequent "user visits," with customers sometimes visiting those stores several times each week. That makes it easier for companies to lure consumers with a mobile app that promises "deals" or loyalty rewards.

In comparison, the urgent care market centers on infrequent, on-demand consumer usage. Most consumers who use urgent care only visit a center 1.7 times per year, according to industry surveys. How likely is an urgent care to garner app space on the phone of a patient who comes to your business so rarely for service?

Only 16 percent of healthcare professionals currently use mobile apps, according to a 2015 survey cited in Modern Healthcare. And while 46 percent in that survey said they have plans to use a mobile app in the next five years, there are significant hurdles. Healthcare providers "are proceeding cautiously because of the dearth of clinical evidence for many consumer apps, and because some developers may be misleading consumers by overstating their products' capabilities," Modern Healthcare writer Joseph Cann said in a [November 2015 article](#).

Getting an app on someone's phone in 2016 is the equivalent of the loyalty cards retailers worked so hard to get into people's wallets a decade ago. Brand affinity is often what drives people to download an app, and research into urgent care shows most consumers have no ties to any brand of immediate medical care. Even among users of urgent care, there's not much differentiation of center identities or regional brands.

You might succeed in getting patients to download the app, with promises of speedier check-in or seamless access to information. But how much use will that app generate based on standard traffic patterns in urgent care? Patients could wind up turned off by having another login requirement—especially since you'd need to require complex usernames and passwords (along with encryption) to make it [HIPAA-compliant](#) for sharing any sort of protected health information.

Consider what goes into creating a custom mobile app. To make one that is functional and fanciful requires information, expertise and knowledge of consumer behavior that's likely beyond that of a typical urgent care operator. Let's jump back to the example of the Cartwheel app, which is likely a favorite of many of your suburban, upper middle class urgent care patients. Target spent a year developing its app—in partnership with Facebook—and spends a lot of time regularly updating the technology and adding features.

Do you have that kind of extra time, money, or technical knowledge to invest in such an endeavor? Successful apps need to be updated four to eight times per year. And remember, consumers will quickly abandon a custom mobile app that frequently crashes or freezes, so you don't want to put a subpar product on the market.

Certainly you want to invest in patient experience and excellent customer service. Urgent care is in the retail healthcare business, after all. But how important is healthcare mobile app to the typical urgent care patient?

If the app features only "brochureware"—information about hours and locations—there's not much value to the patient beyond what they could get from the website. Transactional apps, those that allow a patient to schedule an appointment, register, or pay a bill, offer more value but may only spur patient downloads when they need to complete such actions.

The healthcare apps most likely to generate frequent use are ones that engage patients in a relationship, offering features like medical record review, tracking of vitals, or other provider interaction. But since most urgent care treatment is episodic, the opportunity for this long-term level of engagement with patients is not as obvious. That's not to say it's impossible if the urgent care providers can connect with patients and provide updates about seasonal services (i.e. flu shots or sports physicals).

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