

Survey Confirms Automated Phone Messages as Optimal Appointment Reminder Method



During a recent survey, 2,931 healthcare practices were asked about reminding their patients of upcoming appointments. Topics included how effectively these reminders prevent no-shows, how they are delivered (if at all), and how that reminder delivery method impacts other areas of the practice (long distance charges, double-booking, etc.). Survey responses also shed light on three of the most common questions practices of all sizes have about appointment reminders:

For the practice not sold on reminders at all:
Are appointment reminders truly effective at preventing patient no-shows?

For the practice not sure of how to deliver them:
Are phone calls more effective than mailers at preventing patient no-shows?

For the practice lacking staff time to manually remind patients:
How much time is saved by automating appointment reminder phone calls?

ARE APPOINTMENT REMINDERS TRULY EFFECTIVE AT PREVENTING PATIENT NO-SHOWS?

While the majority of practices surveyed are reminding patients of appointments in some form, it's worth examining why practices that choose not to send these reminders have made that choice. Could there be any truth to the notion that appointment reminders have an overstated impact on no-show rates? As expected, the survey found that whether or not a practice reminds patients of appointments is directly correlated to that practice's no-show rate. Responses show that 46.7% of practices who do not send appointment reminders have an average no-show rate of over 10%. In contrast, no-show rates of over 10% can only be found in 27.6% of practices who deliver appointment reminders to their patients. See Figure 1.

Practices with no-show rate over 10%

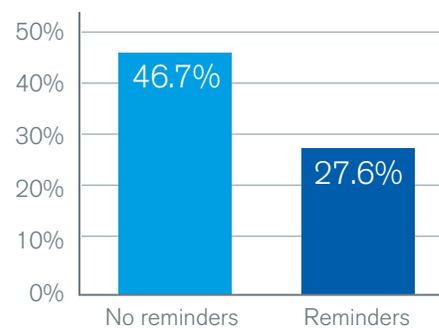


Figure 1

For the practice that is undecided about whether it should remind patients of appointments, patient satisfaction and the impact on long-term relationships should also certainly be considered. 34.3% of practices have received complaints from patients who were not reminded of an upcoming appointment.

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Since statistics strongly link appointment reminders to lowered no-show rates, it's worth noting that many practices feel like staff time constraints leave no time for this task. 74.5% of practices who do not deliver appointment reminders cite a lack of staff time as one of the reasons. For three-quarters of these respondents, an appointment reminder solution that requires minimal staff involvement could play a vital role in reducing patient no-show rates.

ARE PHONE CALLS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN MAILERS AT PREVENTING PATIENT NO-SHOWS?

For practices that see the value of appointment reminders, the challenge is often finding the most effective medium for delivering them. While e-mail and SMS technologies are growing in popularity, the two most common delivery methods continue to be telephone and direct mail (letters and/or postcards). Average no-show rates of more than 10% occur in 52.1% of practices that rely on mailed reminders – an even greater percentage than practices that send no reminders at all! Manual and automated phone calls combined to significantly outperform mailers, with only 26.5% of practices reporting phone delivery methods having a no-show rate of over 10%. See Figure 2.

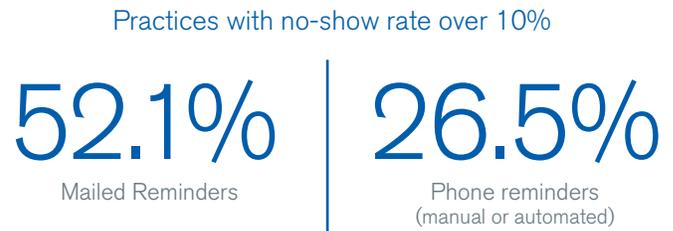


Figure 2

There are two key characteristics about phone calls that allow them to outperform mailers in an appointment reminder role. First is the immediacy of a phone reminder. Phone reminders are often delivered as late as one day before a scheduled appointment, while mail delivery requires several days of lead time. Widening the time gap between the reminder and the appointment makes patients much more likely to forget about the appointment. A second point to consider is how each method allows practices to handle undeliverable messages. When a phone reminder reaches a disconnected or inaccurate number, the practice knows immediately and can quickly seek other ways to reach the patient. Undeliverable mail may not be returned to the practice until after a patient fails to show up for that appointment, leaving no opportunity for a secondary reminder contact attempt.

HOW MUCH TIME IS SAVED BY AUTOMATING APPOINTMENT REMINDER PHONE CALLS?

When deciding whether or not to automate reminder phone calls, many practices wonder just how much time the automation will save. After all, there is still a small degree of manual work involved in generating a list of patients to be contacted and determining what messages they will hear. However, this process appears to have a minimal impact on staff time, since survey respondents who have adopted an automated process report spending far less time on appointment reminders than manual callers. 27.7% of practices that manually deliver appointment reminders spend multiple hours on the process each day. 87.3% of automated reminder practices handle an entire day's worth of reminders in less than one hour. See Figure 3.



Figure 3

Do these extra hours spent on manual reminders have a negative impact on the practice? 26.8% of manual calling practices responded that they do not have sufficient time to deliver the reminders. When focusing solely on practices who see over 100 patients per day, that figure jumps to 39.7%. This can mean that as practices grow and serve more patients, they are often unable to retain the staff necessary to continue manual reminder calls.

In many cases, practices that have staff members deliver appointment reminder calls say that those staff members could provide greater value to the practice by focusing on other tasks. 72.2% of those practices agree that personnel can be best utilized in other areas. See Figure 4. Practices that relieve staff members of reminder calls greatly benefit from having them handle other office activities, tend to in-office patients, give more attention to marketing, etc.



Figure 4