



Will healthcare design ever catch up to medical innovation?

BY TYLER MINTZ

We live in the era where AI-powered robots that convert into human vehicles cruise down our city streets. Ghostly passengers half paying attention, listening to their daily podcasts on the latest Bluetooth-enabled wearable technology, simultaneously search the app store for a new mental health tool. While this scene is ubiquitous in major metropolitan areas, it may feel foreign to suburban or especially rural dwellers. If you're not from the city, don't be fooled. The 500 mbps fiber optics connected to your home to stream a children's TV show, the latest episode of *The Bachelor*, and two game consoles all at once are just as remarkable.

Health and wellness are top of mind to most in this world not only because of COVID-19, but because it's the beginning of a new year, and well...resolutions. 2020 brought a global pandemic that shook the foundation of our contemporary existence. Food and fitness trends are a dime a dozen and we've seen many come and go in the past decade. From intermittent fasting and the Whole30 diet to micro-dosing and yoga, our culture consumes every new health trend imaginable, waiting impatiently for the next.

We are obsessed with technology and self-improvement, for the better. Yet, when it comes to the medical world and healthcare, we see an aesthetic and overall usability score familiar to that of the 1980s. For decades, healthcare, visually speaking has been a patchwork of rebrands, product rollouts, mergers and acquisitions, openings and closings. At the forefront of the healthcare world, innovations, breakthroughs, medical journals, and forward progress paint an awkward paradox in stark contrast to the feeling we get while thinking of medicine.



Technology has disrupted most major CPG models. The gig economy has changed the service industry because of user-centric design. Big Tech has even changed the way some people order and receive their prescription medicine. With brands like Capsule or Ro Pharmacy, we can order our prescriptions while bingeing our favorite shows from the comfort of our bed. Some late adopters like CVS or Walgreens have adopted similar user experiences — only out of competitive necessity. Telehealth is on the rise, too. Once only an “added bonus” of bleeding-edge providers like Oscar, telehealth is now a pillar of the doctor/patient relationship. Sondermind has revolutionized the way we seek help from therapy during this pandemic using video conferencing. Many compliant conduits are popping up as acceptable ways to “meet” our doctors. Once an idea on the fringes, meeting healthcare workers virtually almost feels “normal.”

The internet is a tool that could be leveraged to level-set people’s access to leading healthcare. Regardless of demographics, geolocations, income levels, and racial inequities, top-line healthcare can be made available to all, online. You only need a steady internet connection or a cell phone, in some instances a camera. The result? In 5 to 10 years, healthcare services will primarily be delivered online and in-home, and less at offices, hospitals, care centers, and pharmacies.

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This is not the result that matters, though. Accessibility is the key thing that will result in better healthcare for all. If we reimagine the experience of managing our health to be an easier experience, seamless or satisfying through better design, people will be healthier at scale. *When will the industry start to look and act like the future healthcare consumers will soon demand?*

Some healthcare extensions have started to change and you may have noticed them in your social feeds. Disruptor brands like Harry’s or Casper are now being echoed by consumer-centric tech startups hyper-focused on specific elements of healthcare. Brands like [Rory](#), offering health products for women, are visually in line with trendy CBD-infused edibles like Lord Jones in its sophisticated design language and easy-to-use digital touchpoints.

Seamless user experiences consumers have come to expect while ordering their lunch on Uber Eats or DoorDash have been created by the medical testing company [Everlywell](#). Everlywell empowers consumers by allowing them to take at-home medical tests safely and securely, and send out for results. Their integrated, thoughtful user-experience design starts from the moment you order a test and maintains that throughout the user journey.

Two Expert Perspectives on Healthcare Design

Steven Heller, a writer and co-author of over 130 books on design and design culture, an AIGA Medalist, Art Directors Club Hall of Famer, founder and co-chair of the School of Visual Art's Designer as Entrepreneur MFA programs in NYC, weighed in on the subject. "I've looked at enough healthcare sites to know that I don't want to see experimental design. I want the facts and easy access. That said, there is a bland monotony that is very institutional and arguably feels safe and trusted," said Heller on the topic of underdesign in healthcare.



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We asked Steven what it would take for healthcare to become a true service industry? His response: "City MD and these urgent care facilities have shown how corporate plus people centricity can work in concert. They are also proving in this COVID age to be pretty necessary to the public. I would say, healthcare has to find a balance between community and industry. But with all the health conglomerates eating up healthcare and wellness, this is a difficult and interesting road to hoe."

[Workpath](#) is one example of a healthcare service-design innovator. They developed an API that enables medical systems to deploy health practitioners for in-home visits. Its effort is monumental on behalf of revolutionizing the medical paradigm. With Workpath's mass adoption, a doctor can come to you for a house call. This isn't a new idea, but it is a relatively new user experience with regard to seeing a doctor or being treated by a medical worker. Most people have only ever seen medical professionals in the confines of their offices, hospitals, or clinics.

Karin Soukup is the Founder and Chief Creative Officer of Sovereign Objects. She was previously a Managing Partner at COLLINS, a brand experience agency based in SF and NY selected as Ad Age's 2020 Design Agency of the Year. Karin has worked with companies such as Google, Robinhood, IDEO, Bose, and most recently Cora - a health and wellness company for women. We spoke with Karin Soukup about design and innovation in the healthcare world. "Healthcare is a regulated industry — and with good reason. This means that there are a lot of voices and variables that affect its ecosystem, evolution and impact. It also means that things just move more slowly — on everything from new policy to tech integrations — because it cuts across public, private and non-profit sectors. Precedence plays a role, because it's easier to do what has always been done than to do something different."

Karin goes on, "Why?"



**Customers tend to like things that are familiar
(and seem more trustworthy, for better or worse)
while businesses typically want to reduce the
introduction of unnecessary risk.**

The medical industry is building on decades of cultural associations we've hammered into people's psyche: suggesting that, for instance, a white + reductive aesthetic = we're healthy and clean and won't make you sick!"

When will design and technology start to disrupt the healthcare experience for good?

The painful clipboard-sized forms, drab reception rooms, long wait or hold times, and confusing paperwork we've become accustomed to all need to go away. Medical practitioners provide the most precise treatments in the world, yet trying to find their offices in the maze of hospital wayfinding can be infuriating. In other countries, healthcare is perceived to be "much better" than in the United States; our country ranked #15 on a 2020 report of countries with the most well-developed public healthcare.* More than 20,000 global citizens were interviewed for the study. The report assessed perceptions of 73 countries on 65 different metrics, but technology, user-experience design, and branding were not accounted for, shedding some light on human-centric factors that do matter but are often overlooked in the medical world. While it's people that medicine is trying to help, it is people the medical world often forgets to design for.

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In our correspondence with Soukup, she reminded us of earnest and sometimes unfortunate segmentations in the healthcare industry in the form of quantitative data — speaking volumes about the “whom” healthcare needs to be reimagined for and “why.” Soukup said “Take, for example, a September 2020 study by the Undeafed that indicated that only 50% of African-Americans were planning to get the COVID vaccine. Such reticence is less related to the increasing political divide and more rooted in the fact that, for a long time now, black

*<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/slideshows/countries-with-the-most-well-developed-public-health-care-system>

communities have seen lower standards and/or access to quality care. So who wouldn't be skeptical of brand signals suggestive of systems that have historically screwed you over? New visual languages may have a lot of runway here to indicate that something "new" — and hopefully more equitable — is afoot."

When will a team of user experience designers reimagine the complete healthcare experience; from brick and mortar to in-app experiences?

Innovation in medical technology has created implant devices that take the place of prescription medicine. There are now consumer-facing wearable stroke detectors, ingestible pill trackers for medication compliance, and even spray-on stem cell skin grafts. But when we call our doctor's office to track down medical records, a seemingly basic task, it can be impossible. Imagine a tech-enabled world in which you don't waste hours sitting, waiting for your scheduled doctor's appointment.

To stay competitive, healthcare companies, hospitals, and insurers must adopt the playbook of CPG companies: attract customers. Healthcare should become a true service industry focused on patients' needs, and not only on what benefits doctors or providers. Boomers and Gen Xers are the largest populations seeking medical help in the United States. Millennials are not far behind. With any good (Millennial) product comes the need for well-designed, thoughtful, inviting individualized experiences. These words are hardly used to describe any medical experience. The healthcare industry spends a stunning \$30 billion a year on advertising, therefore budget shouldn't pose a barrier. Beyond the trendy visual identities that come and go, healthcare is here to stay. So let's remake it, right. Finally.

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When asking her about examples from other sectors healthcare could learn from, Soukup serendipitously shared the same wrap-up sentiment we leaned into. "SpaceX, a breakout

competitor to the government agency, NASA, is perhaps an interesting case study. Here a rogue entrepreneur takes his transportation dreams to the next level; expanding his brand portfolio from future-facing automobiles into next-level spaceships. While Musk has a lot going for him, I would attribute many of the successes for SpaceX to JFK — the man who helped capture the imagination of the American public by turning the anxieties of the 1950s Space Race into the thrill of the Space Age. This simple mental shift set off a cultural revolution; inspiring new trends in fashion, media, art, and more. When I was MP at the brand agency COLLINS, we referenced this shift a lot to help clients see the value of story. It ignites a spark in people — in this case, tapping into the excitement of adventure! Of uncharted territory! Of new technologies! And of the vast mysteries of our galaxy! — to pave the way for truly significant change. That’s what healthcare needs: an engaging reframe that ignites cultural relevance.”



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Flying to outer space was once only imaginable if you were an astronaut for NASA. SpaceX changed this paradigm forever; flying the first commercial rocket to space and introducing the world to the idea of *Space Tourism*. There is a world in which healthcare can feel as good as turning your Nest dial. There is a healthcare system that can chase experience design trends like a new app’s personalized onboarding flow. Healthcare should be in the design spotlight, setting trends for other industries. Let’s set the bar high and reinvent the way healthcare is perceived through strategically driven good design. After all, soon people will be traveling to space just for the joy of an amazing experience.

