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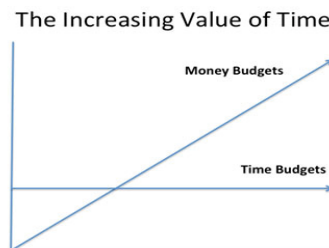
Why Time is of the Essence for Urgent Care Patients

By Alan A. Ayers, MBA, MAcc

Urgent Message: As time-starved consumers turn to urgent care centers for convenient, on-demand access for basic health services, urgent care providers must respond with systems, processes, and technology to assure a smooth flow that gets patients in and out quickly.

It has been said that time is the great equalizer, meaning, it matters not what country you are from, the color of your skin, your education, occupation, or religion; for each of us there are only 24 hours in a day. Ultimately, there are only so many years in a human life. As Figure 1.0 illustrates, while assets like money are potentially infinite, time is the one commodity that is truly finite. There is nothing that can be done to create more time, so the focus of modern society has become making the most of the time you have.

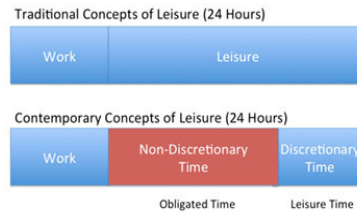
Figure 1.0: The Increasing Value of Time



Changing Consumer Perspectives on Time

In the past, days were broken down into two simple parts—work and leisure—with work being survival activities and leisure being play and rest. Today, people still work, but their leisure time is now divided between discretionary and non-discretionary time. The latter refers to obligations which may include caring for children, aging parents or pets; community and volunteer service; cleaning and maintaining a home and automobile; running errands, shopping for food, clothing, and other necessities; and exercise, hygiene and beauty routines, among other commitments. Dual income households, in particular, have found that as their daytime hours are consumed by their careers and their evenings and weekends consumed by non-work obligations, that discretionary or “me time” has become rare or non-existent.

Figure 2.0: Changing Consumer Time Budgets



As a luxury, increasing the amount of discretionary time has become a quest of individuals of financial means. Going out to eat costs more than preparing meals at home but it shifts time that would have been spent shopping, prepping, cooking, and cleaning to time that can instead be enjoyed relaxing and socializing with friends and family. Increasing discretionary time is why affluent and upwardly mobile consumers also do things like hire household help; shop on the Internet; get liposuction, laser hair removal, and permanent make-up; travel by jet airplane; and *utilize urgent care centers*.

Time Value of Urgent Care Centers

Urgent care centers appeal to consumers who want immediate attention for medical conditions that are not medical emergencies. As the name “urgent care” implies, the value proposition is time; the ability to see a doctor now, without the burden of making and waiting for an appointment, without driving downtown to an urban legacy hospital, and with minimal time spent in the waiting room. Consumers turn to urgent care centers in order to reduce their obligated or non-discretionary time, thus increasing the amount of time patients can control for themselves.

Understanding that time savings is what draws consumers to urgent care is a key to success in the urgent care business, as extended wait times tend to be the most frequent patient complaint about urgent care centers. Urgent care operators who realize their role in saving patients time build their entire service offering around efficiency and then advertise time savings as a differentiator for their centers. They’re open extended evening and weekend hours. They communicate expected wait times in advance of and during the visit. They minimize hassle in terms of registration, billing, and payment. And finally, they realize that the patient’s time is more important than the doctor’s time and practice “urgent care medicine” to move patients through the center quickly. Consider the examples in Figure 3.0.

Figure 3.0: Examples of Urgent Care Operations with Innovative Approaches to Managing Patient Waits

- Physicians Immediate Care, with 32 centers in Illinois, Indiana, and Nebraska, offers online check-in to limit patient wait times and presents current wait time for each location on its website to allow patients to choose a location that can serve them quickly.
- Immediate Care of Oklahoma advertises that patients can “get in line ahead of time.” Its slogan sums up this service promise: “Real Care, Real Quick at a Real Value.”
- CareNow, which operates 26 urgent care centers in Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas offers web check-in (via its website and mobile app) that enables patients to

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wait at their home or office instead of at the center. Patients are called to come to the center 15 minutes prior to when it's expected the doctor will be available to see them resulting in a "virtual wait" from home and "zero wait" in the center.

- FastPace, with offices across Tennessee, realizes that some patient waits are inevitable due to the ebb and flow of a walk-in model. That's why they offer amenities including videogames, children's play area, a Slushy machine and free Wi-Fi to make unavoidable waits more productive and enjoyable.
- Concentra Urgent Care in Warwick, Rhode Island offers to take patient cell phone numbers and call them when they are next to be seen—allowing patients to browse the adjacent regional mall or run other errands rather than sitting in the waiting room. The center adds part-time providers during peak hours and it uses scheduled appointments to shift physical examinations and physician re-checks to less busy times of the day, both reducing turnaround times in the center.

Given the entrepreneurial nature of urgent care medicine, there are many other time-saving innovations that can be found by scanning the websites of leading urgent care providers. But when patients do respond to an urgent care center's promise of time savings, that center must consistently deliver on patient expectations of "zero wait" or risk diminishing its brand. For instance, a center that enables patients to avoid the wait by registering online must perfect its processes so patients who pre-register are escorted directly to an exam room and immediately seen by a provider. Otherwise, if web registration patients still end up waiting 20 or 30 minutes after arriving at the center, their frustration with the wait time will be greater than if the time-saving service were never offered. Careful and frequent patient communication is a must, as patients who are waiting can become agitated as they see "call ahead" or non-physician visits (i.e. drug screens) served ahead of them.

A Generational Perspective on Wait Times

Urgent care generally appeals to adults of working age, many with children living at home, who are generally healthy and lead active lifestyles, who may or may not have a primary care physician but need someplace to go when a minor illness or injury occurs, especially during evenings and weekends. Understanding the time orientation of these key urgent care age cohorts—adults 18-35 and 35-50 (Generations X and Y, respectively)—can guide urgent care operators in developing services that account for the changing time expectations of young and maturing consumers.

For Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1972, expectations for life started out great. As the United States experienced a period of unprecedented peace, prosperity and technological advancement, this age cohort anticipated the turn of the century with energy and excitement. Alvin Toffler's "Future Shock," written in 1970, was perhaps predictive of the challenges Generation X would face as the revolution from an "industrialized nation" to an "information world" would lead to stress, disconnectedness, disorientation, and even disappointment.

Forty years later, the "future is now" and technology still hasn't fixed everything. Generation Y, those born between 1980 and 2000, no longer await "what's next" but instead are overwhelmed by the ever

-accelerating pace of life. Time has thus become their most precious commodity. As a sequel to “Future Shock,” media writer Douglas Rushkoff describes this phenomenon in “Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now.” Here is a brief description from the publisher:

This is the moment we've been waiting for... but we don't seem to have any time in which to live it. Instead we remain poised and frozen, overwhelmed by an always-on, live-streamed reality that our human bodies and minds can never truly inhabit. And our failure to do so has had wide-ranging effects on every aspect of our lives.

People spent the 20th century obsessed with the future. We created technologies that would help connect us faster, gather news, map the planet, compile knowledge and connect with anyone, at any time. We strove for an instantaneous network where time and space could be compressed. Well, the future's arrived. We live in a continuous now enabled by social media, email and a so-called real-time technological shift.

Yet this “now” is an elusive goal that we can never quite reach. And the dissonance between our digital selves and our analog bodies has thrown us into a new state of anxiety: present shock...

“Future Shock” and Judeo-Christian concepts of time centuries before were linear or process-based. People thought of life as a sequence of events, “first this and next that...the sun rises, the sun sets...and then you die.” So long as progress was unfolding, people were conditioned to wait for a desired outcome.

“Present Shock” is circular thinking; more and more just keeps happening with no end in sight. Days are no longer marked by sunrise and sunset but life is a continuous, simultaneous, 24-hour flow. The mantra of our current generation has become an old one: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Today, however it seems almost insanely true. There is no acceptance of waiting for a better state but increasingly, the younger generation’s concept of time is now, immediate, and without delay.

“Urgent care” refers not just to a delivery channel for walk-in treatment of minor and acutely rising medical conditions; the term itself sets an expectation of service immediacy. While Generation X and its predecessors were willing to wait if such meant a solution to their medical problems, Generation Y and beyond is completely intolerable of waiting.

In other words, “future shock” patients could be placated by explaining the process, their place in the queue, and setting expectations as to wait times and service outcomes. That’s because their linear concept of time aligns with the linear processes that drive the back office of an urgent care operation (i.e. a patient gets triaged, put in an exam room, an examination and diagnosis are provided, chart documented, script written...and on to the next patient). For older generation patients, the value of urgent care could be articulated in terms of process—wait times in urgent care have been acceptable if they meant a shorter wait, lower cost and less hassle than other options, namely the Emergency Room.

By contrast, for “present shock” patients, waiting for an outcome doesn’t jive with their expectation of immediacy in a connected, 24/7 world. They don’t appreciate the linear flow of back office operations but instead feel the urgent care operator should have structured his entire practice around their singular need—to deliver a health care solution at the precise time the patient wants it—the same way that retail, restaurants, and entertainment providers have done. Viewing time as their most valuable resource, younger generations will simply migrate to service providers who have embraced technology that eliminates waiting altogether.

Conclusion

Given the importance of time to the value proposition, brand differentiation and long-term success of urgent care, what is your center doing to save time for your patients? Urgent care providers who have integrated Internet pre-registration, call-ahead scheduling, who staff according to demand, who expand their services to provide a one-stop shop, and who integrate telemedicine solutions to provide “treatment in the now” without leaving home, will find success with the younger generations while those who continue to function on the doctor’s time—with extended waits due to process delays—will go the way of the dinosaurs.

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