Building Patient Loyalty Through Recall Notifications

Today's top performing practices place equal emphasis on attracting new patients and keeping the ones they currently serve. This white paper shows how recall efforts can help practices retain patients.

THE CHALLENGE

In the business world, they say that attracting a new customer costs five times more than simply keeping an existing one. Does that same concept apply to healthcare? In today's increasingly competitive environment, it's probably not far off. While many dental and orthodontic practices have increased marketing budgets in recent years, there's a critical need for making sure a portion of those dollars are focused on patient retention.

Why? The majority of practices are challenged by the disappearance of their "lost" patients - patients who have fallen off of regular treatment schedules for whatever reason. A recent West survey found that 56% of practices consider getting lost patients back in for their next visit to be a problem for their practice. 64% of practices claim that more than 10% of their patients have not been in for an appointment in over a year, and for a quarter of practices, more than 20% of their patients haven't been back into the practice in the last 12 months. With average appointment revenues ranging between $100-300 per visit, practices are missing out on what should be some of their best opportunities to serve patients.

Too much time is spent chasing new patients rather than experiencing the benefits of the provider-patient relationships that have been built through exceptional patient care and service. Today's top performing practices are those that have created a healthy marketing balance between patient attraction and patient retention. Keeping existing patients while adding new ones to the family is a proven formula for practice growth.
PREPARING FOR PATIENT RETENTION

Despite the industry’s shared strain around lost patients, many practices are not equipped to proactively attack the issue and re‐engage these patients. Of the surveyed practices who consider lost patients to be a problem, 39% consider lack of staff time to be the primary reason they are unable to contact patients. As one practice noted in their survey response, “sometimes they just get lost in the hustle of things.” Among the day-in, day-out tasks an office staff is challenged by each day, routine patient communications often fall to the bottom of the priority list. Any practice not prepared from a staffing and technology standpoint risks this same experience in patient retention.

Lack of financial resources was also mentioned by practices that are battling the problem of lost patients, and this reason was cited by 11% of respondents. Concerns over rising postage and printing costs or the staff FTE hours required to fulfill patient outreach campaigns causes many practices to be overly conservative in their patient retention communication. This indicates a lack of awareness around the variety of communication strategies available for recall notifications and other patient engagement. While some of these strategies involve a technology investment, there is often an immediate return on that investment from the new appointment revenue these technologies generate. A willingness to invest in communication technology can return huge dividends right away.

IS MAIL REALLY MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

Survey data suggests that it’s not. After dividing the respondents into two groups (those who do struggle with lost patients and those who do not), there is a similar prevalence of practices mailing postcards or letters to patients to get them to reappoint. In fact, the practices who do consider lost patients to be a problem are actually slightly more likely to be mailing patients then those who do not consider it an issue (61% vs. 57%). Are practices wasting money by relying on the mail in conjunction with or in place of other communication channels such as phone calls, emails, etc.? With per piece mail costs frequently reported at over $1 across practices of all sizes, these dollars would be better spent on other patient engagement channels.

BUILDING TRUST INTO PROVIDER‐PATIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Shifting focus from why practices struggle with retention notifications, it’s also important to understand why this communication makes such a positive impact on practice‐patient relationships. A West study of over 2,200 patients found that 83% of Americans admit to not following treatment plans exactly as prescribed. This includes attending regularly scheduled exams and preventive appointments, such as oral cancer screenings. Patients lead busy lives, and forgetting an appointment (even after confirming a reminder) is sometimes a consequence of that hectic pace.

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Source: West, “A Fragile Nation in Poor Health”
When left to self-manage their upcoming visits, patients often forget to contact the practice when it’s time for their next preventive care appointment or when they need to reschedule after a recent no-show. Even though it sometimes seems that more patients forget than remember, patients do want to come to appointments. Many patients simply need a quick prompt from the staff to reschedule and get back into the practice.

In addition to re-engaging patients in their care, a proactive approach to patient recall and retention notifications also contributes to a greater sense of trust in the provider-patient relationship. The same West study found that 42% of people would be more likely to follow their provider’s treatment plans if they received encouragement between visits to stay on course. This encouragement can include voicemail, email or text reminders from providers reminding them to do something specific like schedule a next appointment. While any practice would agree that this communication is helpful, the trick is finding the means to connect with patients without overextending staff resources and marketing budgets.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL RECALL NOTIFICATIONS

Now that you know why recall notifications are important to the practice and how they can positively impact your patients, here are three delivery recommendations to drive optimal results:

1. Partner with a patient communication vendor. Any practice wanting to get their patient engagement strategy right can’t do it alone. There are too many important messages to communicate for staff to handle manually, and trying to mail these communications requires too much postage and paper. Seek out a vendor who can recommend best practices in scripting, delivery times and more to help you make the most of these patient retention efforts.

2. Communicate with patients via their preferred channel. Many patients prefer to receive a text message, while others would prefer an email. While patients of older generations are increasingly adopting these communication methods, many in these age groups still prefer a phone call. Are you accommodating all of these preferences in your current communication strategy for recalls and any other notifications? If not, you could be sacrificing responses.

3. Make sure your notifications are properly paced. If you’re engaging in a recall campaign where many patients will be called at once to schedule their next appointment, it’s important to make sure you are properly staffed to handle incoming response. Practices see as high as a 25% response rate from outgoing recall notifications, and these incoming responses are from patients who are ready to schedule or have questions for the staff. Both scenarios indicate a re-engaged patient, and it’s important to put your best foot forward when they are ready to interact with the practice.

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