



ASK THE EXPERT

PATIENT PORTALS IN PHYSICIAN PRACTICES

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Which of the many aspects of communication between patients and their physician practices generates the most utilization in a patient portal?

A key element of successful patient portal implementations is offering a fully featured solution encompassing all of the reasons that patients need to communicate with their physician practices. As multiple types of communications are offered to patients, overall utilization increases. An example of this accretive effect is the patient that completes initial paperwork and then chooses to pay their bill online because they are aware and have used the portal previously. Likewise, patients are much more likely to retrieve their lab result online if they have been introduced to the portal during their in-office visit.

Another important aspect driving utilization is integration with existing systems. Accessing data from appointment scheduling to deliver online reminders with an embedded link for pre-registration is an excellent example. Likewise, when a patient's demographic and other initial intake data can be loaded to the existing PM/EMR system without re-keying, the practice staff sees dramatic benefit. Therefore, integration positively impacts and reinforces staff motivation for introducing and supporting the portal concept.

The most widely used online features are pre-registration including filling in health history forms, online bill payment, appointment requests, appointment reminders, and lab result interpretation delivery. Those practices that add a kiosk or PC in their waiting area see additional utilization of features like patient interviewing questionnaires.

What are the major factors and trends spurring adoption of patient portals within physician practices?

Often insulated from administrative operations, many physicians have an epiphany when they "secret shop" their own practices. When calling the practice and recognizing how long it takes to actually speak to someone, many are surprised at the aggravation relative to other businesses. Responsiveness to "on hold" waiting times is especially challenging during peak volumes. Offering patients a self-service option simply mimics the market trend experienced in most other industries.

Patient satisfaction is positively affected when consumers familiar with airport kiosks, self-service parking, grocery check out, etc. can communicate with their physicians in the same manner. The increasing percentages of patients comfortable with self service

allow practices to give more time to those that choose traditional means of communication which further positively impacts overall patient satisfaction.

With the rise of consumer-driven health care, more patients are making choices about which practices they utilize and how they spend their money. Improving service and offering features like Personal Health Records are core components of strong patient retention and acquisition success stories.

Finally, the efficiency that the practice experiences from improved data gathering, easier response to inquiries, and improved delivery of information is a critical factor in these groups making a portal available.

How is integration addressed for practice management and EMR systems, given the variety of touch points for gathering and delivering data?

First, let me point out that integration is not required. Many Medfusion clients appreciate the benefits of completed information and easier communication without the additional benefit of reduced data entry. They acknowledge that integration might provide value, but mostly appreciate the reduced phone volume, lower mailing costs, etc.

Having said that, the biggest practice management related benefit of integration is with patient demographic information. For practices with EMRs, integration of health history form intake is very valuable as it saves significant data entry time of more expensive clinical staff.

The bulk of Medfusion's business actually comes from channel partner relationships where PM or EMR vendors resell or re-brand our portal and deliver a deep level integration for their clients. This focus commits us to strong integration capabilities for all of our solutions through a simply implemented Application Programmers Interface for vendor partners. Medfusion offers a range of integration methodologies from HL7, to web services, to custom programming.

As the American Academy of Family Physicians partner for websites and secure communications, Medfusion also supports industry standards for interoperability such as the Continuity of Care Record (CCR).

The value of integration can be of such importance to larger practices and the performance concern from legacy experiences so great that Medfusion routinely guarantees integration results.

The volume of communications required of primary care physicians makes the benefits of a portal fairly obvious to them, but are those physicians in specialty practices as interested or successful with portal implementations?

It's true that the patient-physician relationship with primary care practices drives so much volume and differentiation of communications that they see the benefits quickly. At the same time, specialists have unique factors that drive benefits. For instance, the average patient visit is worth much more financially, thereby creating significant value in improved referral management. Many specialists' traditional marketing plan consists of a fruit basket at year end and perhaps a golf tournament sponsorship. To the extent that they can offer their referral sources an ability to log into their website to more easily make a referral, specialists can provide an exciting, new media, self-service marketing alternative to their key revenue sources – primary care physicians.

In addition to simplifying referral intake to primary care providers with options like CCR attachments, specialists can provide acknowledgement and tracking of referrals which can be of significant value both from a patient safety and efficiency perspective. By being able to provide consult reports electronically back through the portal, specialists provide a valuable and differentiating service to primary care referral sources. In addition to referral management, specialists many times offer episodic care to patients. This means significant data entry on each patient. With a higher volume of "new" patients, pre-registration and other simplified ways to gather data in an eClipboard mode are greatly appreciated.

How important is the quality of the physician practice's website with regard to patient utilization?

Many physician practice websites are first generation. Advances in technology, including graphics, make it very apparent when viewing an outdated site. Typically, many of these sites are static and haven't had the content recently updated. On the other hand, some practices have recognized the value of their website as a strong first impression of their practice and the services offered. For those practices satisfied with their existing websites, Medfusion can simply add a tool bar of secure interactive features to existing sites.

Over 85 percent of practices that utilize Medfusion portals decide to upgrade existing websites to include content management features. With significant patient views and interaction, a more graphically appealing site with fresh and meaningful content has benefits. Value-added features of a content management system include the ability to add unlimited pages and make unlimited edits instantly. Letting patients know the status of availability of flu shots is a great example. Many of our clients update the front page of their website and use our message broadcasting abilities to provide timely information, resulting in additional practice revenues.

Relative to other IT projects such as practice management system and EMR implementations, how complex is the implementation of a physician practice portal?

Simplicity and flexibility are required aspects of an online portal implementation. Patients must be able to utilize the application immediately and successfully without any training. Simplicity and clarity of design must be translated through to the staff's utilization of the portal as well.

Online tutorials are supplemented with a dedicated implementation project management contact for "live person" help. Most implementation consulting is focused on selecting options that allow for deployment of the optimal work flow for each practice's unique scenario. Flexibility in application design allows customization of intake forms, work flow, and other factors critical to ease of use. Modular components allow practices to implement the most important features first and add solutions as they see more patient utilization of the portal. The typical implementation including a completely redesigned website is less than a six week process. Practices that are not on EMR view their portal implementation as an incremental step towards EMR, as they get many of the benefits without any change to physician behavior and without significant costs. Those practices with EMR view the portal as a way to squeeze additional benefits from IT by improving communication and leveraging the investments they have already made. +