A continued consumer shift toward digital communication and the improved functionality and security of SMS programs have made text messaging an essential tool for increasing provider-patient engagement.

10 Reasons to Text Your Patients

**ADJUSTING TO CONSUMER TRENDS**

1. **Landlines are becoming a thing of the past.**
   Have you noticed how many of your friends and family members have gotten rid of their home phone service? 39% of American households are wireless-only, meaning that they no longer have access to landlines in the home.¹
   This figure has more than doubled since 2007, underlining how rapidly Americans have replaced their landlines with mobile phone service. Why are we doing it? In many cases, it’s a budget-driven decision, as Americans look to save on monthly bills by only paying for mobile phone service. It also eliminates confusion for friends and family, as they can use a single number for getting in touch with that individual. 39% of American households are wireless-only.

   How does the move from landlines increase the opportunity for text? As more patients move to a mobile device as their primary phone number, they're more likely to be accepting of text communications on these devices as well. Wireless plans are also adjusting to those who are leaving their landlines by allowing for more unlimited text plans, meaning your patients will not incur a charge when receiving an important text from their provider.

2. **We’re outnumbered by cell phones.**
   Wireless penetration in the U.S. now stands at 102%.² How is that possible? That figure comes from the number of active mobile devices in the country divided by our total population, and it means that there are 1.02 mobile phones in use for every American. As mobile phone ownership increases, so does the ability of those devices to send and receive text messages. Older versions of these devices are constantly being replaced with newer, text-friendly models, increasing the viability of text messages as a provider-patient engagement channel.
3. The “age gap” in technology usage continues to shrink.
Although slower to adopt technology than their children and other younger Americans, older Americans are beginning to see the value of digital communication in their engagement with their providers. In a survey of over 1,100 Americans, 82% of Baby Boomers said that communication from a healthcare professional via text message, email or voicemail is as helpful, if not more helpful than in-person or phone conversations.³ That's not far from the 85% figure reported across all age groups. It seems that Boomers and seniors have joined the younger demographics in realizing the convenience and flexibility that digital technology adds to provider-patient communication. The same technologies older Americans are using to interact with family and friends are now seen as relevant in a healthcare context.

4. Text attracts attention and response better than email.
More than 98% of text messages are read by consumers, compared to only 20% of all email.⁴ Today's email inboxes are often so full of messages from retailers, service providers and more that even non-marketing messages often struggle to break through the clutter. In contrast, only 1 in 50 texts go unread, meaning a text message from a provider is much more likely to engage a patient than an email.

Beyond simply attracting attention, text also outperforms email in terms of driving timely response. While the average consumer takes only 90 seconds to respond to a text message, emails can take much longer to generate a response. As a provider using email to communicate with patients, there's only a 56% chance of getting a response to your email within one hour, and only 89% of these messages are responded to within 24 hours. Those who do not respond within a day are taking much later to reply, making the overall average for email response time come out to 2.5 days.⁵ For appointment confirmations, wellness/preventive reminders and other time-sensitive communications, text is the more trustworthy of these two channels for driving patient response.

5. Text volume is running circles around voice calls.
From the modern-day patient’s perspective, it’s often much more convenient to text with another person than to place a phone call. Consumer data supports this idea, as text volume is nearly five times that of voice calls. A Nielsen Customer Value Metrics report shows that the average American sends and receives a total of 764 text messages per month, compared to 164 phone calls.⁶ Text message volume also outpaces the actual number of voice minutes used every month (644), further illustrating the dominance of text in our daily communication. While the phone call is still a prominent part of our day-to-day interaction, the growth of text suggests opportunities to use both channels as part of a multi-touch patient engagement strategy.
PROVIDER AND PATIENT-FRIENDLY FUNCTIONALITY

6. Every mobile phone can receive a text.

Smartphone ownership continues to grow, but it’s important to remember that even basic mobile (or “feature”) phones can receive a text. Conversely, not all feature phones can receive an email message. The amount of advertising out there for smartphones would lead you to believe that you are in a tiny minority if you have a “regular” cell phone, but this is simply not the case. Only 56% of American adults are smartphone owners, and the age demographics of smartphone ownership show sharp differences among age groups. While 81% of adults aged 25-34 own a smartphone, that ownership level declines as age increases. At the 65+ age group, smartphone ownership only stands at 18%.

7. Opt-in is easier than ever.

A past concern about text messaging’s effectiveness as a provider-patient communication tool was difficulty in obtaining permission to send texts to patients. Vendors have worked to eliminate this barrier to text adoption among patients by offering multiple methods for opt-in. Vendors who offer an automated voice notification service may be able to contact patients via a phone call and allow them to press a button to opt-in their mobile phone. If it’s a landline that is receiving the call, patients can work through a simple IVR prompt to enter their mobile phone number for future text messages.

Alternatives to this opt-in process include two patient-initiated methods. They can opt-in by sending their provider’s unique organization key (typically a small string of characters that can easily be identified with the provider) to the vendor’s approved six-digit short code. If the patient has a QR code reader on their smartphone, they can also simply scan a QR code to opt in. By making the process easier and more convenient, opt-in has become less of a barrier to text message adoption among patients.

8. Text enables two-way communication.

Now that leading vendors offer an opportunity for patients to text back their providers, text messaging has taken on an elevated value in provider-patient engagement. In the case of an appointment confirmation, patients can respond YES or NO to let the staff know they will be at their appointment or need to be rescheduled for a later date.

This interactivity also lends itself to more proactive communications from providers who are making sure patients are receiving the proper preventive care, such as annual exams, check-ups and seasonal wellness measures. A simple text about the importance of an exam can prompt patients to reply YES to let the staff know they would like to be scheduled.
In the case of appointment reminders, since patients can quickly and easily let staff know when they need to be rescheduled, the staff can offer that schedule opening to another high-priority or “wait list” patient. This is a wonderful way to improve service and build loyalty among those patients who are waiting for an appointment time. Though they may already be on the schedule 4-6 weeks out, getting them into the office sooner shows that you’re taking a proactive approach to their care…and it’s something those patients will not forget.

Build loyalty among those patients who are waiting for an appointment time.

10. Carrier errors are no longer a problem.
It’s estimated that as much as 10% of text messages are undeliverable due to carrier errors and similar issues beyond providers’ and messaging vendors’ control. In response to this carrier error possibility, some notifications vendors have developed a “fallback” feature to ensure messages reach their intended recipients. That means that when a text message is undeliverable to a patient due to a carrier error, the vendor is notified of that undelivered message and can deliver an automated voice phone call to the patient instead. The “fallback” feature reduces risk for providers who may be hesitant to offer text messaging as a primary means of between-visit patient communication.

SOURCES: