

Smaller medical practices have been slow to use newer forms of electronic communication that have been widely adopted by patients. The proliferation of communication channels and changing patient communication preferences increase the challenges medical practices face when communicating with patients. In this white paper, we examine how provider-patient communications can be improved through multi-channel messaging.

Changing patient communication preferences

Does your practice have a hard time tracking down your patients? Think of all the patients who move, change phone numbers or change jobs and forget to inform your practice. An increasingly geographically mobile population has become increasingly difficult to reach. Poor patient-provider communications are costly and frustrating for providers and patients alike.

Although patient communication preferences have changed over time, the vast majority of physicians haven't changed their communication practices. While most patients regularly use e-mail, only about 25% of physicians use e-mail as a means to communicate with patients and these tend to be physicians at larger organizations.

Webley surveyed family physicians in April and May 2009, and found that 63% of the 938 respondents reported that their practice staff calls patients to remind them of upcoming appointments. The survey also found that larger practices were much more likely to use automated reminders than smaller practices. In other words, smaller practices are more likely to be using costly, labor intensive methods of communicating with their patients.

While practices assume that patients prefer phone calls from their staff, most haven't directly asked their patients about their communication preferences. Most patients appreciate reminders, regardless of whether reminders take the form of a live call, a pre-recorded voice message or e-mail.

By allowing your patients to choose how they'd prefer to be contacted and using multiple communication channels, your practice is much more likely to reach patients. In addition, the additional convenience this provides will set your practice apart from others and increase patient satisfaction.

Patients want to receive electronic reminders

Patients show a strong interest in communicating electronically with their doctors. Most larger businesses offer consumers the convenience of electronic communications (e.g., live online chat, e-mail) but the health care sector has been slow to adopt electronic communications despite patient interest.

- A Cyber Dialogue Survey found that 14.8 million online adults were likely to switch doctors to gain web access and 11.9 million would switch to a doctor that communicates via e-mail.
- A Medem study of internet users found that 1/3 of respondents would be more likely to choose a physician who offered electronic communications over one that did not.

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The reality is that no communication method works best for every patient and each method has its own advantages and disadvantages. Some patients are too busy to call your office during regular business hours and some check their e-mail account only once or twice a week. To improve communications, a multi-channel approach that takes into account patient preferences is clearly superior.

	Key Advantages	Key Disadvantages
Staff calls patient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal • Two-way, interactive • Real-time, immediate response if someone answers the phone • Universal, most people have a phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming • Expensive, labor intensive • May require multiple calls to get through • 80–90% of people aren't home during the day, so calls tend to reach answering machine
Automated calls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never forgets to call • Detailed, accurate call reports • Fast, may be able to capture responses • Consistent tone and message • May offer real-time, two-way interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived as impersonal • People are more likely to hang up on a computer
Mail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written record • Accommodates longer messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expensive • Uncertainty whether message was received • Difficult to change content • Takes days for message to be received • One-way, non-interactive
E-mail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick relay of messages • Bulk messaging capabilities • Inexpensive • Easy to track 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy for patient to overlook • Not all patients check e-mail regularly • May be seen as spam and blocked by ISPs

Better results with multi-channel and new methods of messaging

Numerous studies have found that telephone reminders increase kept appointment rates. Sending multiple reminders significantly increases kept appointment rates when compared to sending single reminders.

- A study conducted at a pediatric clinic in New York City found that children who received the postcard and telephone reminders were 2.3 times more likely to keep an appointment than the control, no reminder group, while those who received either a telephone reminder or postcard reminder were 1.75 times more likely to keep an appointment than the control group (PEDIATRICS, Vol. 106 No. 4 Supplement, pp. 919-923).
- At Kaiser Permanente, immunization rates were highest for children in the group that received a letter followed by a telephone message (58% immunized) compared to those that received a letter alone (44% immunized) or a telephone message alone (44% immunized) (PEDIATRICS Vol. 101 No. 4, p. e3).

The benefits of multi-channel patient-provider messaging solutions

With the right messaging solution, medical practices are able to send messages at a lower cost, increase practice efficiency and boost patient satisfaction. Webley MD Reminders offers a patient centered, automated solution that provides patients with communication choices and helps the practice streamline and manage these messages. With more effective, multi-channel automated reminder messages, practices typically are able to cover the cost of the Webley MD subscription and one-time, set-up fees in a week's time.

Good for patients. Webley MD's personalized, pre-recorded voice messages are recorded by top professional voice talent. Multiple languages are available. Webley MD also offers the option of e-mail and voice reminders and convenient, easy appointment confirmations. Unlike human operators, Webley MD delivers every call with the consistency and is ready to work weekends and evenings.

Good for practice staff. Webley MD frees your staff from routine, time consuming reminder calls and provides them with more time to focus on patient care. Tracking reminder campaign results takes just minutes with detailed campaign reporting. The practice receives technical support as well as a dedicated practice advisor who handles integration of Webley MD Reminders with the existing practice management system and provides training on how to transition to a new, improved way to communicate with patients.

Conclusion

Most patients welcome messages from their healthcare provider. Since every communication channel has its advantages and disadvantages and patients differ in terms of how they'd like to be reached, the optimal solution allows for multi-channel messaging. Trusted by medical practices across the country for over ten years, Webley MD offers a suite of multichannel, automated messaging solutions designed for medical practices, including appointment reminders and after hours answering services.

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