

Patient Engagement

by the

Numbers

by Diana P. Friedman, MA, MBA

Traditionally, the process of patient engagement within the practice was accomplished through one-on-one phone calls and high volumes of direct mail for appointment reminders, using one-to-many content. However, as the world has transitioned to the digital age, patients have increasingly opted to receive communications from service providers via email and text using a wide variety of electronic devices,

such as smartphones, tablets, desktop and laptop computers. This shift in patient communication patterns and preferences has given practices an opportunity to gain operational efficiencies and better interact with patients on a deeper, more meaningful level than traditional patient engagement could ever have achieved.

Patient engagement centers on a practice's ability to maintain contact with its active patients, ensuring they remain a part of the

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recare system, continue to accept treatment recommendations, show up for appointments, pay their bills in a timely manner, and refer their friends and family to the practice. Additionally, patient engagement is about growing production not just from the existing practice patient base, but also leveraging communications to increase new patient flow into the practice.

Over the past decade patient engagement within dentistry has transitioned into the digital age. Though practices retain some aspects of the traditional personal calls and posted materials, the shift in patient preference for digital communications is astounding, as 97 percent of dental patients prefer to click rather than call the practice for information.¹ Practices that are keeping pace with the digital revolution are seeing dramatic improvements in increased production, collections and new patient flow.

An examination of three core areas of patient engagement shows the positive impact your practice can achieve if the right technologies are deployed.

Automated Appointment Reminders = Increased Production

A recent research study of 518 dental professionals² sponsored by Sesame Communications found that 51 percent of dental professionals use some form of automated appointment reminders.³ These reminders are provided by the practice management software or by a third party provider. A significant 85 percent of doctors in a member survey completed by Sesame Communications stated that automated appointment reminders are important to the success of their practice.⁴

Initially there was a reluctance to move away from personal contact to an automated reminder system. However, these perceptions are undergoing a dramatic shift. A study by Sesame Communications asked 213 dentists what the main practice benefits of automating appointment reminders were, beyond the overwhelming demand from patients. Of the doctors surveyed, 73 percent stated automated reminders reduce no-shows,⁵ positively

impacting production. This number was even higher with the high-volume orthodontic practices, where 85 percent of surveyed orthodontists stated automated appointment reminders reduced no-shows.⁶ These findings are consistent with a 2013 study of 64 dental practices performed by Sesame Communications, which found that automated appointment reminders drove a 21 percent reduction in no-shows, resulting in \$31,460 in increased production per year.⁷

The production gains have amplified the importance of this technology to practice success to the point that doctors rated automated appointment reminders as more important to their practice than website or social media.⁸

Automated Past Due Financial Reminders and Online Bill Pay = Increased Collections

Cash flow is one of the basic tenets of running a practice. When bills are past due, the practice is placed in the awkward position of having to call and encourage patients to pay their bills. However, sophisticated patient engagement platforms have allowed patients to reduce these awkward moments through discrete past due appointment reminders. When optimized with integrated online bill payment, the practice also gets paid faster. A research study found that 90.3 percent of Sesame member dental patients are comfortable with paying their bills online.⁹ Even better, the combination of past due appointment reminders and online bill pay helps improve collections performance. A Sesame Communications study found that 50 percent of past due appointment reminders are paid within the first 48 hours of the email notification being sent.¹⁰ These collections are gained without an embarrassing letter or call from the practice, and save staff time, safeguarding the relationship between patient and practice.

Time is money. Fifty-six percent of dentists surveyed by Sesame Communications stated their patients who pay online pay faster than those who mail checks.¹¹ Interestingly, this is a 35 percent increase

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Patient Qualified Practice Reviews = Increased New Patient Flow

Acquiring patient reviews has traditionally required top-of-mind attention from the practice team to approach and ask patients to go online and review the practice. This time-consuming activity often falls short on measurable results. Additional challenges for practices include how to ensure the online reviews are actually from their patient community and how to get a sufficient volume of reviews to highlight the outstanding services provided by the practice.

An advanced patient engagement platform can provide the practice with many qualified post-appointment patient reviews per month. A national research study found that, on average, Dental Sesame was able to secure and effectively syndicate 22 new patient reviews for each active practice.¹³ The benefit of these reviews is not only the volume of reputation building reviews, but the fact that these are verified patients being seen by the practice. Should a review be less than positive, it affords the practice the chance to contact the patient to correct any issues and earn a revised positive review.

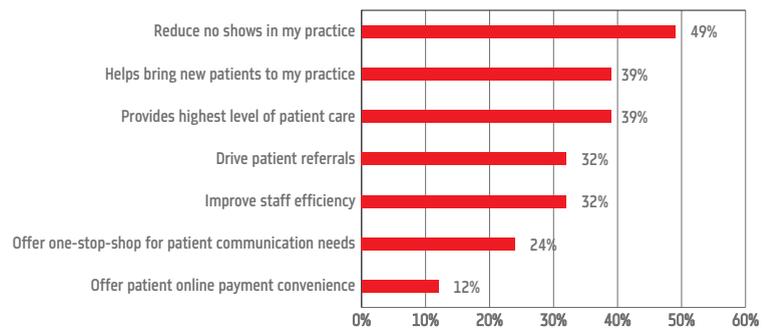
An associated point is syndication channels. Syndicating patient reviews online is greatly impacted by the portal where they are published. For instance, a national research study found that publishing reviews

to Healthgrades.com drove, on average, 11 prospective patient inquiries into the practice each month.¹⁴

Final Thoughts

Consumers want their care providers to communicate with them in an effective and discrete manner. A state-of-the-art patient engagement platform can achieve these objectives very economically while saving practice team time and achieving better production and collection results. A final question posed elucidates the expansive benefits and value of such a platform (see chart below).¹⁵ ■

Patient Portal Benefit and Value



References:

1. Sesame Patient Survey, 2010, Sesame Communications
2. 82 percent of the sample was dentists and the rest dental practice team members with the responsibility purchase software and digital solutions for the practice
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How do you engage your patients? Comment on DentalTown.com/magazine.aspx.

Author's Bio



Diana P. Friedman, MA, MBA is the CEO of Sesame Communications. Sesame Communications helps dental practices harness the power of the Internet to accelerate new patient acquisition, build patient loyalty and transform the patient experience. The Sesame 24-7 Patient Engagement Management System provides an innovative and comprehensive set of solutions that help boost practice growth and profitability. For more information, visit www.sesamecommunications.com.