



# ONLINE PATIENT SCHEDULING

*Sinéad E. Ingersoll, MHSA, CMPE*

In an era where consumers can book flights, schedule a plumber, or book a restaurant, day or night, from their mobile device or laptop, shouldn't patients expect the same convenience when it comes to booking an appointment with their physician? In fact, studies show that not only do patients expect this same convenience; they value it over all other attributes of a physician practice.

Yet despite the availability of multiple technologies that allow patients to book their own appointments and patients' desire for this feature, many practice managers and physicians hesitate to implement this offering.

Drawing from my own experience in rolling out this service in the practice I manage, this article addresses some of the challenges involved in obtaining physician support for online patient scheduling, outlines the business case

for allowing patients to make their own appointments, and summarizes how our practice implemented this offering.

## CHALLENGES

When I first recommended that our board of directors allow patients to book their own appointments, I was greeted with hesitation and outright resistance. In listening to the board's concerns, one central theme emerged: the belief that providers would be giving up control of their coveted schedule. Most physicians felt that their practice was too complicated to allow patients to book their own appointments. There were also concerns that long visit types such as dilated eye exams would be scheduled at inappropriate times, creating bottlenecks in the clinic or causing clinics to run late, resulting in staff overtime. Another concern was patients booking appointments

even though we do not accept their insurance plan.

## OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

Not one to take no for an answer and convinced that we must implement this feature (for reasons I outline below), I decided to circle back on the topic of online patient scheduling at our practice's annual strategic planning meeting. Armed with facts and data from multiple studies demonstrating patients' desire for convenience, I convinced the group to pilot online scheduling with one physician in the group. It took only a short time of piloting with this one provider before we ultimately pushed out the functionality for all physicians in the entire organization.

## BENEFITS OF ONLINE SCHEDULING

We are now in our third year of online patient scheduling and our

patients have booked, rescheduled, or canceled almost 4,000 appointments online in the past year alone. These appointments represent work that patients have done on our behalf. They have reduced the number of phone calls to our appointments office and in turn, freed our appointment schedulers for other tasks.

Allowing patients to cancel and reschedule appointments online has reduced our no-show rate, since slots are then opened up for other patients. However, patients must call our office if they are canceling within 24 hours of their appointment and certain appointments (for example, post-operative visits) cannot be canceled without calling the practice.

Providing our patients with the freedom and convenience they desire to book and schedule appointments at a time that is beneficial for them has generated a great deal of positive feedback, reinforcing the physician's decision to implement online scheduling.

One additional unforeseen benefit is that, compared to documentation taken by our appointment scheduling staff, patients provide more concise information about the reason for their visit. This helps our providers better prepare for the patient's visit.

Online patient scheduling also differentiates our practice, which is located in a highly competitive market, by offering a service that most of our competitors are not currently providing. Furthermore, it has provided access to new patients since we also allow new patients to book their own appointments. Roughly 10% of our online appointments are scheduled by new patients.

Finally, since patients access online scheduling via our patient portal, the increase in traffic to the portal aided in achieving higher scores on some of the patient engagement-related quality measures, a component of the Merit Incentive Payment System (MIPS).

### IMPLEMENTATION AND PATIENT EDUCATION

As with the introduction of any new technology or service offering, success depends greatly on how the technology is implemented. We engaged our appointment schedulers, clinical staff, and providers early in the process. This bolstered buy-in from these key stakeholders.

Our decision to pilot with one provider not only aided in obtaining buy-in from resistant providers and staff; it afforded us the opportunity to build out and tweak the workflow for this new offering before implementing it across the board. Since the functionality was already available in our practice management system, this was as simple as turning it on for one doctor.

Before rolling out the service, we also developed protocols to proactively manage certain appointment types, once again involving staff members and providers in the process. Many systems will allow certain rules to be built in that can assist in managing certain appointment types. For example, not allowing patients to book long visits after a certain time or during a particular time of day reduced physician anxiety about potential patient flow issues.

An important element of success for our group is the system's ability to alert the practice when

an online appointment is booked. We designated responsibility for checking these alerts to a specific group of staff members. This group is then tasked with ensuring that the patient is scheduled appropriately and that the practice accepts the patient's insurance. If schedulers find any issue with the appointment, they immediately reach out to rectify the problem.

Finally, we educated our patients on the new offering by rolling out a mini-marketing campaign. First of all, we updated the on-hold message in our phone system to inform patients of this new feature. Additionally, we strategically placed posters throughout the practice (such as in waiting room and check-in areas) to create awareness of the feature. Finally, we placed a highly visible "Book Online" button on our practice website for patients to link to the site for online appointment scheduling.

### AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRAND OUR PRACTICE

Implementation of online scheduling in an era where patients not only demand convenience but are also more engaged in their health-care represented an opportunity for our practice to not only stand apart from our competitors. It also demonstrated to our patients that we listen and respond to their needs. **AE**



*Sinéad E. Ingersoll, MHA, CMPE (919-802-6799; sinead.ingersoll@gmail.com), is the Chief Operating*

*Officer at North Carolina Eye, Ear, Nose & Throat, P.A., Durham, N.C.*



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