Top Challenges for Medical Practices

Results and Observations from the 2015 Practice Readiness Survey

A December 2014 survey of 471 healthcare professionals asked participants to name the common problems of practice management that they anticipated to be most challenging to their practice in 2015. The questions covered four major areas of successful practice management, including practice marketing, appointment notifications, post-visit communication and ongoing engagement with patients.

This report shows a breakdown of responses for each area, along with additional observations around the top-ranking challenges in each category.
Thinking about practice marketing, which of these common problems do you feel will be most challenging to your practice in 2015?

1. Need more patient volume for revenue growth
   - Top answer for: Cardiology, Internal Medicine, Ophthalmology, Urology
   
   More appointment volume means more appointment revenue, but as many respondents indicated, generating those appointments is easier said than done. Practices with successful appointment growth strategies focus on both the current patient base as well as other potential patients in the community. Effective practice websites are a must for attracting today’s Google-searching healthcare consumer, as roughly 4 in 5 patients search for health information online. A greater focus on communicating preventive care opportunities to current patients can drive increased volume as well.

2. Lack of awareness about additional services
   - Top answer for: Dermatology, OB/GYN, Pediatrics

   For practices who struggle with this challenge, an important question to answer is this: “Am I promoting my practice’s additional services in every patient touch point?” In-office signage, email newsletters, on-hold messages and the website are just several of the opportunities a practice has to create exposure for these services. Better results from these efforts will lead to increased appointment volume and potentially better patient outcomes.

3. Dropped calls when patients are on hold
   - Top answer for: Family Practice

   Leaving a patient on hold for too long can result in a lost appointment opportunity, especially when it’s from a patient calling to schedule his or her first appointment with the practice. For practices that haven’t done so already, implementing an on-hold messaging program can be a good way to keep patients entertained until the staff can field their call. Studies have shown that a combination of music and information during an on-hold message makes callers perceive their wait time to be shorter than it actually is.

Additional Challenges Listed:
- Not enough time to implement a marketing plan
- Cost of marketing through multiple avenues
- How to best use social media channels
- Competition from big health systems with deep marketing pockets

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Thinking about appointment notifications, which of these common problems do you feel will be most challenging to your practice in 2015?

1. **Lost revenue from broken appointments**
   - **Top answer for:** Dermatology, Family Practice, Internal Medicine, OB/GYN, Ophthalmology, Urology

   Nearly half of survey respondents chose this as their #1 challenge, and it was also the leading response for subsets of respondents in numerous medical specialties. Depending on the size of the practice and appointment volume, no-shows can cost a practice thousands of dollars per week. Appointment reminder strategies that include multiple reminders through multiple communication channels (phone, text, etc.) have proven successful in keeping broken appointments to a minimum.

2. **Low response to recall efforts**
   - **Top answer for:** Cardiology, Pediatrics

   Recall communications have long proven their value in a medical practice, as relying on patients to remember and schedule these follow-up visits has historically delivered poor results. Aside from being an additional revenue opportunity for the practice, these visits are also critical to the treatment and ongoing health of patients. A focus on consistently connecting with patients about recall visits will play a large role in making sure these appointments happen on schedule.

3. **Not enough staff time to call patients**
   - Related to #2 above, connecting with patients over the phone has outperformed other contact methods in terms of no-show prevention and appointment scheduling. The trick for practices that chose this as their greatest challenge is finding staff bandwidth to support manual outreach efforts and balancing the communication with other high-priority tasks in the practice. More and more organizations have adopted an automated solution to deliver routine communications, including 55% of MGMA’s “better performing” practices. These solutions ensure that important communications are delivered on a consistent basis.

**Additional Challenges Listed:**
- Keeping updated patient contact information
- Need a way to reach patients via text message
- Not connecting with enough patients with our reminder phone calls
Thinking about post-visit communication with patients, which of these common problems do you feel will be most challenging to your practice in 2015?

1. Limited staff to focus on A/R accounts
2. Low recovery rates from A/R accounts
3. Inefficient communication of test results

**Limited staff to focus on A/R accounts**
Staff time limitations were a recurring theme throughout the Practice Readiness Survey. Specific to past due balances, many organizations have adopted a blended strategy of automated and manual outreach in which staff members or agents focus on high-dollar accounts or those with a lower propensity to pay. Automated notifications are delivered to early-stage, low balance and higher propensity to pay accounts, covering the “low hanging fruit” while offloading these contacts from the to-do list of manual calling teams.

**Low recovery rates from A/R accounts**
Respondents in many specialties listed this as their top challenge over staff bandwidth concerns. Much work has been done in recent years to establish best practices around the scripting of communications to accounts throughout various stages of the A/R cycle. It is recommended to experiment with scripting of outreach to past due accounts to make sure patients are aware of convenient payment options, clear up any confusion about amounts owed and build a sense of urgency into the need for action. Alternatively, partnering with vendors who have established best practices in A/R communication scripting can potentially be a more successful approach.

**Inefficient communication of test results**
The two most challenging factors here are heavy inbound phone traffic and creating “phone tag” between providers and patients. Inbound phone traffic often occurs when anxious patients call the practice to learn test results before those results are available. Practices often spend valuable time fielding these requests that distract from other important tasks. Since results are not left on answering machines or voicemail, phone tag between the staff and patients in hopes of a live conversation can be a challenge as well. Practices have cited success in providing patients with self-driven online access to their results as a means of overcoming these challenges.

**Additional Challenges Listed:**
- Increasing functionality and usage of our patient portal
- Following up to gauge patient satisfaction with their visit
- High volume of patient follow-up calls
Thinking about ongoing engagement with patients, which of these common problems do you feel will be most challenging to your practice in 2015?

1. Leveraging communication to attest for Meaningful Use
   Top answer for: Dermatology, Internal Medicine, Ophthalmology
   Survey respondents who chose this option are likely as challenged by proof of communication as the actual communication itself. Adoption of certified communication solutions can help practices meet Meaningful Use objectives by not only handling delivery of patient notifications and messages but also providing detailed reporting on the results of those communication attempts. And beyond simply meeting Meaningful Use communication requirements, practices can use these solutions to deliver higher quality care and generate additional appointment revenue.

2. Identifying and reactivating non-compliant patients
   Top answer for: Family Practice, Urology
   Re-engaging patients in their care was the top challenge for roughly a quarter of survey respondents. The ability to identify and connect with these “lost” patients not only impacts their ongoing health but also has major ramifications from an appointment volume and revenue generation standpoint for the practice. The questions are often “How do we find the patients with the most critical need for care?” and “Once identified, how do we effectively and efficiently connect with those patients to schedule their next visit?”

3. Inconsistent patient accountability for preventive care
   Top answer for: OB/GYN, Pediatrics
   The solution for practices that face this common challenge starts with an analysis of patient education efforts. What is being communicated to patients to remind them of the importance of recurring screenings, exams, etc.? Underutilized educational tools include the practice website, phone calls to patients, emails, in-office materials and more. What staff or financial resources are available to invest in these educational communications? How could the success of preventive care promotional efforts best be measured?

Additional Challenges Listed:
- Keeping updated contact information for patients
- Getting patients to complete tasks that are required of them between visits
- Obtaining positive feedback from satisfied patients