Should you be texting your patients? What should you say? When should you say it? This whitepaper explains why SMS/text messaging has become increasingly popular in provider-patient communication and provides some strategies for making text messaging an effective part of your own routine patient communication.
Text messaging has exploded. And while that’s a “no kidding” statement for anyone who has recently attended a sporting event, enjoyed a concert or spent time within 20 feet of a teenager, SMS technology is only now beginning to prove its value in a healthcare setting. For providers eager to improve communication and engage with their patients, three common questions arise concerning adding SMS to a patient outreach strategy:

- What types of communications are best sent via text message?
- When is the optimal time to send those messages?
- Why should I be texting my patients at all??

Let’s start with that last one.

**WHY should I be texting?**

This is perhaps the most important question to answer for your organization. Unless there’s an audience for text messaging among your own patients, it doesn’t matter what types of messages you send or when you send them. Do your patients text? The statistics say they do!

228 million Americans are mobile phone users, and 72% of U.S. adults regularly send and receive text messages. On an individual level, text usage has grown 80% each year per subscriber. If you averaged 100 texts per month last year, you’ll probably be around 180 this year, 320 the next year and so on. Experts predict that we’ll collectively send and receive a total of six trillion text messages in 2014. Six TRILLION!

Contrary to popular belief, texting isn’t only for younger generations. In the last several years, it’s grown among ALL age groups. As high as age 45, Americans send and receive more text messages than phone calls on a monthly basis. 2011 Nielsen data shows that even members of the 65+ age group send and receive an average of over 40 texts per month. So providers that serve a high percentage of elderly patients may still have an opportunity to engage through text messages. Patients in that age group are texting at least once a day on average!

While those figures illustrate the overall growth of text, the majority of these text communications are personal (family, friends, etc.) or work-related. What percentage of patients would actually want texts from your office for appointment reminders, account alerts or other reasons? TeleVox surveyed patients at a large southeastern multi-specialty clinic about their preferred methods of provider-patient communication and gained this text messaging insight:

- 92% of patients surveyed currently use text messaging

And of those patients who text…

- 81% want appointment confirmations via text
- 43% want them via automated phone call
- 41% want them via email
- 28% want them via calls from staff members

For the most part, patients who text regularly want their appointment confirmations that way as well. Also, note that these figures add up to well over 100%. Respondents could choose more than one way to receive an appointment confirmation, and most of them did. This suggests that patients want to be reached through multiple communication channels. We’ll discuss this subject later in the whitepaper.

Another reason to text your patients? Leading technologies allow two-way communication via text, and there’s a major difference between simply sending a message to a patient and actually getting their response on whether they would like to be scheduled, will be attending their upcoming visit, etc. In the case of appointment-related messages, “YES” or “NO” responses from patients are essential to keeping the appointment schedule full. Advanced warning of a missed appointment allows a provider to fill that opening with another patient who needs to be seen. Of the patients surveyed, 69% say that they are most likely to respond to text confirmation messages versus other communication methods.

Everyone is texting, and it’s the preferred communication channel for patient populations overall. But what applications are there for SMS in your everyday communications?
WHAT types of communications should I text?

SMS can be a valuable communication tool throughout the patient lifecycle. Pre-visit communications, post-visit account alerts and ongoing wellness outreach can all be delivered efficiently and effectively via text message.

Appointment Confirmations
As mentioned earlier, text messages are great for not only reminding a patient of their appointment but also giving them a convenient way to let you know if they're planning to attend.

Account Alerts
Text can be used to notify patients when a bill has been mailed to their residence or is available for payment through your online portal. The message can provide a URL that directs patients to your website, include a phone number they can call to discuss the account or offer any other information that helps them resolve outstanding balances more quickly and conveniently.

Preventive Care Reminders
Providers are continually challenged to find effective ways to get patients back in for annual exams and other recall visits. Patients can easily reply “YES” to let you they want to be scheduled. A brief follow-up call from the staff gets them on the schedule, creating an additional revenue opportunity for you and making sure patients are receiving proper ongoing care.

Patient Surveys
Quick, one-question surveys are perfect for tracking improvement over time. Response to a question as simple as “Were you satisfied with your appointment today?” with “YES/NO” response options can be compiled and viewed by days, weeks, months, providers, locations – however you want to slice and dice it. What opportunities for “YES/NO” patient feedback would be valuable to your organization?

WHEN do I text?

Well, it depends.

Your best chance for success in connecting with patients is combining text with other traditional outreach methods to create a multichannel approach. An organization that wants to make sure patients don’t forget their upcoming appointment might consider this series of outreach messages that incorporates phone, email and text communications:

Example Appointment Confirmation Strategy

| 2 Weeks | Confirm appointment with an email 2 weeks before the scheduled appointment.  
|         | Why? Sending an email two weeks in advance allows the patient to add the appointment to their electronic calendar. |
| 2 Days  | 2 days out, follow up with an automated call.  
|         | Why? Obtaining a confirmation from the patient serves as another reminder for them and also enables you to make any necessary schedule changes. |
| 1 Day   | Send a confirmation text message 1 day before the scheduled appointment.  
|         | Why? For patients that didn’t respond to the confirmation phone call, a confirmation text message provides a convenient way for patients to respond to let you know if they will be keeping their appointment. This text confirmation can also be sent in place of the confirmation call for those patients that indicate a preference for text. |
| 2-3 Hours | Send a text message reminder just hours before the appointment.  
|         | Why? People are busy! A quick last-minute reminder is helpful and effective. |
Getting Started

Once you’ve selected a vendor to deliver these texts on your behalf, there are two things that need to happen before you can begin texting your patients:

1. You need their cell phone number.
   Many practices have made obtaining cell phone numbers a regular part of the sign-in process, and if you’re not doing this today, texting notifications is just another of the many reasons you should be collecting patients’ mobile numbers. That cell number can be in any of the phone number fields in your PMS/EMR. Leading vendors can detect which numbers are associated with mobile phones and deliver the text accordingly.

2. Patients must opt-in to receive texts from you.
   It’s as simple as texting your practice’s unique keyword to a short code (a six-digit number unique to the vendor’s texting program), and it only takes a few seconds of the patient’s time. This is for the mutual protection of both your patients and your practice. By taking the action of opting-in, patients are confirming that they are aware of what kinds of messages they will be receiving from the practice, including appointment confirmations, account alerts or other care-related information.

8 Ways to Increase Text Adoption Among Patients

Here are eight ideas to help you promote text messaging and obtain the necessary information from each patient. Using any of these methods can help you get your text messaging program off to a great start!

1. Use your staff
   Train your staff members to ask each patient for their mobile phone number and to update that information in your practice management or scheduling software. An ideal time to do this is during check-in or check-out. Staff can then encourage the patient to text your unique keyword to the short code to begin receiving text messages from your office. You could also train your scheduling staff to have this discussion with patients when scheduling new or returning visits.

2. Update your sign-in sheet
   A great way to collect cell phone numbers is to add a field to your sign-in sheet. Then your staff can add that information into your scheduling system. Make sure your staff members tell the patient to text your keyword to the short code to complete the sign-up process for text messaging.

3. Put it “on hold”
   Information about the text messaging program can be added to your on-hold message so that patients can learn about it while they are waiting to speak with a member of your staff. Sample on-hold message: “Wouldn’t it be convenient to get appointment reminders, account and/or care-related information via text message? We’ve got it! Speak with us about it when we return to the line.”

4. Use the mail
   Why not advertise the availability of text messaging in any regular mailings to your patients, such as invoices or newsletters? Include a message like this: “We now offer convenient appointment reminders, account and/or care-related information via text message! If you’d like to sign up for this service, make sure we have your cell phone number on file and text <your keyword> to <short code> to get started.”

5. Make the call
   If you’re currently using an automated system to deliver appointment reminder calls or other messages, add the following to the end of your messages to encourage your patients to sign up for text messaging: “If you’d like to receive text message appointment reminders in the future, make sure we have your cell phone number on file and text <your keyword> to <short code> now.”
6. Send an email
   Emailing your patients to notify them of your new text messaging capability can be a great way to increase adoption. Text messaging vendors can provide you with some suggested wording for this email.

7. Utilize counter cards
   Leading vendors can provide you with counter cards and/or other materials to place at your check-in or check-out areas where they are likely to capture patients’ attention. The cards provide simple instructions for signing up for text messaging.

8. Update your website
   Make sure your website is updated to announce the availability of text messaging. Many vendors can provide you with a banner ad to be placed on your site.