



**5/19/11**

## **Improving a Patient's Experience with Interactive Technology**

*By Daniel Casciato*

Given the changing nature of healthcare, improving a patient's experience is of critical importance. Patients frequently have the ability to choose their healthcare provider for both day-to-day and specialized procedures, so the ability to deliver excellent service is a critical deliverable. One way you can enhance the patient's experience is through the use of interactive technology. The more a practice can go digital, the more easily they can communicate with the patient, and make the whole process of care more transparent.

"Any information task that can be made more efficient with technology increases the time healthcare professionals spend with patients," says Bob Kernen, vice president of product development for HCPLexus, publishers of The Little Blue Book, a referral directory used by more than 300,000 physicians in the U.S. "EHR systems and digital prescribing tools are examples of technology that is changing how health care providers deliver care. Other functions, referrals, inter-physician communication, drug reference and interface with health plans are beginning to develop digital applications that build on these new efficiencies."



Kernen says that since the patient's needs should always be put first, technology isn't productive if it doesn't adequately serve the end user. "Remember that what is easy for the healthcare professional may not be easy for the patient, and when that is the case adoption will suffer," he says. "Any new interactive technology should be easy for non-technical consumer to understand, intuitive enough not to require any training."

It is also crucial that the technology meets the consumer where they are – within their daily information flow. Some users will want to use mobile platforms, while others will be most comfortable with the web or email.

"Your technology should find them where they already are, and not require any additional work on the consumers' part," says Kernen.

## **Importance of using interactive technology**

Practices should consider using interactive technology to improve a patient's experience in their medical setting for several reasons, according to Kael Kelly, senior director at Varolii Corporation in Seattle, Wash.

"Interactive communications technologies can help healthcare organizations develop and maintain ongoing patient engagement," Kelly says. Not only will it improve the patient experience, but he says that it will produce these key results:

- Increased patient adherence – monitoring and engaging with patients at key stages of therapy improves clinical outcomes.
- Improved patient/customer retention – consistent, personalized communication keeps your organization top of mind and customers/patients become more loyal.
- Optimized prescription management – contacting patients about prescription refills, order status and medication education positively impacts pharmaceutical care.
- Improved revenue cycle management – appointment reminders, self-service payments and educating patients about the expectations and timelines for co-pays, self-insurance and fees not covered by insurance.

Using a blend of automated voice, e-mail and SMS texting, Kelly says that his firm helps drive successful outcomes with fewer costs to the organization and improved experiences for the patient.

"We also analyze each patient's prior interactions to adjust future communications, to deliver the most personalized and relevant communication as possible," he explains. "This ultimately improves customer service by communicating relevant information with patients when they want it and how they want it."

Varolii further works with healthcare companies to help streamline disease management outreach and ongoing patient communications, which helps organizations form long-lasting and positive relationships with their patients, Kelly notes.

## **Quick and easy tools**

Leading medical practices are using practical approaches to interactive media to deepen increasingly weak patient-practitioner bonds.

"For instance, imagine how much more confident your patient would feel entering their cardiologist appointment, with a pocket-size article delivered by their Smartphone suggesting alternative heart-healthy treatments, shared by a well-known doctor across the country," says Jeff Molander, a Chicago-based author of *Off the Hook Marketing*. "Knowledge can be used by practices to qualitatively improve the patient experience."

Mobile media, particularly through SMS text messaging, is one way to improve the patient experience on a day-to-day basis. Molander notes that SMS text messaging is a simple, affordable and practical way for offices to keep in touch with patients and improve time management thus, improving the patient experience.

For those who worry that they won't have time to use text messaging, Molander recommends a simple software application tool like Fanminder, a reminder service. "It solves that problem by focusing on practical application and deadly simple tools," he says. "There is very little training required to operate the software."

Other handy interactive technologies include mobile survey apps for practices to survey patients on their experience. Survey on the Spot is one such mobile survey application that can be used on an iPad as a quick and easy tool to survey patients in real-time. Once the patient completes the survey, results are sent immediately to management and they are able to address any issues right away.

Mike Baldassarre, administrator for the Transitional Care Unit at Brockton Hospital in Brockton, Mass., is extremely pleased with the results he has already received since launching the new system. "Patient satisfaction is our number one goal," he says. "Our previous paper-based system was time-consuming, inefficient and costly. We did not receive enough valuable feedback and responses would come in two to three weeks later."

Using an app like Survey on the Spot, Baldassarre says it eliminated the pitfalls of using a paper-based system. The system also provided him with reliable and timely data to ensure they are providing exceptional care, quality and service.

"The system's automated charts have the results mapped out so that we can visually see how we are doing with each indicator," Baldassarre says. "It shows where we scored high and where we need to improve so that we can then take that data and improve our quality processes."

If a patient ranks his unit as poor in any of the 10 prepared questions, both Baldassarre and the director of nurses will immediately get an e-mail from Survey on the Spot informing them of the response.

"We can then circle back to all of the patients who responded that day and probe as to what the issues were that concerned them and resulted in a poor response," he says. "The responses are anonymous so it requires a bit of leg work on our part to speak individually with all the patients. It allows us to do service recovery prior to a patient leaving and gives invaluable information on how we can improve our service delivery."

### **Keeping it simple**

For Dr. Stephen Schimpff, a retired physician and a professor at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore, the best interactive technology just happens to be the most commonly used today.

"In my opinion, the most important interactive technology today is the lowly e-mail," he says. "It takes little time for patient to write a request and not too much time for a physician to respond, especially to a query that relates to a problem that the doctor and patient have been addressing for some time."

Schimpff says that more patients could get fast, useful information on controlling their health-related issues by e-mail without the need for a doctor's office visit – which would take time out of work and time out of caring for children, as well as time out of the medical practice.

"But the real reason why email is not utilized as often as it could be or should be is money," Schimpff says. "Most insurances do not pay for it. Most physicians are loath to ask the patient to pay directly. Yet, we all know that a lawyer turns on the meter when we call as does the accountant. We need to fix the insurance issue or more simply, we need for doctor and patient alike to accept that the patient should pay directly for the doctor's time, up to a limit when insurance kicks in."

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