The Importance of PATIENT ENGAGEMENT: Why They – And *You* – Need It

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True Patient Engagement is in Two Parts: You and Your Technology

"Patient engagement" consists of two separate premises:

1. the "where patients can stay engaged with the practice 24 x 7 x 365 from almost anywhere in the world with a secure internet connection" scenario, and
2. the "where patients are engaged in their own medical treatment and care" scenario

Both can help create the one thing you want: high rates of patient retention since it's generally accepted that engaged patients are satisfied patients, and satisfied patients will stay with you.

And, retained patients are the ones most likely to recommend the practice to others. It's one big, beautiful circle!

It's the disengaged or on-the-fringe patients who are most likely to be out there saying and posting negatives.

So…that's why you'll want patients to be engaged, connected, and in on their own care.

Now let's explore in detail the technical and human engagement pieces.

Technology: *Engaging* Patient Engagement

A Patient Portal represents the first step to a happy engagement as follows:

- Unless you're operating 24 x 7, you have only certain days/hours that you're available to your patients or clients. All other times they're disconnected from you, right?

Wrong, if you have a patient portal!

Using an iOS or Android device, or a tablet, laptop or desktop PC, the patient can connect from almost anywhere in the world with a secure internet connection to:

- request or actually schedule appointments and complete forms and questionnaires on-line, anytime at the patient's convenience helping to complete major portions of intake in advance

- edit demographics, update insurance information, and request refills, all without needing staff intervention

- see their lab reports and medical information to the extent made available by the practice without having to disturb practice staff

- obtain alerts on new information to read, or for new or existing items to be completed

- Make online payments directly to you
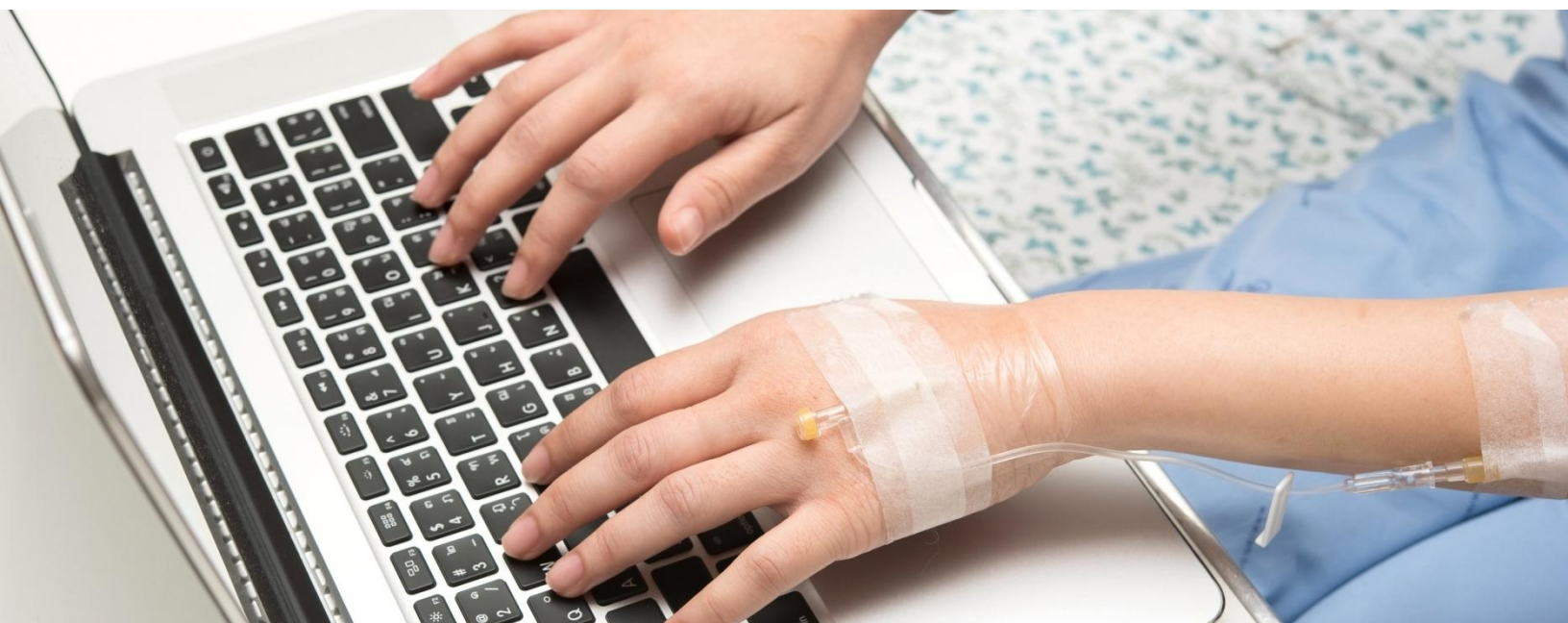
Electronic Messaging: Keeping in Touch on a Variety of Fronts

Now that appointments are scheduled, you'll want interactive reminder texts to patients enabling them to confirm or cancel simply by replying.

So, instead of dealing with no-shows and lost revenue you'd be able to quickly reschedule those cancelations, and fill-in gaps with future appointments. At the very least, you'd know not to allocate resources around cancelations.

Texts (1) should support specific information/instructions about each appointment, (2) be usable for reminding patients about scheduling their next appointments, (3) for alerts on new treatments, new providers on staff, new locations, new hours, inclement weather closings, and more.

A solid software vendor should have its own texting feature without requiring a second or third party resource.

Kiosk: Inkless Intake

Now as patients arrive – especially since they received reminder texts – they should be able to use their devices or a practice-supplied iPad or PC to complete any remaining forms or questionnaires for today's visit.

Kiosk replaces the cumbersome and often "beat up" photocopied paper forms on clipboards that are usually given to patients on arrival. Written information on those forms then needs to be deciphered and entered into the system by staff.

Ideally, kiosk supports scanning and electronic signatures making it easy to sign in, which also means it eliminates the handwritten sign-in sheets that are routinely seen at front desks, and which aren't very HIPAA compliant.

Your patients use kiosks in any number of venues and settings. They'll appreciate being able to use one at your practice as well.

Together, portals and kiosks make for a powerful combination of engagement and experience enhancing tools for your patients, and for you!

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Telemedicine: Patient Engagement, Personified!

Perhaps the ultimate feature for patient engagement is telemedicine, with encounters enabled from almost anywhere.

As with in-office visits, the portal can be used to schedule telemedicine sessions, and for completing any questionnaires in advance.

If your own financial policy calls for it, patients can be asked to prepay their telemedicine sessions through the portal.

Telemedicine patients can (should) receive reminder texts about their sessions along with instructions for logging in at the appointment time.

Patients log into the portal for their sessions with an iOS or Android device, or a camera-enabled tablet, laptop, or desktop PC. The provider invokes the session as well, and the encounter begins.

Each participant can see and hear the other in real time. The patient's image may even be maneuverable by the provider in a "picture-in-picture" fashion.

Encounter notes are entered into the EHR as they would be for an in-office visit.

The provider can issue electronic prescriptions and/or order lab or radiology tests, and schedule follow up sessions where appropriate.

Sessions should be automatically time-stamped when they're completed.

Telemedicine produces revenue and supports seeing more patients. They're excellent for those who are remote, and for patients who simply don't need in-office visits.

For all practical purposes, telemedicine may well be the ultimate vehicle for promoting engagement and a great experience for your patients, and for you!

Website and Social Media: Online and Connected

Medical practices should "get with the programs" for being online and for having social media engagement.

If your practice doesn't have a website, that's absolutely the first thing you need to get, even if it's just a simple one page site for starters.

There are plenty of resources available for website creation securing a URL (web address). You'll also want a general email address for the practice, generally something like info@XXXmedical.com. Incoming emails would be accessed by whomever is designated at the practice.

For social media, the main outlet for medical practices (our opinion) is Facebook (Fb). Your website design company should be able to assist with Fb if assistance is needed.

Why Facebook?

First, it has 1.6 billion monthly active users. Secondly, a recent National Research Corporation poll indicated more than 90% of respondents went to Fb for healthcare information!

So now, what about Fb and your practice?

Most businesses know that having a Fb presence is an absolute necessity. That's why it would be highly unlikely to **not** see the Fb logo as a contact icon on any website or piece of marketing material.

Interesting, engaging Fb content can positively, and cost effectively, promote:

1. satisfaction ratings by current patients

2. new patient referrals

A third Fb value is how it can help build relationships with other practices.

Here are some useful tips for Fb and your practice:

- If you haven't done so already, use online tutorials or www.facebook.com/pages/create.php to create your Fb page. It'll be a direct link to your current patients and a showcase for attracting new ones.

- Post content frequently, insert links to health-related articles, and update your status weekly. Patients will interact on a personal level helping to solidify you as being caring and informative.

- If people find your content interesting, they'll no doubt subscribe to your page and receive all of your updates. This can very much increase current patient satisfaction, draw in referrals, and help position the practice as a thought leader. So make sure to utilize your Facebook page as much as possible.

- Don't forget to upload pictures of your practice, the building, lobby, and staff for prospective patients, along with any current patient testimonials or news releases you wish to include. Respond to any comments promptly.

- Advertise your Facebook page to your current patients, to neighboring practices, and to the general public. Sweepstakes or contests are particularly effective ways to bring people to your Facebook page. Ultimately, you'll want to get as many of your patients to "like" you on Facebook as possible.

- Caveat: be extremely careful about patient privacy and using patients' images on Facebook. Make sure you have disclaimers stating that you're not responsible for any material posted on your page. Check that none of your posts elicit personal information, and never give medical advice through Facebook. Just ensure you're complying with general common sense patient privacy standards as applicable to your online presence.

Interesting Facebook content can greatly increase things we've been discussing, and very cost effectively:

1. optimizing satisfaction ratings by current patients (Facebook creates another way to keep them engaged)

2. creating new patient referrals

A solid, versatile mix of engaging practice automation along with a social media presence will virtually guarantee having satisfied patients who'll stay with you, and recommend   others!

The Other Side of Patient Engagement:
It's All You and the Patient

Bringing patients into having a voice in their medical care is the other way to get them engaged.

In fact, some value-based health care initiatives specifically call for bringing the patient more personally into the picture.

The idea here is that the physician not dictate or lecture as to what the patient must do. Instead, treatment options and any pros and cons are discussed in an effort to arrive at the best course of action for that particular patient.

In this scenario, the patient feels more involved. Depending on the situation, family members / caregivers might also be included.

The premise is that when patients are engaged in their own care, they're more likely to follow the course of action agreed to, and will have higher satisfaction levels knowing they had a say in it vs. being told what to do.

The practice's EHR should be able to record and track that course of action, and enable the physician to transcribe the context of the consultation / discussion with the patient for reference if needed.

Patient Engagement: Think of It Like This

If **none** of the preceding suggestions are put into effect, then you're having one-off relationships with your patients. There's basically zero engagement.

If a **few** of these suggestions are followed, then you're dating your patients on a non-commitment basis. It's not great, but better than nothing.

If **more than a few** are followed, then you're "going steady" with your patients. You have a relationship with them and there's probably some good feeling between you.

If **all** of these suggestions are followed, then congratulations…you're engaged!

Ensure your patients are fully engaged with your practice while you focus on caring for them. Patient Portal Software conveniently lets you do just that.

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