

Effective Webside Manner: What Does it Take?

Even when healthcare is delivered virtually, space still matters



Healthcare is personal and intimate, right? And the relationship between patients, families and clinicians requires trust, clear communication and accurate assessments? Absolutely. No wonder healthcare has long been regarded as a service that requires face-to-face, in-person interactions.

But that's changing, and fast. Thanks to the proliferation of virtual care platforms and cheap technology and smart phones, a big shift is underway. More and more, patients and healthcare organizations are choosing virtual video visits for services that in the past would have required being together in the same room.

This shift is happening because patients, accustomed to doing all sorts of activities from shopping to banking on their phones, have developed an appreciation for the convenience of virtual care. At the same time, healthcare administrators face mounting pressure to advance the Quadruple Aim: improve population health, deliver better patient experiences, manage costs and improve clinician experiences – factors that all point toward opportunities virtual care can support.

As a result, “websites manner” (the virtual equivalent of bedside manner) is a key capability for clinicians and health systems to develop. In fact, according to the results of a 2018 Deloitte survey, almost 25% of U.S. consumers have already had a virtual healthcare appointment, a strong indication that it’s a trend that’s quickly becoming mainstream. Especially for people in rural areas where healthcare resources are stretched thin or hundreds of miles away, a virtual visit can be the difference between receiving the care you need or going without.

TECHNOLOGY IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Developing and delivering an effective website manner requires a lot more thought than just putting a webcam and some random furniture in an unused space that might feel like a broom closet. That’s why Seth Starnier, Steelcase Health Advanced Explorations leader, and Jordan Smith, WorkSpace Futures design researcher, have been studying technology-enabled care closely for more than a year.

Here’s what they found: Of course, clinicians need a good internet connection and a quality webcam to do it right. But other essentials are often overlooked. Behaviors such as fidgeting, eye shifts and facial expressions may not be noticed during an in-person exam, but all get magnified onscreen and can be very off-putting to patients receiving virtual care.

Although virtual care gets transmitted via cyberspace, the physical healthcare space where participants are located is an important consideration — for both the patient and the clinician. Steelcase researchers uncovered compromising situations where spatial limitations presented very real obstacles to effective virtual care:

- A weekend camping adventure has produced an alarming rash. Poison ivy? Swimmer’s itch? Tick bite? You’re not sure. But you have important meetings at work you don’t want to miss. So you schedule a virtual care appointment to occur during a break in your busy day. Where will it happen? You know the doctor will want to see the rash. But the privacy enclaves at the office all have glass walls, and you sure don’t want to be Skyping with your doctor from inside a bathroom stall. You end up retreating to your car, the only place you can be sure of the visual and auditory privacy you need to make this an effective exam.
- You’re a clinician providing virtual care several days a week from home. You appreciate not always having to commute and getting away from the intensity of the clinic. You’ve been provided with a high-quality webcam, and you’ve moved a table and chair into the den. However, the lighting there makes you look washed out – exhausted even — and camera shifts show your kids’ toys in the background. Your patients, who have never met you before, feel uneasy about what they’re seeing and wonder if you’re really a professional they can trust.



To avoid scenarios like these, Steelcase Health researchers offer the following guidelines for creating effective, appealing spatial solutions for virtual care:

Be user-centered

Focus first on the needs of people; never let the technology pre-empt human considerations.

Be consistent

Optimize the background, lighting and acoustics to present the clinician well. Provide visual cues — furnishings, backgrounds, work-appropriate attire, etc. — that signal an extension of the quality people have come to expect in your brick-and-mortar facilities.

Make it versatile

Optimize the allotted space by making sure it can accommodate other work modes, too — documentation, focused work, one-on-one collaboration and rejuvenation, for example.

Make it convertible

Requirements can change quickly. Adaptable settings support different activities in different places as needed. For example, modular office walls and mobile furnishings are easily reconfigured on demand. And the SnapCab mobile pod Steelcase Health recently showed at NeoCon can be pushed from here to there — just plug in its power cord at the new destination and, presto, you're up and running.

No question, the foray into virtual care can be daunting. But done right, it can make care more accessible and convenient. That's good news for healthcare professionals, patients and employers who want to help their employees and families stay healthy with fewer hassles and downtime.

At Steelcase Health, we're working to support the technological evolution of healthcare experiences by helping systems and providers optimize webside manner and meeting a range of virtual care needs.

Featured Product



SnapCab Pods

© 1996 - 2019 Steelcase Inc. is the global leader in office furniture, interior architecture and space solutions for offices, hospitals and classrooms. Our furniture is inspired by innovative research in workspace design.