

PHYSICIANS PRACTICE

6 Reasons to Rethink Your Patient Communication Strategy



By Kathy Ford
August 5, 2019

In recent years, technology and patient care delivery have fundamentally transformed the practice of medicine. The way patients want to communicate with physicians has also changed, but few physicians have noticed.

Patients with a question no longer want to wait until the end of the day, the next day or longer to hear from physicians. Unfortunately, medical practice workflows haven't fundamentally changed, which is why patient communication still has several obstacles to overcome.

Practices that want to attract younger patients and retain existing patients must look toward adopting emerging communications software that embraces both simple texts (SMS) and multimedia texts (MMS) as part of a multiplatform communications strategy.

Ignoring the communications demands of younger patients is not a winning strategy for any medical practice. Here are six reasons why a unified communications strategy makes sense.

Younger patients are beginning to dominate

Taken together, those born in 1981 and onward comprise nearly [one-half of the U.S. population](#). The four most populous generations in the United States are:

- Baby Boomers (1946-1964) – 73.5 million
- Generation X (1965-1980) – 65.7 million
- Millennials (1981-1996) – 71.9 million
- Generation Z (1997-) – 86.4 million

Younger members of Gen Z are still frequenting pediatric providers, but already a tidal wave of young adults has arrived in general practitioners' waiting rooms across the country. These patients are tied to their mobile devices and are accustomed to receiving quick answers to their queries. And while it may seem that younger patients are driving the charge, patients of all ages want — and benefit from — additional, faster methods of communication from their physicians.

Digital natives demand greater access

Although Americans of all ages rely on their smartphones to accomplish an ever-expanding array of tasks, millennials and Generation Z are more likely to think of their phones as extensions of themselves. To them, using technology to self-serve is the first choice in nearly all instances, versus picking up the phone.

It's no wonder, then, that seven in 10 millennials have expressed a desire to use technology to [share health data](#), manage their preventive care and book appointments. In fact, they assume that physicians already are sharing patient information in some electronic form other than a [fax machine](#), which can come as a surprise (and a potential frustration) when they need copies of medical records.

For millennials, phone calls remains the primary method for appointment setting, in-person meetings and communicating with physicians, but other options are growing: 9 percent set appointments through [SMS/text](#) and 5 percent through chat/instant message (IM). Communications with physicians are conducted through SMS/text 5 percent of the time while 3 percent of those conversations take place via chat/IM.

Growing acceptance of text-based communications

Cell phones enjoy [nearly universal](#) use among Americans, with a 95 percent ownership rate. Three-quarters of those phones are smartphones that support simple texts as well as multimedia messages.

Although texting remains a small part of healthcare communications, younger Americans prefer texting to email or phone calls. Texts are opened [99 percent](#) of the time, three times the open rate of emails. Most texts are opened within three minutes of receipt.

A multiplatform telehealth communications strategy that supports text messaging and chat/IM can create practice workflow efficiencies. Think about the amount of time staff spends calling patients about appointment reminders, prescription refill requests and other routine communications. Texting as part of a unified communications workflow can cut through the communications clutter that can prevent a practice from better serving its patients.

Estimated lifetime patient value is high

Patients of all ages are turning to the internet to research their health conditions and check their symptoms. And when they need care, patients also are researching specific healthcare providers and facilities. According to a MARS Consumer Health Study, about three-quarters of Americans report going [online to research](#) health and wellness information, while more than one-third report using the internet to research a specific diagnosis, condition or set of symptoms.

Communications platforms that support calling, texting and social media provide a convenient way for patients and prospective patients to reach out. And since the estimated lifetime value of a new patient has been [pegged at \\$600,000](#), investing in technology to improve patient communications can quickly pay for itself.

DIY includes healthcare, too

Not everyone would be comfortable changing the oil in their car or repairing drywall, but technology has enabled all types of do-it-yourself activities that people are comfortable with. Think self-checkout at the grocery store, online ordering and mobile banking.

Healthcare hasn't escaped this phenomenon, although not all practices have embraced such DIY features for patients as online appointment booking or the ability to text the practices. But practices are ignoring these innovations at their own peril. Two-thirds of millennials and those in Generation X said in a survey that they'd consider [changing health providers](#) to ones who offered the ability to book appointments online.

Care encompasses the entire experience

Sixty percent of physician practices say they deliver quality care to patients. But what do patients think? In a study, 81 percent said they found their [healthcare experience lacking](#) in some way. Among all healthcare consumers, those who interacted with physicians most frequently reported the highest rates of dissatisfaction, pointing to a disconnect between physician and patient perceptions of the same care episode.

A survey of more than 35,000 online physician reviews showed that only 4 percent of respondents complained about a physician's skill, diagnosis or inability to deliver quality care. The main reason for a poor review, as cited in 96 percent of cases, was [poor communication](#) and poor customer service. That's something that all physicians can work to improve starting today — and at no or little cost.

The communication needs of younger patients can vary widely from the expectations of older patients. Millennial and Generation Z patients prefer more passive communications methods such as text and chat. Medical practices can gain efficiencies through one-to-many communications such as these as opposed to one-on-one phone conversations.

Practices should be actively researching methods to modernize their communications. The goal is a multilayered communications strategy that resonates with patients of all ages. Although younger patients are driving changes in the way practices communicate, catering to a wide demographic can help ensure a practice's long-term financial success.

*Kathy Ford is president and chief product officer of **Rhinogram**. A healthcare industry veteran with 25 years of experience, she has held roles in sales, marketing leadership and executive level portfolio ownership with merger and acquisition responsibilities at GE Medical Systems, McKesson Corporation, Siemens Medical Solutions, Carestream Dental and NantHealth.*