



How to  
**Curate a Digital Patient  
Experience That Future-  
Proofs Your HME Business**



The home medical equipment (HME) space is on the verge of major change. HME providers will need to turn that change into opportunity.

..... **Patients are seeking simple, reliable, digital ways to connect with their providers.**

To stay competitive and relevant in the face of change, HME providers will need to future-proof their businesses and integrate digital technology into the patient experience. They can do this by assessing and reacting to the opportunities and challenges that have emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as new reimbursement policies, accelerating technological changes and shifting patient behaviors.

This guide offers best practices for HME providers on curating a forward-looking digital patient experience, with added insights from Bonnie Jablonowski, director of product management at McKesson Medical-Surgical.

## What is the HME digital patient experience?

In the past, the digital patient experience was simple — centered on paying bills, setting appointments and pulling lab results. But this has changed across healthcare, and HME providers are no exception. For businesses like yours, the digital patient experience now includes:

- **Care communications** that impact therapy compliance
- **Streamlined patient outreach**
- **Patient feedback** such as clinical questionnaires and satisfaction surveys
- **Real-time distribution of educational materials** related to patient devices or products
- **Resupply automation**

The HME digital patient experience is a moving target. Patients increasingly see and engage with healthcare through a consumer lens. We have yet to see the full extent of the impact of this trend.

**One thing we do know is that HME providers who meet patients where and when they want to be will be best positioned to handle future changes.** .....



## What does the future-proof HME business look like?

**To make things more concrete, let's look at what future-proofing means for an HME provider.**

Future-proofing isn't about making your business impervious to every potential change. It's about making changes that keep you agile and prepared for future shifts. On a practical level, this means that your technology, your people and your processes are ready to handle the coming challenges — and that you have the right tools.

The result is being able to stay ahead of your competition, without a complete infrastructure overhaul every time a new regulation drops or a trend in consumer behavior surfaces. So what does this look like for a provider? First, the HME provider has to be focused on three critical activities:

1

**Growing referrals** to drive patient volume

2

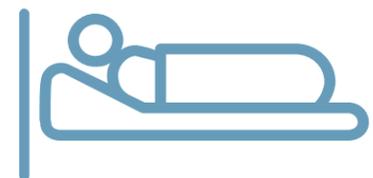
**Building efficiency** into every element of operations

3

**Looking for emerging opportunities** to incorporate telehealth into overall strategy

HME providers will benefit from digital patient technology that fosters and balances both growth and efficiency, while prioritizing the patient experience.

As an example, think of a mobile app that **supports care communications between provider and patient by alerting patients when it's time to ..... reorder digitally.** It bypasses the need for expensive call centers and the drain on efficiency caused by endless phone tag.



Another example is a provider selling continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) supplies and **uses technology to ..... support patient compliance with their prescribed therapy** — benefiting reimbursement and increasing referrals.

This is just the beginning. HME providers who successfully integrate a digital patient experience into their operations will set themselves apart.

### THE FUTURE-PROOF HME:

- **Focuses on growing referrals** to drive volume
- **Prioritizes efficiency**
- **Uses patient engagement technology**
- **Has grown past reacting** and progressed to taking advantage of opportunities

## Understanding HME trends

To get a complete picture of the landscape your HME business is facing, it's important to understand the trends shaping the industry today.

### INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS

The HME landscape is changing. Take hospital at home programs, for example. **Their growth has been accelerated by an aging population that wants to “age in place,”** as well as by a pandemic that has strained hospitals and pushed them to find new, more flexible ways of delivering care.



The programs are becoming more common with hospitals across the country. The American Hospital Association frequently features hospitals that are taking advantage.<sup>1</sup>



### TECHNOLOGY ADVANCEMENTS

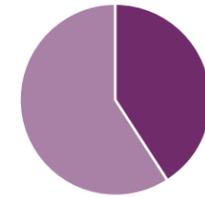
Advancements in technology outside home healthcare will likely have a significant impact on your future business decisions as well, since both your consumers and competitors will be exploring new technologies.

Consumers have dived into wearables, with patients now expecting the ability to bring all sorts of medical devices with them as they go about their active lives. But this trend goes well beyond smart watches and step counters.

Portable medical equipment now includes devices like portable oxygen concentrators that patients prefer to be lightweight and wearable to keep up with their lifestyles. This means that HME device companies will, in turn, need to keep up with the shift toward portability.

## SHIFTING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Changes in consumer behavior aren't always about the traditional patient experience. Many patients bring their expectations from outside the healthcare sphere with them as they choose medical equipment.



For example, an increasing number of consumers are shopping online. People tend to assume this is largely driven by younger consumers, but **consider that as of 2017, 41% of baby boomers shopped online.**<sup>3</sup> The pandemic has shifted their shopping behaviors even more than those of younger generations.<sup>4</sup>

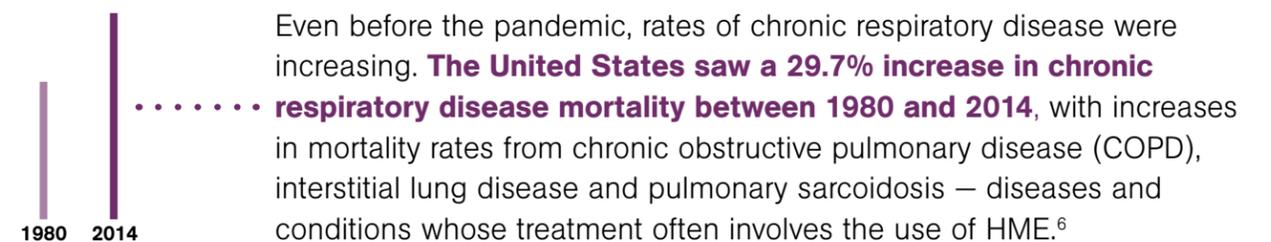
### PANDEMIC IMPACT

You can expect higher demand as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the reach of this public health emergency doesn't stop there.

COVID-19 will likely have long-term impact, so organizations like yours will benefit from adopting new strategies and tactics, like new product categories that you define as you observe how the care continuum is changing.

Take a look at the pandemic's impact on demand for respiratory devices, obstructive sleep apnea devices and negative pressure wound therapy devices. Demand was estimated at \$6.2 billion, \$2.2 billion and \$2.1 billion, respectively, in 2018. With the pandemic pushing hospitals to shift more patients into homes as they navigated outbreaks of the virus, HME providers in these specialties have scaled their supply to play important supporting roles.<sup>5</sup>

### DEMOGRAPHIC AND DISEASE TRENDS



“The healthcare journey that patients used to experience is long gone. We've all likely heard that more than ever before, patients treat their healthcare as another consumer product. And, they do all of this from the comfort of their own homes. The key for providers is to meet patients where and when they want to be met—and that's in their homes.”

**BONNIE JABLONOWSKI**, Director of Product Management, McKesson Medical-Surgical

## Examining the patient experience-focused HME business

**Ultimately, what we're facing is new expectations from HME customers.** To understand how you should adapt, let's take a step back and consider how patients are engaging with home medical equipment and HME businesses.

### UNDERSTANDING THE NEW "ENLIGHTENED" HME CONSUMER

For years, patients purchasing HME medical supplies and products had limited options. They were less price aware and had expectations of HME shopping experiences that were different from their other retail experiences. Those days have passed. Today's HME patient could be described as an "enlightened consumer."

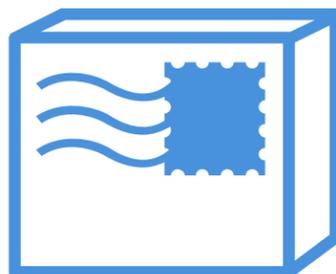


Think of how your average person shops for a car or smartphone. . . . . **They know they have the option of multiple suppliers and they compare prices and consider their customer service experience in their final decision.** Many of today's enlightened HME consumers are the same. They know what a provider will charge them for a product after insurance is factored in, and they also know that they can purchase the same item on Amazon or from another business and receive shipments quickly.

They're aware of the services you provide as an HME and are comparing you to another, if not multiple, other sources. They've done their homework and they've done research to find out how you'll treat them as a customer. They've also done the background work and know what to expect even before they engage with you.

During the pandemic, we watched online shopping habits explode in grocery and takeout. If you think this only impacts younger demographics, think again. Baby boomers now dominate online shopping as the fastest growing category of e-commerce participants. The trend is expected to hold.<sup>7</sup>

**Today's HME consumer of any age wants to do everything from the comfort of their home and to receive their orders quickly and efficiently. The consumerization of healthcare means that your customers will now hold you to these . . . . . new standards.**



### WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR HME

The answer isn't to simply copy Instacart or DoorDash. Your goal is to center on the patient experience, shifting your operations to support the expectations of a new breed of patient.

**This means that once you bring a new patient into your census, you will need to prioritize three things:**

- 1 Providing patients with the best service possible.** The goal is to drive optimal patient outcomes, setting yourself apart by giving patients the freedom to manage their healthcare experience.
- 2 Meeting patients where they are.** Just like patients are now doing their homework to understand your products and service, you will need to do your homework to understand *them* – and align your offering with their preferences and expectations.
- 3 Implementing the right technology.** If you'll look at the leaders in customer retail experiences, you'll notice that they're heavily tech forward. This is because they know that managing change means implementing patient engagement technology that empowers patients to manage healthcare when and how they want.

## The key: A focus on patient engagement technology

The last section brings up the question of how you should use patient engagement technology in your plans to future-proof your HME business.

“ How can patient engagement technology drive efficiency? Patient engagement technology can help drive efficiency to HME providers by alerting patients when it’s time to order supplies through an app; responding quickly with real-time, two-way communication to meet patient needs; reducing staff calls to patients and supporting therapy compliance and patient outcomes. ”

**BONNIE JABLONOWSKI**, Director of Product Management, McKesson Medical-Surgical

### UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF CHANGE ON YOUR TECHNOLOGY

With HME consumers now behaving like your average online shopper, **it’s important to rethink your current use of technology and address what might be missing.**

You’ll look to answer questions like:

- What does our current patient experience look like and what role (if any) is technology playing?
- What are consumers able to do from their homes? What are they not able to do?
- Have we met patients where they are and how they want to be met? Are we equipped to continue (or begin) this when “where they are” changes?
- Can we learn from other consumer fields as we craft our strategy?



As you answer these questions, consider them in the context of your specific organizational goals. For example, your answers might be different if you’re addressing a market for wheelchairs or walkers versus catheters.

**Make sure that your technology decisions are made not just for the sake of technology, but in alignment with what your organization wants to achieve in the future.**

## Examples: Technology as a path to future-proofing

To better understand the opportunities you have in future-proofing your HME business, let’s look at some examples of how other organizations are applying patient-centered tech in the HME space.

### IMPROVING OUTCOMES WITH BETTER PATIENT CONNECTION

Consumers increasingly use mobile technology to aid in their healthcare, from their homes. HME providers should consider how they incorporate this technology into their patient service model, meeting patients where they are while driving efficiency for the provider.

One example of this is McKesson VerbalCare®, **an app designed to . . . . . increase care communication between providers and patients.**

McKesson VerbalCare® saves time via customizable, automated communications based on patient therapy and date-dependent patient events. It also streamlines patient outreach and supports therapy compliance for communications such as resupply, follow-up reminders, clinical questionnaires and satisfaction surveys.<sup>8</sup>

For example, through patient engagement technology, like VerbalCare, you can help improve CPAP therapy patient compliance and automate refill inquires. And better yet – you’re meeting patients where they are and want to be – in their home. Here’s how technology like VerbalCare can help:

- **Alert patients** when it’s time to reorder CPAP resupplies to help ensure they stay on track.
- **Send reminders** that it’s time to set up their follow-up appointment with their physician.
- **Send survey assessments** to patients to see how they’re doing with the equipment like their CPAP mask.
- **Consider how much staff** it takes to do all of these mandatory items.

Now imagine how many other competing priorities your staff is managing. Thanks to advancements in patient engagement technology like VerbalCare, providers can automate their patient communications, freeing up staff to do other valuable work.





## Best practices for future-proofing your HME business

Future-proofing will be an important goal as you shape your HME . . . . . business to fit tomorrow's challenges.



Here are some top tips for moving forward:

- **Understand that future-proofing your HME business may require cultural changes** within your organization that involve shifting your relationship with healthcare technology and the HME tech landscape – and make sure to communicate this possibility early
- **Develop a practice of anticipating and adjusting to meet HME customer expectations**, with a platform that streamlines online ordering and shipment tracking
- **Adapt your marketing, messaging and customer relations** to reflect your new stance on meeting customers where they are in their patient journey
- **Prioritize technology that offers real-time insights and interactions** – for your customers, your staff and providers
- **Look to retail experience as a guide** for how to provide personalized interactions that align with the patient-consumer experience
- **Think competitively**, since “competition” now includes non-healthcare retailers such as Amazon, as well as new entrants to the healthcare and HME space

Ultimately, HME providers are facing huge opportunities if they're willing to reimagine their relationship with technology in a way that centers on patients – and sees every stakeholder as a conduit to new solutions, better outcomes and a future-proof business. To take the next step in future proofing your HME business [start here](#).

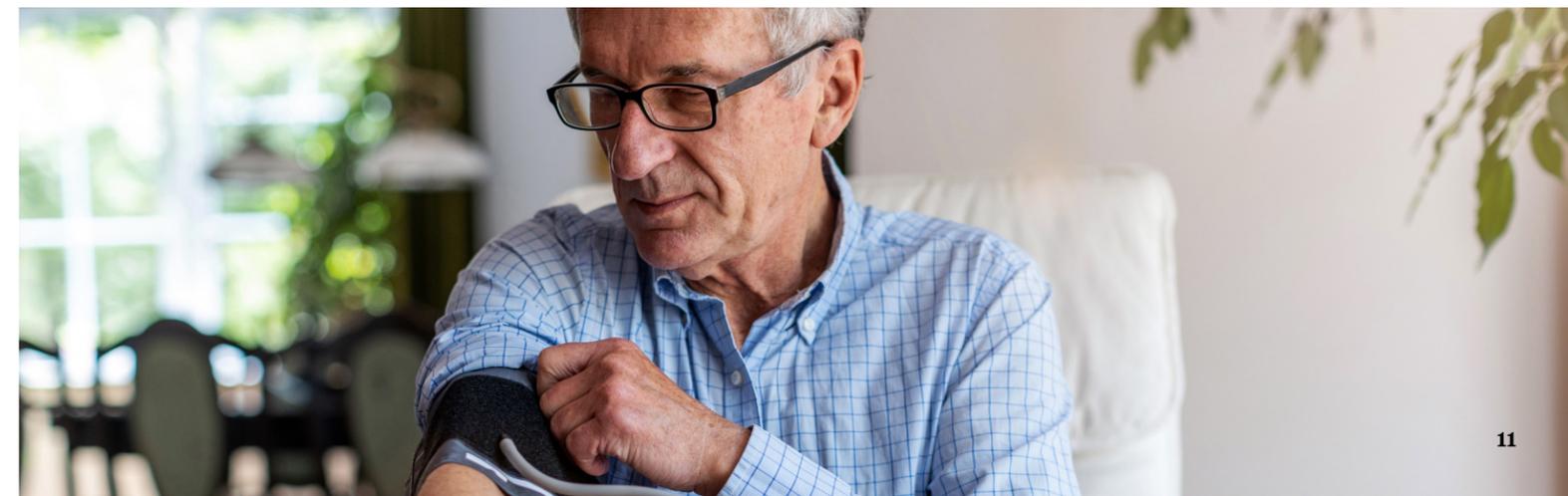
### A NEW APPROACH TO REMOTE PATIENT MONITORING

Another technology that HME providers have the opportunity to implement is remote patient monitoring. For example, RemetricHealth provides a fully integrated remote patient monitoring (RPM) solution that helps providers manage, track and monitor the conditions of their at-home patients.<sup>9</sup> **RemetricHealth helps improve outcomes for high-risk patients by monitoring symptoms, vital signs and . . . . . medication adherence.**



Providing simple, plug-and-play options for patients, they continue to innovate in the areas of video telehealth, symptom monitoring, patient education, biometric devices and more.<sup>9</sup>

**These examples illustrate not only the potential of patient engagement technology in the world of HME, but they can also inspire you in finding the optimal point of alignment between technology solutions and your business goals.**



## SOURCES

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