

When Will Patients Return?

How healthcare marketing became an industry-wide effort

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Recent studies indicate that more than 50% of people surveyed who had a scheduled medical appointment canceled, or were due to have an appointment with a medical provider during the pandemic for basic primary care, an elective procedure or diagnostic exam are still not comfortable in rescheduling to see their provider at this time.

In fact, over 60% have indicated they will wait another three to six months before returning and many practices that are attempting to reschedule patients through recalls are finding that more than 45% of their patients are not willing to schedule an appointment.

The challenge is that medical practices and healthcare providers are now ready to get back to work, to reduce the backlog of cancelled as well as missed appointments. The key question is “how can they persuade patients that they are ready to serve them safely?” And, “is there an effective marketing strategy to communicate the precautions in this “new normal?”

With any marketing strategy, the first thing to understand is that not every consumer is the same. In this instance, some patients are more willing to return while others are more concerned and may not return for months. The marketing approach needs to consider those differences so that the message, channel and frequency of communication takes those different patient concerns into consideration.

Key Communication Channels

Whether marketing to the proactive or more reluctant patient, leverage your internal communication channels, emails, social media platforms, and specifically designed practice website sections so they clearly describe the safety precautions you have in place so the patients get a glimpse of what to expect at their next appointment. This isn't about mass advertising it's about reaching your patients at the right time, in the right way with the right message.

Implementing the following steps can help any practice in encouraging their patients to return:

- Create a website page or a section on your website describing your safety measures with clear prompts to schedule an appointment. Create the pages with specific, easy-to-consume content focusing on your protocols and social proof points using testimonials from patients who have returned. Hardwire the messages so they remain relevant, informational and consistent over time.
- Develop practice-specific patient safety videos to be used in your email campaigns and on your website pages. Make the videos authentic and unique, use your staff, film them with a cell phone and use your physicians as spokespersons.

- Send frequent emails once or twice a month to your existing patient base outlining the changes you have made, include a link to your video and again have a very specific call to schedule an appointment, include virtual options if you offer those as an alternative.
- Post on your social media channels it doesn't matter if you have 50 or 2000 followers, engage with them frequently and consistently—at least two to three times a week. Post “we are open, and safe messages” and describe your precautions. Funnel any testimonials from patients who have returned as well as current staff photos in PPE and shout outs to thank the staff, which will enhance your safety message.
- Train your office staff on the new procedures and the basics of communicating to your patients, reinforcing the immediacy of appointments even same day if possible, safety steps and convenience. Develop recall scripts outlining those measures and train the staff to explain the new procedures as they perform them in the office in real time with patients in clear sight. Tell the patient why you are wiping down the equipment and the importance of remote check-ins.
- Communicate with your referral network. If you are a specialty practice, communicate with your referral network so they understand the safety measures you have in place. There has never been a better time than now to build a strong referral network across the medical community to ensure patients are comfortable and safe going to a doctor's appointment .
- Launch a digital marketing campaign to expand your messaging and reach prospective new patients searching for an appointment. Search, display and social strategies all play well in this new environment and can generate very positive new patient lead and acquisition metrics.

How to Get There Now and Beyond

By marketing to your patients correctly you can build volume, address backlogs, attract new patients, establish a high level of trust for your brand and create brand ambassadors to help you reach your more reluctant patients.

Unquestionably, safety concerns and the hesitancy of patients to schedule appointments are real and practices have to embrace those challenges as healthcare providers. But practices have to think, operate and communicate in new and innovative ways during these uncertain and unprecedented times to make the patient journey as comfortable as possible.

Many of the marketing methods we are using today can be applied long term, as practices continue to grow and more patients return.

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