
The Essential Guide to Using Web Chat in Healthcare



A publication of



INTRODUCTION

Technology has revolutionized the way we communicate with one another -- whether it's text messages, e-mails, web chats or video conferencing -- we now have the ability to connect with different people in a multitude of ways. Banks, insurance companies and even retail stores have integrated these communication tools into their everyday businesses to connect with their customers. However, **healthcare** is one industry that has lagged behind in the widespread adoption of these new communication methods.

This has made it hard for healthcare providers to connect with their patients in easy and meaningful ways outside of a physical visit. Utilizing different types of communication methods can have a variety of benefits for both the patient and the provider, and can have a sizeable impact on the healthcare industry as a whole.

In this eBook, we will focus specifically on utilizing **web chat** in a healthcare setting, the impact chat can have on healthcare and some key things you need to consider when implementing web chat. Enjoy!

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UTILIZING WEB CHAT IN A HEALTHCARE SETTING

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THE NURSE CALL CENTER

Nurse Triage Call Centers are utilized by hospitals and clinics and play a crucial role in population health management. Triage nurses refer patients to the appropriate level of care, reduce unnecessary ER visits and decrease patient readmissions, all of which help to lower medical costs.



Triage nurses have a very difficult job-- providing patients with accurate and reliable medical advice over the phone. On top of that, triage nurses must rely solely on the patient's verbal descriptions of their condition. In the article, "Consistency of Triage Decisions by Call Center Nurses," Dr. Shira Belman explains that information provided by the caller—an untrained observer—presents a challenge to the nurse's communication skills, with total reliance on verbal communication skills.

“The caller may not know enough to share the most pertinent and critical symptoms, or may not recognize what is normal or abnormal.”

Many triage nurses find that symptom-based calls are among the most difficult to triage and the most common. Triage nurses follow best-practice, well established protocols to assess and advise these types of calls; however if there is any doubt, the patient is advised to present at a healthcare facility.



Triage nurses must ask a lot of questions in order to obtain enough information to adequately advise the caller, which can be very time consuming and potentially confusing to the patient.



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The triage nurse asks an average of 12 questions before making a triage decision.

But what if the caller could start their triage in a web chat and then securely send an image to the nurse and avoid that long list of questions? Integrating the use of images and web chat into the triage nurse protocols allow the nurse to communicate with the caller more effectively and efficiently to ultimately reduce uncertainty, improve the accuracy of nurses' care recommendation, and reduce unnecessary visits to healthcare facilities.

How does this integrate into the call center workflow?

The process can start the same: the caller contacts the call center via telephone, and after a few introductory questions, the nurse can decide whether or not an image would be helpful in order to give the best care advice. Then, the nurse can send the caller a secure link via SMS (Short Messaging Service, commonly known as a text) to launch a secure and HIPAA-compliant chat. This is a crucial step in the process because standard text messaging is not HIPAA-compliant and cannot be used to discuss patient health information. Next, the caller simply uses his or her smartphone to take a photo of the condition and send it to the nurse from within that secure chat. The nurse can view the image while still on the phone with the caller and make a more informed triage decision.



Nurse sends SMS to caller with a link to a secure chat session.

Caller takes a photo of condition and sends to nurse through encrypted and secure connection.

The nurse can visualize the caller's condition.

Triage nurse makes a faster, more accurate triage decision.

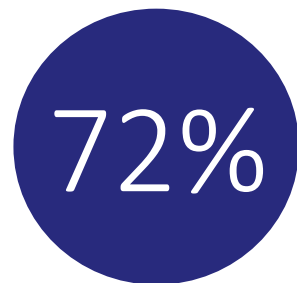
The nurse can even save the image to the patient's medical record, if that is part of the triage protocol. Given how common nurse triage phone calls are, this is an important breakthrough in highly scalable telehealth, and could lead to a decrease in inappropriate admissions to hospitals and clinics.

PATIENT SCHEDULING

We've all experienced it. The anguish of waiting on hold for what seems like forever, only to be transferred to another call agent and start all over again. Or the loss of privacy when trying to schedule an appointment for a sensitive condition while at work or in public. Don't you wish you could have avoided all of that and just scheduled your appointment online? Yeah, we do too. We can help.



of people consider live chat to be a useful business tool.



of patients want to book, change or cancel appointments online.

While a few healthcare organizations have started to offer online scheduling, most patients are still forced to do it the old fashioned way: over the phone. But online chat scheduling can be extremely beneficial for both the patient and the healthcare system. We think online chat is faster, more convenient and more efficient for everyone.

It can take an average of
5 minutes
to make an appointment
via telephone¹.

30 seconds.
(or more)
The average wait time
to connect with a
scheduler¹.

However, in order to get the most efficiency out of your web chat, it should enable real time communication between the patient and call agent. Recently, the US Department of Veterans Affairs has implemented a new online scheduling system, in which veterans use an application and list their preferred appointment times and an agent reviews the request and responds as quickly as possible². However, the interaction between the patient and scheduler is not in real time and can often take a lot of back-and-forth time and effort to get an appointment scheduled. Using *live* web chat is crucial because real time interaction with a scheduling agent can significantly reduce the time and hassle of scheduling an appointment.



Solution Spotlight

HealthEast Care System is located in St. Paul, Minnesota, with four hospitals and multiple clinics and outpatient services spread throughout the Twin Cities metro area. Six months ago, HealthEast added web chat as a way for patients to schedule appointments and get general questions answered. Contact center agents report that the chat feature allows them to be much more efficient when scheduling. And patients love it too—HealthEast is averaging nearly 1,000 chats a month!



Home ▶ Contact HealthEast ▶ Care Connection

HealthEast Care Connection

HealthEast Care Connection gives you easy access to HealthEast services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Just call **651-326-CARE (2273)** or [click here to chat with Care Connection](#).

Whether you want to find a new doctor, need to speak to a nurse about an illness or injury, are looking for a class, or want to be connected to any of HealthEast's services, we are just a phone call away.

General information

- HealthEast programs and services
- Community resources
- Customer service concerns
- Appointment requests for select programs

Physician information

Looking for a new doctor or specialist? We can let you know about area doctors, including their:

- Medical specialty
- Board certification
- Clinic location
- Phone number

Nurse triage

An experienced registered nurse is available to provide you with the information you need to make informed decisions about your health.

651-326-CARE (2273)

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Interpreter lines

Hmong - 612-235-4861
Karen - 612-235-4864
Spanish - 612-235-4863
[Other languages](#)

THE PATIENT PORTAL

Patient portals are designed to keep patients informed, engaged and to give them easy access to their health information. However, according to a systematic review of 46 studies conducted over 22 years, it has become evident that the portals themselves don't necessarily improve health outcomes or reduce costs.³ While many factors may be hindering the success of the patient portal, it is clear that communication both on and off of the patient's portal is crucial to encourage patients to be more active in their care.

Web chat can enrich the patient portal by allowing patients to access their providers from a place and with a technology they are already familiar with.

Web chat in a patient portal has the potential to transform the patient



portal into a communication hub where patients can ask questions about test results, prescription refills, appointments or general health concerns – and get real-time answers. Allowing patients to get their questions answered quickly,

securely and accurately can help increase compliance, resolve issues before they turn into an ER visit and most of all, give the patient peace of mind.

CHAPTER

2

ASSESSING THE IMPACT

PATIENT ENGAGEMENT

For years, doctors have been trying to get their patients more involved and engaged in their care. Not surprisingly, more engaged patients often have better health outcomes, which is a benefit to both the patient and our health system, especially as Stage II Meaningful Use requirements start to take effect. However, healthcare organizations don't always provide their patients with easy ways to become more involved in their care.

Web chat fosters an increased level of patient engagement as it allows patients access to a provider in the way that works best for them.

Whether it is chatting to schedule their appointment online or chatting with a nurse about a medical question, if you enable patients to communicate quicker, easier, and more efficiently, involvement in their care will likely increase as well.



PATIENT SATISFACTION

Happy patients are oftentimes the healthiest patients as well. If a patient feels empowered and more connected with their healthcare providers, chances are they will be more inclined to follow through with their post-discharge instructions or communicate with their doctor if something doesn't feel right. In most industries, experience is everything—going out to eat at a restaurant or shopping in a store — and success is driven by giving people the best possible experience. However, somewhere amidst the fast-paced, hectic and confusing healthcare environment, the consistent drive to provide a good experience has often been lost.

Giving patients the ability to connect with their providers —how and when they want to—will help restore the type of experience people desire from their healthcare providers. People of all ages utilize web chat to communicate across different industries. In fact, 62% of US online adults prefer to use web chat as their primary communication channel for service.⁴ Each generational cohort's preferred channel of interaction has changed over the last ten years, and that trend will continue. Web chat enables healthcare organizations to support this shift and can help increase patient satisfaction scores for responsiveness, experience and access to care.



REDUCE READMISSIONS

25 billion dollars.

The amount the United States health care system spends on preventable hospital readmissions every year⁵.

Readmissions are very costly for both the healthcare system and the patient. While there are many factors that result in a readmission to the hospital, lack of care coordination and poor communication between providers are leading factors associated with high readmission rates. Web chat can help reduce inappropriate readmissions because it can increase patient engagement and timely interaction. Web chat is often easier and more efficient than other modes of communication, which gives patients a way to communicate with their providers when and where it works best for them. Making it fast and easy for patients to reach their providers and get questions answered early can result in more favorable health outcomes, reduce miscommunication, and therefore reduce readmission rates significantly.

CHAPTER

3

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS WHEN USING WEB CHAT

SECURE

Patient privacy and security is a key factor in every aspect of our healthcare system. Therefore, when implementing web chat in a healthcare setting, it is crucial to make sure the platform you select meets all standard security regulations. It is important for any web chat platform you choose to be HIPAA-compliant and encrypt all sessions end-to-end. Additionally, the web chat platform should have the ability to log and archive all exchanges and transactions for consistent audit trails. It should go without saying, but ensuring that a session really ends when it says it does (anyone remember calling into a phone conference bridge when the previous call was still taking place?) and that access to the session logs can be controlled are important items to consider when deploying web chat in your healthcare organization.



SCALABLE

The web chat platform you select should be scalable, both in terms of the number of users it can support, and in the features and modalities of communication it offers. Your chat should have the ability to perform functions such as:

1. **Handling multiple chats.** A call center agent or nurse should have the ability to process multiple web chats at a time. This compares favorably with telephonic interaction, where you can only handle one call at a time.
2. **Escalation.** The web chat platform should enable agents to transition between different communication mediums. For example, it should be pretty easy for a scheduling agent to send a medical form to the patient using chat. Or for a triage nurse to go from a chat to an audio session or phone call by the click of a button.
3. **Share desktops.** Having the ability for users to share desktops is a very valuable capability of web chat. This can be useful when explaining a patient's lab results or discussing something on the patient's electronic medical record.

The versatility of web chat allows for rich and flexible communications between patients and providers, something you'll want to do at scale.

COST EFFECTIVE

We've been hearing a lot about the rising costs of healthcare lately, so finding a web chat platform that offers high functionality for a low price can seem tricky. Make sure you do your research before you committing to a platform. There are many different options to consider, but it's worth focusing on cloud-based platforms. Cloud-based communication platforms tend to be a more cost effective option through eliminating capital expenditures and lowering acquisition costs.

In addition to being cost-effective to deliver and deploy, the functions and capabilities of secure web chat can have an outsized impact on reducing other costs within the healthcare system. Increasing patient access through web chat and making it easy for a patient to engage and ask questions can help reduce noncompliance, increase the level of medication adherence among those with chronic conditions, avoid unnecessary readmissions, and foster more accountable care.



OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

Operational efficiency is crucial in healthcare where providers are under pressure to keep costs down while also providing high quality care. Web chat usage can significantly improve operational efficiency in a variety of ways. First, web chat allows healthcare organizations to use lower cost resources to serve as the front end to the health systems to help navigate patients to the appropriate channel. It's critical in your planning for web chat deployment to determine who in the organization will be available to receive and process these incoming chats. We've seen great success in using call center agents



when a call center exists in the organization- in effect transforming that capability into a multi-channel contact and patient-engagement center. In addition, giving agents the ability to process and schedule appointments using chat can improve capacity and throughput for a given number

of agents. In comparison with the traditional telephonic system, where an agent can only communicate with one person at a time, web chat can significantly improve operational capacity and efficiency.

WORKFLOW

Establishing and maintaining efficient workflow is critical in healthcare systems, and that applies just as much when implementing a communication tool like web chat. Choosing the right web chat platform and taking time to plan can help ensure positive impacts on your current workflow.

Some of the questions to consider as you plan:

- Where is the right place to start using web chat?
This will vary by organization, but we think care coordination, scheduling, or general inquiries are great places to start.
- Who will receive the web chats?
Can a contact center or front desk role be utilized to respond to web chats? These are scalable resources who know already how to interact with patients.
- How many web chats can a single agent take at a time?
We suggest starting with a maximum of 2 sessions to start, which can be increased with experience.
- What is the process for escalation to different modes of communication?
This will vary by role, but consider incorporating file transfer for scheduling and the business office, and image transfer for triage.
- Who else might need to be included in a session? How can a physician, business office, or medical interpreter be brought into the session?
The ability to drag-and-drop resources into a session is a key workflow element you should consider in your chat selection.

CONCLUSION

Connecting patients with their providers has never been more important. Our healthcare system is currently undergoing major changes, and effective communication is more crucial than ever. Utilizing different types of communication methods can have a variety of benefits for both the patient and the provider, and can have a sizeable impact on the healthcare industry as a whole. Secure web chat makes it fast, easy and convenient for patients to engage in a conversation with their provider— **anytime** and from **anywhere**.

Want to
learn more?

Visit us at
www.ovation.com

GOT QUESTIONS?

Still not sure about how you can use web chat in your health system or how best to start? Feel free to drop us a note and chat with one of our sales representatives to learn more about how web chat can help you achieve your goals!



[Click here](#) to chat with us and experience it for yourself

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