Does your medical practice text?

Critical reasons you need to communicate with patients via text messaging

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Introduction

Once considered a luxury, the mobile phone is now a necessity for daily, hourly and minute-by-minute communication. This is particularly true for healthcare professionals. Many of them, like the patients they treat, keep on-the-go schedules that place the landline phone somewhere between inconvenient and obsolete.

Yet even in a world of mandatory mobility, speaking directly can be time-consuming and cumbersome. It is a widespread belief that explains why the Short Message Service (SMS), also known as text messaging, is gaining favor as our preferred means of communication.

"Texting is so much faster than speaking, and to be honest, we accomplish so much more in a few texts than we would in a conversation," Cleveland resident Martha Neff told USA Today. [1]

Text messaging is quick, convenient and cost-effective. Physicians and administrators are wise to embrace the technology as they work to maintain existing revenue streams, create new ones and stay connected to people whose health they monitor. Most mobile users are never far from their smartphones or tablet PCs.

Tomi Ahonen, the authority on mobile according to Forbes[2], said in November 2011 that any company whose advertising agency lacked a mobile plan should "get a new agency."[3]

Similarly, healthcare practices operate as businesses, although patients often fail to view them as such.

And with any business, communication between the service provider and the customer is crucial. SMS hits the mark better than any other digital option, including calling a mobile phone or sending email. There's no guarantee the recipient of a phone call picks up, gets the voice message or calls back.

The TIME Mobility Poll[4] surveyed 5,000 people from eight countries and discovered 22% of respondents screen most of their calls. And, they typically respond with a text.

Between text and email, the former is a vastly superior option. Ahonen offered this statistic while advising that every business should have a mobile plan: A text message, on average, is opened in four minutes. An email, by comparison, is first read 48 hours after delivery.

Furthermore, the mobile phone, because it rapidly retrieves information, is somewhat of a vice for users. They cannot disconnect from their devices.

A 2011 study in the Journal of Personal and Ubiquitous Computing presented evidence that smartphone use is "habit-forming."[5] The study's subjects, on average, checked their phones 34 times each day out of habit or compulsion.

"Each time you get an (electronic notification), it's a small jolt, a positive feedback that you're an important person. It's a little bit of an addiction in that way," Loren Frank, a neuroscientist at the University of California San Francisco, told CNN.com.[6]

So why should healthcare professionals make SMS messaging work for them? The short answer: Failure to do so affects a practice's bottom line.

No-shows hurt cash flow

The most valuable asset physicians have to offer their patients is time. It is not a disposable commodity. Time lost is money lost, and neither is recoverable. Nonetheless, patients routinely miss scheduled appointments. As explained below, the problem can cost upwards of $150,000. It's a devastating financial hit for a small- or medium-sized practice.

Four "no-shows" a day isn't uncommon for a practice; the national no-show rate average ranges from 5 to 7%, according to the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA).[7] The $150 value for a typical appointment is also common. Based on a 5-day work week and a 48-week work schedule, it's possible to lose $144,000. Add nearly $10,000 in labor costs, and a practice's total loss surpasses $150,000.[8]

No-shows also set off a chain reaction of unwanted scenarios. Waiting time for other patients increases. Staff efficiency decreases. Dollars devoted to operational costs and damage to the physician-patient relationship can't be overlooked either.

"I do think patient no-shows can be a tremendous disruption to practices… Regardless of the reason, it's a great hassle," Christine Mayo, vice president of operations for San Jose-based MRI/CT imaging center PremierScan, told DiagnosticImaging.com.[9]

SMS provides a fast and easy method for sending medical and administrative alerts to patients, which, in turn, enables staff members to use their time more productively. Practices can quickly fill an available appointment that results from a no-show or last-minute cancellation. Likewise, texting allows the practice to receive patient responses in the same manner.

Financial ramifications aside, SMS is a useful tool to help patients maintain their health, or return to it. SMS provides the figurative tap on the shoulder without being intrusive.

A 2012 review in the Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association offers evidence that electronic reminders – particularly SMS reminders – are effective in the short term (six months).[10] Electronic reminders, the review noted, "appear to be easily integrated into patients' lives. As such, this seems to be a simple intervention for both patient and professional for enhancing medication adherence."

Comparing texting to talking

For years, it has been necessary that physicians know their patients' eating and exercise habits. Communication habits have become equally important. One of several surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for its Internet & American Life Project found that 83% of American adults age 18 and older own a mobile phone. Seventy-three percent of them send and receive text messages.[11]

Among adult cell phone owners who text:

» 31% prefer to be reached via SMS rather than talking

» SMS users send and receive an average of 41.5 messages per day

» 55% of mobile phone users averaging 50-plus texts daily prefer SMS to voice call

» Young adults (age 18 to 24) average 109.5 texts daily, or nearly 3,300 messages a month

» The daily text average for 18- to 29-year-olds is 87.7, followed by 30- to 49-year-olds (27.0), 50- to 64-year-olds (11.4) and those 65 and older (4.7)

The research also shows that demographics play a significant role in SMS use, which represents an important consideration for practices determining how best to adopt text-based patient communication. For example:

» Men average 40.9 texts sent and received daily; women average 42.0

» African Americans average 70.1 texts, followed by Hispanics (48.9) and Whites (31.2)

» Daily texts range from 58.7 in homes with an annual income of less than $30,000 to 31.9 in homes with an annual income of $75,000-plus

Additional proof exists that talking on the phone has taken a back seat to texting. The duration of an average voice call dropped precipitously from 2006 to 2010, according to the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association (CTIA), a non-profit organization representing the U.S. wireless industry.

According to CTIA's report[12], an average local call in 2006 lasted 3.03 minutes. Four years later, the average call was completed in 1.79 minutes.

Connecting with tomorrow's adults

Teenagers are driving the text message revolution. Seventy-seven percent of 12- to 17-year-olds have a cell phone; 75% of all teens text. Practices that succeed in communicating with today's teens via text increase the likelihood of developing a long-term relationship well into the patient's adult years.

With permission from her teen patients' parents, Dr. Natasha Burgert, a pediatrician in Kansas City, Mo., uses SMS to connect with the adolescents she treats. She sends reminders about taking medicine and asks how a prescription is working. She even offers encouragement before a big exam at school.

"I do as much as I can to get it on their phones, because that is what they live and die for," Burgert told the New York Times.[13]

Burgert's strategy is based on the fact that 63% of teens use SMS as their primary means of daily communication. There isn't an alternative that compares, whether it's:

- » Calling by cell phone (39%)
- » Face-to-face socializing after school (35%)
- » Social network messaging (29%)
- » Instant messaging (22%)
- » Talking on a landline (19%)
- » Using email (6%)

If one of Burgert's patients is any indication, the doctor's decision to communicate in a way teens feel most comfortable is working.

"I feel more attached to Dr. Natasha this way," 16-year-old Marie said. "It's kind of cool. It's direct. I don't have to go through the office ladies. And I like having another adult who is safe to go to."

The easiest way for healthcare professionals to text

Clearly text messaging is a communication tool healthcare practices should be using to engage and inform their patients. But if your only exposure to text messaging is the frustration of hitting tiny buttons on a cellphone keypad or mistakenly hitting the wrong letters on your smartphone's touchscreen, there is an easier and more efficient way to communicate with patients via text. And chances are good that you may already have the capability in place.

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