

Teach Patients How to Be Good Patients

The Patient Centered Playbook – Connect with Patients Using Social Media



White Paper

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This paper began as a way to help providers teach their patients to be better patients by providing them with the information they need in a way they want to receive the information. It soon turned into the *Patient Centered Playbook* on connecting with patients using social media.

Studies have shown when doctors better communicate with their patients, outcomes improve. Applying that logic to other aspects of the doctor patient relationship will improve practice results, too.

In this paper, we will answer some key questions:

- What are key areas practices can improve on to reduce staff time on unnecessary phone calls, missed appointments and unpaid bills by communicating better with patients?
- In what ways can social media be used to better communicate with patients and what are the benefits?
- What types of social media do patients use?
- How can practices communicate better with current patients and attract new patients?

This paper will focus on how better communication empowers patients and doctors with shared responsibility of the relationship.

Too often, busy medical practices forget to connect and communicate with patients in a meaningful way that can lead to a much better patient-physician relationship and therefore a healthier outcome in all aspects of the relationship.

Patients want and need to know what your expectations of them are and they want to receive their medical care in a friendly environment. They want to have a connection with your office and to be able to communicate with you in ways that you might be overlooking.

When patients feel they communicate well with their physician, they are more likely to follow their doctor's advice.

If they feel they aren't able to connect with you, they are likely to move on to another practice. In fact, patients who had a consistent relationship with a single physician were healthier and more satisfied with their care than those who hopped between doctors according to a review published in 2010 in the *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practices*.

It is equally important to improve communications with your current and active patients as well as potential new patients that are shopping for a doctor that meets their expectations.

Finding ways to better communicate with patients doesn't have to be hard. Utilizing technology that patients are already used to using and that they prefer to use can open up a whole new line of communication and trust-building. It can also be an effective marketing tool and help you build your patient base.

Traditionally, physicians have spent little time communicating with patients outside of office visits and they have failed to communicate what they learned from patients into a more personalized patient connection.

Challenges in Dealing with Patients

Practices face daily challenges of dealing with patients who need a prescription refill, want lab results or just need to communicate with the practice in a more meaningful way.

If practices can teach their patients how to be good patients, financial results can be improved.

Using social media to provide patients with your office policies is a very effective patient (customer) service that gives patients a clear understanding of your expectations and their responsibilities.

You can reduce time-wasters like:

- Missed appointments due to no-shows
- Calls about lab results
- Calls about prescription refills
- Calls about carriers you participate with

You can reduce patient wait times by:

- Putting your office/patient forms online and asking patients to complete them and bring to their appointment.
- Posting the information you need patients to bring to their appointment such as, drivers license and insurance card

With all the online information available to patients, it stands to reason they are able to be a better advocate for themselves. They better understand options available and have the resources to make better educated decisions and are becoming better at communicating their preferences and expectations when they seek medical care.

Better Communication

For some, a patient's only means of communicating with their healthcare provider is over the phone talking with a staff member or during an office visit. Unless a practice specifically communicates office policies or test results, patients often have to call their doctor's office to ask.

Hurried doctors miss an opportunity to connect with patients and can make them feel rushed and consequently forgetful of something they wanted to talk to the doctor about.

Communicating results from tests but also explaining what the results mean or why you did the test can go a long way toward helping patients make better decisions about their care and can build trust and confidence in the relationship. And communicating office policies on obtaining results can prevent unnecessary phone calls and wasted staff time.

When patients feel they can't communicate well with their doctor's office, the relationship often isn't a good fit for either.

Solution – Shared Responsibility Using Technology

Patients and providers alike can share in connecting with each other for better communication and outcomes. They can each provide information of value to the other through mutual investment.

For instance, patients can easily learn your office hours or what to do in the event of an emergency or you can notify them of delays or office closings if you make this information readily available to them. You can provide patients with educational information and allow them to review their statement online and you can participate in community activities all by utilizing available technology that patients are already used to using. Patients benefit from your easily obtained office information and you benefit by getting their commitment to your practice and understanding of your expectations.

We as consumers want information and we want it as fast as we can get it. Patients are no different.

Regarding marketing, Larry Beardall, executive vice president of marketing and sales for Dynatronics, a national manufacturer and distributor of medical equipment and products, says "there now exists an inherent expectation that information be instantly available and increasing assumption that communication with a practice be a two-way street."

Patients expect doctors to communicate with them in ways they want to communicate and that essentially means through multiple methods.

Savvy practices can use social media to better communicate with patients to improve relationships.

Improving Communications

Studies have shown that improving communication improves outcomes.

If we apply this same logic to improving communication in other aspects of the doctor-patient relationship, we can also improve the financial results of the practice.

Communication starts at the onset of the patient appointment.

Firm, consistent financial policies are a customer service that patients deserve and expect.

Ask for your patients' assistance with and understanding of your policies.

For new patients – briefly explain your policies and make them available through your website, facebook page, fax, mail or email.

When everyone in the office is on-board with your policies, it's easy to refer patients back to them with warmth and courtesy. It prevents undermining staff and gives you a way to avoid creating spoiled patients.

The very best marketing efforts should not only harness the power of social media but also include features that improve office efficiencies, enhance patient conveniences and drive revenues, according to Cynthia Ford-Sanders, a medical editor covering both clinical and business news impacting the healthcare industry.

Of course, in using this technology, there are inherent responsibilities in protecting patient confidentiality and physician reputation.

Ford-Sanders noted that the underlying message was in today's climate – opting out of social media is really no option at all.

Reasons to Use Social Media

The following are good reasons to consider using social media to connect with patients:

- Better communication methods
- Better outcomes
- Empower patients with knowledge
- Better inform patients to connect with them and build trust and confidence
- Branding to differentiate your practice from others
- Can reduce staff time and allow for fewer interruptions
- Increase productivity effectiveness
- Collect more money from patients
- Allows you to maintain relationships with patients and colleagues
- Starts a dialogue with patients and gives you a voice
- Promotes and fosters a sense of community
- Can provide realistic expectations of treatment

Content Ideas

There is a wealth of information you can share with patients to improve the doctor-patient relationship:

- Office policies
- Printed educational materials
- Surveys
- Contests
- Donations and giveaways
- Inclement weather cancellations
- Compelling patient stories
- Introductions of staff members and other providers within the practice
- News of procedures or techniques
- New services
- Immunization and vaccination information
- Fundraisers
- Celebrations

Policies to share using social media:

- Requirements and importance of maintaining current account information (address, insurance, responsible party)
- Forms of payment (cash, credit cards, checks) by fax, mail, website options
- Patient history forms (re-do every six months)
- Returned check fees
- Obtaining medical records and fees
- Billing cycle information
- Hardship application and documentation
- Services for minor children
- Delinquent accounts
- Missed appointments
- Hours of operation
- After-hours and on call coverage
- Referrals
- Billing inquiries
- Self-pay accounts
- Completion of forms
- Assignment of benefits
- Secondary claims filing
- Circumstances for discharged patients (delinquent or not following doctor's advice)
- Patient privacy and HIPAA
- How codes for visits are selected based on AMA guidelines

Types of Social Media

Website – This should be your primary method of connecting with your patients and providing information about your practice. Be sure to name your site something that patients can easily remember and access and don't forget to list it with search engines.

Texting – Texting can easily allow you to let patients know about delays and inclement weather cancellations. You can also remind patients of appointments. Texting is a good communication service to provide patients with, but is often overlooked.

Newsletter – You can provide patients with information about your latest company gathering, clinic information, a new service or product, education information and more. Newsletters are an effective tool and you can provide them monthly, quarterly or annually. It gives you a way to reach out to your patients and stay connected.

eBook – eBooks are electronic versions of information where there is too much content to provide in a basic document. They can be used by practices to provide patients with follow up care info or options regarding surgery. The point is, they can be easily accessed by patients through your website and they provide information you want to share with patients.

Email – Emails allow you to communicate patient appointment reminders, birthday wishes, promotions, surveys and more.

Wiki - A collaborative website which can be directly edited using a web browser, often by anyone with access to it. Wikis can be used for practices that want to provide a lot of varied content to their patients that can be easily searched and presented.

Facebook – Facebook allows you to communicate with patients online in a simple format. A facebook page can be easily updated quickly with a few words directed toward page fans (patients). It's a great way to connect with patients who likely already use facebook to communicate in other meaningful ways with friends, family and businesses. In fact, facebook is quickly becoming a preferred method of staying in touch with others.

Flickr – Practices can use Flickr to store photos that you want patients to be able to access. This can be especially advantageous to physicians that use photos to show before and after pictures.

Blog – Blogs are used to provide information in an editorial or opinion type format. Many physicians subscribe to blogs to stay informed themselves or they use them to provide information to patients in addition to a website.

YouTube – Some doctors are using YouTube to demonstrate information and education to patients. It's free and extremely easy to use. Physicians can create a YouTube channel for communicating with patients and easily link to Facebook or a website. A study published in August 2010 by Forrester Research found that the public has come to expect online videos. They can be used to demonstrate procedures and post-op care using props and models.

A website should be your primary method of connecting with patient to provide patients with information like:

- Patient registration forms
- HIPAA policies and notification of privacy practices
- Office policies – (hours, obtaining refills, lab results, payment methods and expectations)
- Educational information
- Services offered
- Provider and staff introductions and pictures
- FAQs
- Online statements and payments

Your facebook page should supplement your website and can include things like contests, surveys, celebrations and inclement weather office closings.

Texting should be reserved for appointment reminders and office delays if the patient approves.

Email communications should be limited to informational purposes unless you use a secure email service that is HIPAA compliant.

Physicians should consider subscribing to blogs their colleagues provide to stay abreast of changes and new techniques.

Twitter – This is a “micro-blogging” method of communication. You can use Twitter to recruit new providers, share information, market and connect with patients.

Before You Say No

Everyone has heard stories about medical practices that do not have internet access in their office. In today’s environment where patients want to connect with healthcare providers in a more meaningful way, it’s really not an option to ignore social media as a viable method of communication.

It’s understandable that you might fear your staff may abuse internet access or worse, waste your time when they should be working. Set some ground rules on when and how your staff can use the internet. You may be surprised by their ability to connect with others for support and information about billing and coding. That could lead to your staff becoming more efficient and productive at collecting your money. You can and should monitor staff use of the internet. Setting boundaries for staff internet use and communicating your expectations will help prevent abuse.

If you don’t have a website, why not? Potential patients can’t find you without one and your current patients can’t learn your expectations without you providing that information to them. You can alleviate a lot of time-wasters by providing all the relevant information online that your patients need to know. They will become good patients in the long run. You’ll collect more money and your current patients will know what to expect. And, you’ll build trust and confidence as well. It’s a win-win for your practice.

Plan Ahead

Dedicate a particular person to spend one hour a day to get started. Formulate a plan and incorporate a website if you don’t already have one.

Add at least one to three additional social media methods of communication as you go. You don’t have to implement everything at once, but you need to implement some of these methods to compete with other practices and to improve your overall practice and patient outcomes. It’s something you can work up to.

Conclusion

Using social media to connect with patients is reasonably inexpensive or free in most cases. It shows patients that you’re capable of and interested in using new technology and provides you with several alternative methods of communication.

Patients already use this type of technology and they want to communicate with healthcare providers in meaningful ways. Social media allows you to connect with patients in the simplest ways and allows you to build trust and confidence while improving the doctor-patient relationship.

You can find all kinds of information available to tweet, post and blog by also using these technologies yourself.

Tips for Optimum Results

Choose a name for your website that patients can easily recall.

Use a similar or the same name if possible when setting up a facebook or Twitter account. Keep in mind that business facebook pages cannot get a permanent address until you have 25 fans to “like” your page.

Example:

AMBA’s domain is ambanet.net. Our Twitter account is AMBAnet and our facebook page is AMBAnet. This makes it easy for our members to recall our pages.

Plan your campaign to be a more patient centered practice to include at least a website and one to three other social media options.

Remember, patients want to communicate with you in ways they already use – and that means Facebook, texting, email, Twitter and more.

Professional associations, like AMBA, provide a lot of information to members they can in-turn share with others.

You can and should use all of the social media methods we discussed to teach your patients to be good patients. And, if you improve communication, your office will run more efficiently. Ultimately, this will benefit the doctor-patient relationship by building trust and confidence.

Resources

Get information to share with patients and learn more about communicating with patients at the [American Medical Billing Association](#)

Start a [Facebook page](#)

[Creating, promoting and administering](#) a Facebook page information

Join [Twitter](#)

Twitter [basics](#)

What's a [blog](#)?

[How to](#) Make a Blog

[Create](#) a YouTube account

[Flickr](#)

[Create](#) an eBook

[Create](#) a newsletter

[Free wiki](#) software

Sources

[Patient-Physician Communication: Why and How](#)

[Five Steps for Better Patient Outcomes](#)

[The Impact of Patient Centered Care on Outcomes](#)

[The Perils and Pitfalls of Social Networks: Professional Associations Respond](#)

[Harnessing Social Media to Drive Revenue](#)

[Top 10 Reasons to Fire Your Doctor](#)

About the [American Medical Billing Association \(AMBA\)](#)

AMBA is a professional association for independent third party and doctors office medical billers founded in 1998. For nearly 12 years, AMBA has offered the national Certified Medical Reimbursement Specialist (CMRS) exam credential for medical billing. AMBA members pride themselves on utilizing the most up-to-date technology available and in offering doctors and other healthcare providers a higher standard in professional medical billing services.

SM in Medicine Case Studies and Articles

- [Sleep Scholar Facebook Page](#)
- [Case Study in Social Media](#)
- [How Social Media has Changed my Practice](#)
- [Why Your Medical Practice Should Adopt Social Media](#)
- [How Social Media Changed One Medical Practice](#)

Social Media Facts

Social networking site usage grew 88 percent among Internet users aged 55-64 between April 2009 and May 2010 (Pew Research)

Social Media has overtaken porn as the #1 activity on the Web (Huffington Post)

Facebook tops Google for weekly traffic in the U.S. (Hitwise Intelligence Heather Dougherty http://weblogs.hitwise.com/heather-dougherty/2010/03/facebook_reaches_top_ranking_1.html)

- **200 million** views of YouTube via mobile per day (Source: Google)
- **30 billion** pieces of content (e.g., links, photos, notes) * are shared on Facebook each month *
- **25 billion** tweets were sent on Twitter in 2010 *
- **152 million** blogs on the Internet at the end of 2010 *
- **100 million** new accounts added on Twitter in 2010 * (Source: Royal Pingdom)

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