

Taking a Traditional Web Site to Patient Portal Technology

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In this era of consumer-driven healthcare, consumers (your current and potential patients) seek healthcare information on the Internet. If your practice doesn't have a Web site, or has one that's static and uninformative, you won't be found, and the patient will move on to the next practice Web site. Why? Because only the most graphically appealing, informative, and patient-centered Web sites will drive patients to your practice. Patients are demanding improved communication with their physician. A practice Web site is a start, but the adoption of a fully functional, interactive Web site with patient portal solutions will not only improve patient-to-provider relationships but will also give the patient access to your practice from anywhere, at any time of the day. Furthermore, these solutions can help practices increase efficiencies and revenue, while reducing operating costs. With the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and other incentives for healthcare information technology adoption, the time is right for your practice to consider implementing technology that will bring considerable value to your practice and also increase patient satisfaction.

Key words: Web site; patient portal; physician practice; patients; communication; revenue; costs.

It's a reality that patients searching for a new physician want to have a good relationship with that physician and easy access to the practice. And when searching for a physician, the first place a patient will go is the Internet, either to search within a particular specialty or to find the Web site of a medical practice that might be a good fit for his or her healthcare needs. That's why it's important for all physician practices to have a Web site presence. Even more, the need for practice Web sites actually far surpasses what is often available to patients. Not to mention that the number of people using the Internet to search for physicians or healthcare information is growing exponentially, along with the number of people who use the Internet to communicate with their physicians, according to a 2002 Harris Interactive Survey.¹

WHAT KIND OF WEB PRESENCE DOES YOUR PRACTICE HAVE?

Just having a Web presence isn't sufficient. Is your Web site simply "brochure-ware," or does it provide current information and functionality that actually interacts with patients? If your Web site is outdated and graphically unappealing, the patient will most likely click away and move on. A fresh, graphically appealing, and interactive site will catch a patient's attention and convey a message that a trusting physician-patient relationship can be established upon good communication. Think about peak times in your office when a patient tries to reach the practice by phone and can't get through due to poor office efficiencies—that trust wanes. With an interactive Web site, your practice can help foster trusting relationships with patients by providing online alternatives to traditional phone communication.

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So how does your practice make the change from a traditional Web site to a fully functional, interactive site? The first step is to upgrade your Web site with current information and to include content management capabilities so that staff can make content changes when necessary. Value-added features of a content management system include the ability to add unlimited pages and make unlimited edits instantly. Letting patients know about the availability of flu shots—*in real time*—is a great example of the importance of content management capabilities in creating a valuable patient-centered Web site. The second step is adding interactive capabilities.

ADDING VALUE TO YOUR PRACTICE WITH PATIENT PORTAL TECHNOLOGY

The most important element of a fully functional Website is implementing solutions that encompass all of the reasons that patients need to communicate with their physician practices. Perhaps you've heard the term "patient portal." But what exactly is a patient portal? A patient portal is a secure, Web-based, self-service communication solution that is part of the practice's Web site and provides online interaction between the practice and the patient. To communicate with the practice, patients access the secure portal through the practice Web site. The practice responds to requests and can also initiate patient communication through the same portal.

Offering the ability for patients to interact with your practice for things like pre-registration paperwork, appointment requests, appointment reminders, prescription renewal requests, paying bills online, and even "virtual" office visits will improve communication between the practice and the patient.

A patient portal can be implemented within a matter of weeks. After implementation, it's critical that you "market" the new communication tool your practice has made available. Offering the ability for patients to interact with your practice for things like pre-registration paperwork, appointment requests, appointment reminders, prescription renewal requests, paying bills online, and even "virtual" office visits will improve communication between the practice and the patient, and will also increase utilization of your new portal—driving higher returns. The convenience of enabling a patient to access your office any time of the day, from anywhere, to perform any of these requests will also increase patient satisfaction.

With the rise of consumer-driven healthcare, more patients are making informed choices about which

physicians they select. Offering features of a patient portal to improve service can impact a patient's choice of provider. And the patient portal provides great value to *both* the patient and the practice. The patient gains improved access to your practice and no longer has to contend with "on hold" times or phone tag. Completing paperwork online decreases the amount of waiting time in the office, because it is completed in advance of the appointment. Patients using this kind of technology to interact with their physician practice often report they feel the quality of their care is improved due to the increased communication between themselves and the practice, and they are more involved in the overall management of their healthcare.

Another consideration for adopting a patient portal in your practice is the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Patient-Centered Medical Home, which have federal and state governments and payers committing to incentive monies for healthcare IT adoption.

The value to the practice is that it can generate revenue and reduce costs by seeing more patients, increasing clinical efficiencies, reducing no-show appointments by up to 40%, replacing non-billable phone calls with online visits, reducing hard costs of printing and mailing up to 75%, and decreasing labor costs by increasing efficiencies. Additionally, the practice is able to shift many time-consuming responsibilities to the patient such as completing paperwork online prior to a visit, resulting in more accurate, complete, and legible information automatically entered into the portal. The time the staff would take to decipher handwritten forms is eliminated and can be directed toward patient care.

PATIENT PORTALS AND GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES

Another consideration for adopting a patient portal in your practice is the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH), which have made available financial incentives for healthcare information technology adoption. Furthermore, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services is seriously considering making online visits equivalent to in-office visits.

So how do patient portals fit into these incentives? Specifically, communication with and accessibility by patients are fundamental to these programs and play an important role in the adoption of healthcare technology by providers and patients alike. In addition, patient portal solutions have a relatively low price point compared with other technologies, and they can exist with or without an

electronic medical record. Plus, a fully functional portal can also help practices achieve recognition in all nine standards of PCMH. And with the growing demand in this consumer-driven healthcare model, a patient portal can help patients manage their own care. Furthermore, patient portals are a critical component to “meaningful use” of certified healthcare technologies. The patient portal is the only technology that addresses these meaningful use priorities:

- Providing patients with timely electronic access to their health information by 2011;
- Providing patients with an electronic copy of their discharge instructions and procedures by 2011; and
- Giving all patients access to personal health records by 2013.

NOW IS THE TIME

With the emerging availability of patient portal technology, there is no better time than now to make the

investment and create a competitive advantage to attract new patients and keep the ones you have highly satisfied. Think about the new revenue your practice can generate by improving payment collections with online bill paying or offering virtual care to replace typically non-reimbursed phone calls.

Patients are already familiar with airport kiosks, self-service parking and grocery check-out, and the like. Now it's time to make them familiar with “self-service” physician-to-patient communication tools that will allow them to communicate with your office from anywhere, at any time. Perhaps it's also time for your practice to increase office efficiencies and revenues and reduce costs with patient portal technology. ■

REFERENCE

1. Patient/physician online communication. *Harris Interactive Healthcare News*. April 10, 2002; vol. 2 # 8.