Orthodontic Practice Significantly Reduces No-Shows with Automated Messaging

- Remarkable decrease in no-shows — 61% fewer in the first month
- Increase in production — the practice has grown 200% since automating appointment communication
- Saved postage expenses

Introduction

Controlling missed appointments in an orthodontic practice is critical to avoid scheduling inefficiencies and lost revenue. Practices that do not provide any appointment reminders often find themselves operating at high no-show rates, ultimately affecting their bottom line. Most practices that need to address this problem face challenges finding the time and personnel necessary to make reminders.

Rekow & Stull Orthodontics, a private two-orthodontist practice in Fort Thomas, KY, was experiencing no-show related problems. With an average patient volume of 75 appointments per day, three days a week, the practice did not have a reminder strategy in place, and the missed appointments were becoming problematic. Handling no-shows was taking staff time away from more valuable office work, and the practice was wasting money on missed appointments.

In 2000, amidst other technology upgrades in the practice, Rekow & Stull Orthodontics purchased Orthotrac practice management software, allowing them to see for the first time how no-shows were negatively affecting the practice. In 2001, the practice added automated messaging from TeleVox with the hopes of reducing no-shows and finding a convenient, effective reminder solution for both staff and patients.

Objective

To decrease the number of appointment no-shows and enhance patient service through the use of an automated telephone messaging technology. The system should provide appointment reminders to patients, resulting in fewer missed appointments and a reduction in related operating expenses.

Methods

Rekow & Stull Orthodontics began incorporating TeleVox automated appointment reminders for all patients in December of 2001, and the process has proven effective. Automated calls go to patients scheduled for appointments, patients due for recall visits and patients who fail to keep scheduled appointments. Each day, the TeleVox system extracts the appropriate data from the practice’s Orthotrac software and automatically makes calls to patients based on the parameters set by the office staff. Appointment reminder calls are made to patients on the day before their scheduled visit. For Monday appointments, patients receive a call on Sunday afternoon. The procedure for recall patients is slightly different. Those patients are called at the beginning of the month in which they are due for an appointment. The practice also utilizes automated messaging to contact patients who no-show, or fail to keep their scheduled appointment. These calls are made once a week, at the beginning of the week following the missed appointment.
The practice sets the TeleVox system to make all calls between the hours of 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm daily, ensuring that most patients are home to receive the call and reducing the number of messages left on answering machines. Each message is personalized with the patient’s name, date, time and type of appointment. Patients receiving a reminder call from Rekow & Stull are able to respond using touch-tone keys to confirm the appointment, request a reschedule or repeat the message. Patients who opt to reschedule are expected to call the office to do so. At the end of each day’s calling session, a detailed calling report is automatically printed for office staff to review.

Results

Rekow & Stull Orthodontics has seen a remarkable decrease in appointment no-shows since implementing automated messaging. In addition to fewer no-shows the practice has regained lost revenue and saved a considerable amount of staff time. Prior to using TeleVox, patients received an appointment card at the time of scheduling and were not called for a follow-up reminder. Practice staff did not realize that there was a problem with missed appointments until they evaluated how much time and expense was being dedicated to handling no-shows. At that time, the practice’s policy was to send patient no-shows a postcard. This required manually writing out a postcard as well as time spent handling the rescheduling process. Additional factors to consider were costs associated with printing and mailing the cards. Missed appointments became such a drain on the practice that all of one staff member’s spare time was dedicated to handling no-shows. Moreover, the practice was expending overhead costs but losing revenue for each missed appointment. Depending on the procedure, a missed appointment can cost a practice $250 to $1000, and some patients were consistent no-shows, even missing rescheduled appointments.

Upon implementation of automated messaging in December 2001, Rekow & Stull realized an immediate decrease in no-shows of more than 61% in the first month. The system continued to consistently reduce no-shows during its first full year of use, with an average monthly reduction of 50%. Three years later, after four years of automated reminders, the system has managed to further reduce no-shows. Current no-show rates for the practice are now an average of 61% less than in 2001.

The switch to the automated reminder process has reduced no-shows, saved staff time and eliminated overhead costs for Rekow & Stull. The practice conservatively estimates a return on its investment within 3 months of the purchase.

Benefits

The benefits of automated messaging are not limited to fewer no-shows and gains in time and money. Both staff and patients have come to rely on the system and enjoy the convenience it affords. Staff members report less stress related to dealing with no-shows and more efficient and predictable workdays, as well as a decrease in the number of calls made to the front desk by patients wanting to check their appointment times.
Because the staff has consistently used automated calls for all appointment reminders, including those for new patients, patients have become very accustomed to the technology. The practice’s evidence of patient acceptance and satisfaction lies not in what patients say, but in what they don’t say. “Our patients are so spoiled that they only comment to us when they have missed our call for some reason,” says Sherree Ingram, the practice’s Treatment Coordinator. “That is how much they have come to rely on it.”

Ingram also notes the efficiencies in the practice’s treatment schedule since using TeleVox. “The savings of time and money is substantial,” she says. When you consider the cost of chair time reserved for an appointment, the cost of re-booking that appointment again and again is a waste of time and very costly. With automated messaging, we don’t have to spend as much staff time rescheduling and we lose less overhead. Ultimately, patient treatment time is actually decreased when appointments are kept and treatment can progress as planned. Patients now see the value of each appointment.”

Finally, the practice considers automated messaging to be a great patient service tool and one of the reasons that Rekow & Stull is regarded as a successful, patient-centric practice. In fact, incorporating TeleVox and other technology has contributed to the practice’s growth and its ability to absorb that growth. Since 1999, Rekow & Stull has grown nearly 200%.