

This white paper explores the key benefits of using automated messages to send patients appointment reminders and the reasons why some small and medium-sized medical practices have not adopted this technology.

Limitations of Relying on Practice Staff to Make Appointment Reminder Calls

Most small and medium-sized medical practices still make appointment reminders the same way they have for decades. They rely on their front desk staff to call patients during office hours to remind them of upcoming appointments. Making reminders by phone has numerous challenges, including frequent busy signals, patients who don't answer the phone and don't have an answering machine, disconnected phone numbers, etc. In addition, staff members only make calls during weekday business hours.

Reminder calls made by a human agent are extremely time consuming and expensive. The medical office receptionist needs to find the patient's phone number, dial, wait for an answer, talk to the person who answers the phone (or leave a message on a machine), and note the result of the call. If no one answers the call and the answering machine doesn't pick up, the receptionist usually tries to call later in the day. Many of these appointment calls reach the patient's answering machine. How personal is it to leave a message on an answering machine?

Your Practice Can Save at Least 50 Cents Per Call By Using Automated Voice Messaging

While superior automated messaging solutions exist in the marketplace, few small and medium-sized practices have adopted them. By continuing to rely on inefficient, unreliable methods of delivering appointment reminders, these practices are paying the price in the form of higher no show rates.

Appointment reminders have been shown to be effective at reducing no show rates whether these reminders are delivered by mail, by phone or online. It's clear that all medical practices that offer appointments stand to benefit from providing appointment reminders. Not only will such practices realize the additional income from what would otherwise be a missed appointment, patients will appreciate receiving reminders.

According to the Medical Group Management Association, the industry average no show rate is 20%. For a practice that sees 1,000 patients a month with an average no show rate of 20%, where one no show represents \$75 in lost revenue, this equals \$15,000 of lost revenue a month or \$180,000 a year. The costs are even higher when you consider the labor costs involved in making the reminder calls. It takes 150 minutes to make 50 reminder calls a day, assuming an average call takes 3 minutes. Assuming your front desk receptionist earns \$15 an hour, it costs \$750 a month to make 1,000 reminder calls or 75 cents a call. Your practice can save 50 cents or greater per call by using automated voice messaging.

Benefits of Automated Reminders

The benefits of automated reminders go beyond cost savings. The key benefits of automated reminder messages include:

- Consistent, reliable delivery of reminders at scheduled times, including weekends, evenings and holidays.
- Eliminates the problem of staff forgetting to make calls or running out of time to make reminder calls.

Assuming your front desk receptionist earns \$15 an hour, it costs \$750 a month to make 1,000 reminder calls or 75 cents a call. Your practice can save at least 50 cents per call by using automated voice messaging.

- Messages are scripted, so they remain consistent in tone and content.
- Two-way automated messages capture patient responses and are a superior method of tracking reminder outcomes, including appointment confirmations, busy signals, message delivered but not responded to, number of contact attempts, and so forth.
- Messages are delivered in minutes rather than hours. This makes it far easier to switch from reactive to proactive messaging.

The Five Obstacles to the Adoption of Automated Reminders

Webley's research team interviewed a random sample of family practices across the country in April 2009 to uncover the reasons why practices hadn't adopted automated reminders.

Misperception 1: Automated voice reminders are too impersonal

Webley MD messages are recorded by professional voice talent. Our voice message sound quality is second to none. Messages can be personalized with the recipient's name and the date and time of the appointment.

Misperception 2: Automated calls are too confusing for patients

Webley MD has developed simple, clear scripts for a variety of occasions that can be delivered in English and several foreign languages. At the conclusion of each message, the recipient has the option to replay the message as many times as desired. Webley MD also provides patients who require additional assistance with the option of being connected to your front desk or answering service. To increase message effectiveness, practices have the option of sending patients multiple reminder messages by phone or e-mail.

Misperception 3: My patients won't like automated reminders

Patients generally greatly appreciate appointment reminders. The main reason that people miss their medical appointments is that they simply forget them. Automated calls are efficient, convenient, inexpensive, and convey the necessary information to the recipient. Overall patient satisfaction with your practice should increase because your practice is providing a useful service and the automated reminders will decrease call volume during office hours, decreasing wait times and busy signals. Keep in mind that not all patients prefer to receive phone reminders. Offering to send reminders by e-mail in addition to or in lieu of phone reminders may increase patient satisfaction.

Misperception 4: Automated call services are too much of a hassle

The opposite is true with Webley MD Reminders where the goals are to increase practice efficiency and to relieve your overburdened front desk staff. During the set up phase, your Webley MD practice advisor will work with your staff to integrate Webley MD reminders with your practice management system and provide staff training. After the set up phase, Webley MD Reminders essentially runs by itself. Post-implementation support is also provided.

Misconception 5: My practice can't afford an automated reminders service

Webley MD is a subscriber-based, hosted application service provider. This means that there is no equipment or software to buy. Our automated reminders service typically pays for itself not in a few months but in less than a week.

For a two doctor practice that sees 180 patients a week with the industry average no show rate of 20% and an average of \$75 in revenue per patient visit, it takes just 8 additional patients (patients who would have otherwise not kept their appointments had they not received a Webley MD reminder) to cover the cost of the one-time Webley MD set up fees and a full month of Webley MD's subscription service for two physicians.

Can your practice afford to forgo the additional income generated by Webley MD Reminders?

Conclusion

Automated appointment reminders save time, increase staff productivity, provide greater convenience to patients and have better message deliverability rates than manual phone calls. In addition, automated reminders have been shown to be effective and readily accepted by patients. Such systems are affordable and cost effective for most medical practices.

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