Database integration offers providers a centralized customer-service vehicle

Comprehensive data warehousing can streamline medical management and improve customer loyalty, satisfaction

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AS THE HEALTHCARE industry becomes more competitive, managed care providers are finding that they must become more customer-centric in order to survive. Providers who offer superior service to their customers and involve customers more deeply in care management will be able to effectively differentiate themselves from competitors in the future.

In order to build loyalty among existing customers and attract new prospects, many providers are turning to customer relationship management (CRM) initiatives. CRM involves understanding and meeting customer needs across all customer-facing functions, including sales, marketing, and customer service. According to the Gartner Group, managed care providers who have not thoroughly adopted CRM by the end of 2005 will not be competitive.

Customer knowledge is central to a successful CRM initiative. Without the ability to gather and analyze customer information, a managed care provider will never achieve the level of understanding necessary for building stronger relationships. Many providers purchase a wide array of reporting and customer care software packages in the name of CRM, but these solutions are useless without quality customer data.

The best way for a provider to create a repository of valuable customer information is to implement a data warehouse. These serve as a central store of customer data, drawing information from all channels and business units and making it accessible to employees across the enterprise.

GETTING YOUR DATA IN SHAPE
A provider certainly can get by with storing customer data in various data marts or databases, but an enterprise-wide data warehouse provides two big advantages: integrated data and better quality data. These two things are absolutely essential for a successful CRM initiative.

A data warehouse can incorporate customer data from all business units, operational areas, and customer-contact channels. This integration enables a provider to obtain a comprehensive view of each customer, which is very important for developing stronger customer relationships.

If data resides in various unconnected systems throughout the organization, it's difficult for a managed care provider to truly understand a customer's total relationship with the company or deliver a consistent service experience across all channels. For example, providers that col-

lect patient-supplied data about treatment and outcomes, but fail to integrate it with claims data, will have difficulty analyzing the effectiveness of patient-care management programs.

A thorough data-integration strategy also allows providers to collect data from new sources of customer information, such as customer service and support applications. As customer service becomes a differentiating factor for providers, it will be increasingly important for them to track all customer interactions in order to pinpoint areas for service improvement.

Though poor data quality has long plagued managed care providers, few have tackled the problem because of its complexity. Make no mistake—enterprises can choose to build a data warehouse without fixing data-quality problems, but they run the risk of ending up with a nearly useless implementation.

The primary data-quality problem facing providers is inconsistent data among, or even within, applications.

For example, the same physician might have several different ID numbers across the organization, depending upon which database or application is being used. And data-entry requirements can vary from application to application, leading to widely differing data formats and levels of data detail. These data-quality problems make it very difficult and inefficient for managed care providers to build an integrated repository of customer data. The growing popularity of CRM and the emerging requirements for information sharing outside the enterprise will bring data-quality issues to the forefront.

Fortunately, with the advent of HIPAA, now is the perfect time for organizations to tackle their data quality difficulties. HIPAA transaction standards will provide a starting point for data cleanup and will lead to a basic level of data consistency for all managed care providers. But HIPAA does not address all of the data-quality problems providers will need to solve in order to support CRM initiatives. Organizations that take the time to go beyond basic HIPAA compliance will be rewarded with data that supports better decision making and faster, more accurate responses to customer inquiries.

Collecting and analyzing the most complete data will allow providers to evaluate and refine interventions.

BUSINESS BENEFITS

Managed care providers who implement data warehouses will reap several important business benefits. First and foremost is the ability to offer faster and more responsive customer service. Expectations for customer service in the healthcare industry have risen as a result of advancements made in other industries, including retail and banking. Consumers want the same kind of convenience they experience when dealing with other types of businesses, including the ability to complete transactions via electronic channels.

One of the most important ways in which a data warehouse can improve customer service is through the ability to respond quickly to customer inquiries. Managed care providers are facing increasing pressure to move to a zero-latency environment, which supports instantaneous response to events and information. Ideally, a zero-latency environment would allow patients to verify benefits at the time of service or to immediately confirm a consumer's eligibility. Eventually, many providers could offer auto-adjudication, rendering claims decisions almost instantaneously. A high-performance data warehouse supplies the information that powers a zero-latency strategy.

Managed care providers also will need to offer customers self-service options, such as the ability to apply for coverage over the Web. A data warehouse is a critical component of an electronic-service environment because it integrates data from the electronic channel with data from other channels and sources. The Internet offers an excellent opportunity for providers to collect customer data, as well as share information.

Data warehouses also enable providers to improve their medical-management and patient-care management practices. These processes rely heavily on a provider's ability to analyze historical data, with the end goal of streamlining administrative processes and improving patient outcomes. Detailed, high-quality data is a necessity for patient stratification, which uses health status, risk assessment and historical cost and utilization data to develop patient segments. Patients then are assigned to interventions based on predefined algorithms. Ideally, a managed care provider has access to clinical data that can be used to track patients as they move through various intervention paths.

By collecting and analyzing the most complete data possible, providers will be better able to evaluate and refine interventions. In the end, improved medical management and patient care management will build customer loyalty by helping patients get the best care possible and by involving them in the decision-making process. **MHE**

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