

Thinking Outside of the Box: What Urgent Care Can Learn from ZoomCare

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Consumer demand for “immediate care,” spawning retail clinics, walk-in “doc-in-a-box” offices, and full-service urgent care centers continues to reshape health care’s longstanding and outdated access paradigm. Non-acute patients fed up with lengthy, expensive visits to the hospital emergency room or long waits for an appointment with their primary care physician – if they even have one – have provided the initial fuel for immediate care’s rapid growth, while healthcare reform promises an influx of millions more newly insured seeking fast and convenient medical treatment. With an emphasis on short wait times, on-demand service, affordable prices, and a superior experience, immediate care providers of every stripe enjoy a burgeoning marketplace brimming with opportunities for profit and continued growth.

Yet despite all the built-in advantages of, say, operating an urgent care center within the current health care climate, many providers still fall woefully short when it comes to maximizing the full revenue potential of their centers. Whether it’s a lingering “build it and it they will come” mentality, lack of marketing/business savvy, or reluctance to adopt and integrate newer technologies, providers who aren’t aggressive and forward-thinking in capturing and retaining patients are basically leaving dollars on the table.

ZoomCare: A Brief Case Study

Put simply, being an early adopter of new trends, pushing the envelope, and embracing innovation is key to getting ahead of the ever-growing pack of urgent care competitors. One such “healthcare on demand” provider aiming to reinvent the model with their wholly unique approach to service delivery is ZoomCare, an urgent care operator based in Hillsboro, Oregon. Founded in 2006 by Drs. David Sanders and Albert DiPiero, the ZoomCare footprint comprises 23 neighborhood clinics located geographically in the Pacific Northwest (primarily Portland and Seattle). ZoomCare, which touts itself as the world’s “first neighborhood clinic and smartphone-based healthcare delivery system,” is noteworthy for, among other things, its full integration of cutting-edge technology throughout their patient service model. As a result of this and other innovations, ZoomCare has not only realized steady clinic growth and expansion, but has secured a multi-million dollar investment from a private equity firm they’ve recently partnered with.

How ZoomCare is Different

The ZoomCare healthcare delivery model stands apart in how it successfully leverages web and mobile technology in creating an efficient, streamlined, and patient-centric experience. Follows is a breakdown of some of the more prominent features of ZoomCare’s practice model:

- **Full Service Website** – ZoomCare has a full-featured, “one-stop shop”-style website complete with easy-to-navigate menus/submenus that detail their service offerings, list their service locations along with the resident clinicians, and includes press releases touting their services and innovations. A patient of ZoomCare can simply login to the website (via smartphone, tablet, or PC), create a patient account, and begin utilizing ZoomCare’s in-depth web portal. Or, an end user may simply follow the menus to browse the clinic’s broad medical offerings.
- **Full Profiles of Every Clinician** – Every clinician at each clinic location has the following features in their profile: Full headshot photo, professional credentials, university education, and field of specialty. Basically, a patient can view a photo and read up on a clinician before they schedule an appointment, which gives the patient a measure of control over who they choose for their healthcare needs.

- **Extensive Use of Physician Assistants (PA's) and Nurse Practitioners (NP's)** – By extensively utilizing less expensive PA's and NP's (as opposed to MD's and DO's, who command a much higher salary), ZoomCare clinics keep their staffing budgets manageable, which subsequently allows them to expand their hours of service. Note: ZoomCare clinics do employ a small number of MD's and DO's, but for most urgent care visits, PA's and NP's have the educational qualifications and clinical experience to diagnose and treat typical patient complaints.
- **Integration of Medical Specialists** – Unique to most urgent care models, ZoomCare employs a team of on-site medical specialists who've received “advanced education and clinical training” in the following specialties:
 - ✓ **Orthopedics**
 - ✓ **Podiatry**
 - ✓ **Gastroenterology**
 - ✓ **Otolaryngology**
 - ✓ **Cardiology**
 - ✓ **Physical Therapy**

The obvious benefit of having in-house specialists is that it eliminates the need to refer a patient to an outside provider for further treatment, which also facilitates the development of a highly coveted longitudinal, or chronic care relationship. In short, ZoomCare can manage many medical episodes from initial complaint to case conclusion.

- **Integration of Mental Health** – Select ZoomCare clinics employ a full-time, credentialed mental health specialist trained to treat patients with a variety of mental health issues including anxiety, insomnia, PTSD, depression, OCD, etc. The treatment schedule consists of a preliminary visit/exam, then follow-up appointments as needed. Given the growing number of mental health presentations in emergency rooms, and the difficulty in scheduling a psychiatric consultation during a time of crisis—integrating mental health improves patient access and brings cost savings.
- **Integration of Naturopathy** – In response to increased consumer demand in the Pacific Northwest for complementary and alternative therapies, ZoomCare now offers Naturopathic services at select clinics. Naturopathy takes a holistic approach to addressing the underlying causes of illness and disease, and espouses natural methods of healing.
- **Preregistration, Browse, and “Schedule-A-Provider” Online** – On each clinic's registration web page, a patient can browse and select from each available clinician's open time slots, then book themselves an appointment whenever it's most convenient for them. Note: Patients must provide valid payment information (i.e. credit card, insurance) at the time of e-registration through the website. Demarcated at 15 minute intervals from open to close, patient self-scheduling is at the heart of ZoomCare's patient-centric service model. Not only does their online preregistration feature streamline and organize the clinic's daily patient load, but guarantees the patient that they'll be seen by their preferred/chosen provider.
- **Extended Hours of Service** – Select ZoomCare locations offer extended hours, with some opening as early as 8am and closing as late as 12 midnight. For busy people who can't miss work or school during the mornings and afternoons, being able to see a clinician during the very late evening hours is a convenience that they simply won't find at many traditional urgent care centers.

- **Telemedicine** – ZoomCare also offers online consultations/appointments through Skype, allowing patients to receive medical services without leaving their home or office. Patients simply navigate to the Online Visits submenu on the main page, complete the Appointment Details information (including Skype ID), and provide a valid credit card number. Shortly before the scheduled Skype appointment, the patient will be asked to accept the request to add the ZoomCare TakeOut clinic Id to their Skype contact list. Note: Should the provider request that patient schedule an in-person visit to the clinic for care, the cost of the Skype consultation will be deducted from the final bill. Additionally, lab and test results can be emailed to the patient in PDF format.
- **Prescriptions Dispensed/Filled in the Clinic** – ZoomCare dispenses prescription medicine at each of its clinics. Clinics that dispense medication in-house tend to get better patient compliance to care instructions, which of course improves clinical outcomes overall. Not to mention patients appreciate not having to make a separate trip to the pharmacy for their meds, resulting in faster relief. Note: ZoomCare clinics do not dispense narcotics or medical marijuana.
- **Accepts Most Insurance** – ZoomCare participates in most insurance networks. However, ZoomCare does not accept Medicaid, Medicare, and other state-funded plans. “ObamaCare” exchange products such as Modahealth in Oregon are accepted.
- **Publishes Prices for Self-Pay/Uninsured** – For the approximately 20% of patients who are uninsured or opt for self-pay, ZoomCare offers a comprehensive price list for each of their medical services. Full price transparency policies such as ZoomCare’s are rare in healthcare, and appreciated by patients who want flat, straightforward pricing when they visit for a medical service.
- **Provides Primary/Chronic Care In Addition to Episodic Care** – ZoomCare offers chronic/longitudinal care for common medical issues such as diabetes, acne, GERD, obesity, osteoarthritis, IBS, asthma, etc. A chronic care specialist, after an initial evaluation, will develop a comprehensive treatment plan with regular follow-ups for routine checkups, labs, medication refills and more.
- **Follows Patients into the Hospital via the Hospital Concierge Program** – Patients who seek a stress-free hospitalization experience can pay a monthly fee for ZoomCare Hospital Concierge service. Concierge service ensures that, among other things, medical costs are transparent, care options are fully explained, and the hospital-to-home (or work) transition is as smooth and seamless as possible.

What Can Urgent Care Learn?

The “immediate care” industry as a whole, due to both the Affordable Care Act and a seismic paradigm shift in the entire health care access model, is not only growing rapidly, but poised to flourish for the foreseeable future. Thus, healthcare providers hoping to “ride the wave” and stake their claim must begin to embrace this burgeoning concept of “healthcare on demand,” then commit to implementing it fully throughout their practice models. This is what patients expect and demand these days, and if it means going under the proverbial hood to reinvent the model, so be it.

ZoomCare is but one example of an immediate care provider who “gets it,” and has truly rolled out the red carpet for its patients in novel and innovative ways. From its extensive use of lower-cost mid-level providers, to its offering of Skype appointments, to its forward-thinking “Schedule-A-Provider” scheduling system, ZoomCare is constantly exploring ways to leverage technology and customer service concepts, and finding unique ways to combine them for its patients’ benefit. And although ZoomCare is certainly breaking the

urgent care mold, their methods are hardly proprietary, or impossible to duplicate. In fact, many of their methods can and should be copied by other providers, especially if they wish to catapult their practices to new levels of efficiency, connectivity, and functionality.

The challenge seems to be taking a hard look at models like ZoomCare and others, and then asking, “How as a provider can I take my practice to the next level as well? In what ways can I leverage readily available technology to create a service delivery model for my patients that is superior to anything in my market? What additional services can offer to enhance my patient’s experience within my practice?” Indeed, there will be an initial financial outlay when overhauling a preexisting service delivery program, but like the ZoomCare model clearly demonstrates, the payoff – for both the provider and their patients – is well worth it.