



Double Your New Patient Conversions

The Importance of Inbound Phone Calls



About eDoctors:

eDoctors.com is a medical-practice marketing service that helps physicians Find, Convert and Retain their patient base. They operate a portfolio of health-specific websites that generate over 20 million unique visitors each month as well as a suite of technical and training resources focused on improving the value of medical practices through better communications with their patients. To find out more about eDoctors visit www.edoctors.com.

About the Author:

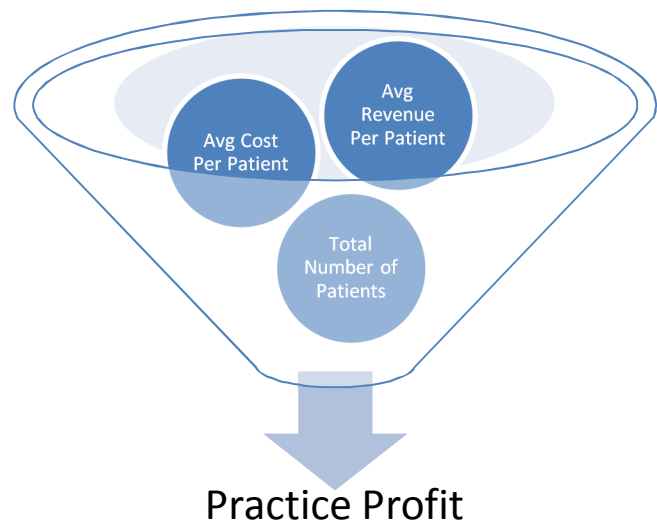
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The Patient Centric Model of Practice Profitability

In the world of healthcare, particularly in physician practices, emphasizing patient value and spending money to market your practice was once deemed unethical; physicians were held to a higher standard and expected to focus solely on treating their patients. But with the cost of education constantly rising, the increased expenses of running a practice, and the decreased insurance reimbursements, it has grown clear that a thriving private practice requires effort and business acumen.

From a profit-and-loss perspective, the patient-centric medical practice relies on three core drivers of performance: number of patients served, average revenue per patient, and the total costs associated with serving those patients. Each of these profit drivers is filled with nuance, but stepping back and focusing on the fundamentals can help you identify potential areas of improvement. This paper's focus is on one of these drivers – growing the size of your patient base. More specifically, we'll concentrate on how to convert more inbound inquiries into actual patient appointments.



How Do Patients Become *Your* Patients?

As methods of information sharing have become more varied and complex, so too have the sources of new patients. Twenty years ago the vast majority of patients came through some form of personal, insurance or physician referral. But today, more prospective patients are using Internet research and 3rd party recommendations from social media and online directories to help find a care provider.¹



Regardless of how a person found your practice, there is one important truth – all patients become *your* patients by showing up to an appointment with you. They have to make it on your calendar. And, according to our numbers, the majority of prospective patients still make their initial contact by picking up the phone and calling your front desk. Here at eDoctors, we see thousands of referrals pass through our system each month and, on average, phone calls outnumber other forms of initial contact (email, online form, etc.) by a ratio of 5 to 1.

The continued use of the telephone to create an appointment, coupled with the increased penchant for prospective patients to comparison shop, means one critical thing – the person answering your phones can make or break your chances of bringing in new patients. More and more, this first point of contact is playing a critical role in the ultimate decision making of the prospective patient. They've gathered their own information and are aware that your office is not their only choice. Today, that first experience is more critical than ever.

¹ According to Pew Internet's "Health" report (March 2012) 64% of US consumers are now turning to the Internet to research health issues. And according to PWC's "Social Media Likes Healthcare" report (April 2012), 40% of US consumers have reported that online information has influenced the way they coped with a chronic condition, their approach to diet and fitness and even their selection of a specific doctor.

Are you aware of the experience provided to prospective patients? Who is the person answering the phone and delivering that first impression? In many cases, this is the same person who manages your waiting room, processes billing issues, checks insurance coverage and reimbursement, handles patient records, deals with suppliers, and sometimes even helps out in examination rooms. It is typically someone with a lot going on when that phone rings.

Your front desk may be filled with rock stars, able to juggle all of their tasks and provide a fantastic first impression to your prospective patients. More than likely, however, something is falling through the cracks. To be honest, the vast majority of medical practices we speak with don't know if anything is falling through the cracks let alone what can be done to improve the situation.

“If You Can Measure It, You Can Manage It”²

From a business perspective, one of the largest pitfalls we see with medical practices is the lack of quantifiable performance metrics around office operations and marketing. In the age of pen and paper, compiling and accessing the necessary data was overly onerous and not a priority relative to treating patients. In the digital age, however, data can be gathered efficiently and must be analyzed to best understand where improvements can be made.

Once you accept that your office phone and the staff answering it are the most important entry point for new patients, then it is important to begin tracking calls and analyzing what happens during these conversations. **The two most important metrics for this are:**

1. ***The number of calls from prospective patients:*** It can be most effective to divide this category up depending on what method patients used to find you, which can be done by setting up different tracking phone numbers for each of your marketing vehicles (e.g. website, yellow pages, directories, advertisements, referral sheets, etc.). Having a reporting infrastructure that makes it easy to view these can help to quickly make comparisons across channels and identify opportunities to alter your investment strategy.
2. ***The conversion rate of these prospective calls.*** How many appointments were made relative to the total number of prospective patients who called the office? By setting up tracking numbers and analyzing what happened during each of the calls – a service eDoctors performs for their clients – you can not only track conversions but identify valuable improvements that can be easily implemented by your front-desk staff. And with this reporting in place you can not only understand the volume of calls coming in by channel, but the quality of those calls as well.

But beware: What you find may surprise you.

The 3 Most Common Errors Keeping You From New Patients

Once you start to measure and analyze prospective patient calls, you will immediately see room for improvement. There is always room for improvement. After analyzing thousands of calls across a variety of medical practices, we've found that the average front desk is not adequately prepared to succeed with prospective patient callers. More often than not, our research discovered that callers' first impressions are less than optimal and, more often than not, cause a potential client to walk away.

On initial assessment, before we begin working with practices to improve their phone-handling skills, we see that the average practice converts prospective patients' inbound phone calls less than 15% of the time. These individuals have been guided to your practice, taken the time to call your office seeking help, and yet less than 1 in 7 ends up as an appointment in your calendar. You could chalk this up to low-quality callers, but even when you strip out the tire-kickers and window-shoppers, the conversion rate only rises to about 20%.

We have found that **there are three common mistakes made by front-desk staff that result in missed bookings:**

1. ***The (lack of) Human Touch:*** Phone trees can be critical time savers in a busy medical practice. However, offices all-too frequently adopt highly complex phone trees that leave a caller confused and frustrated. In addition, once callers choose the correct line, they are often immediately placed on hold, left listening to music and wondering whether they should have even called this office – many simply hang up.

Improvement Step: If you require a complex phone tree to route calls, invest in a multi-level tree that keeps each step simple, with limited choices. Guide the caller to the correct choice rather than giving her a large laundry list to remember.

Improvement Step: Aim to significantly reduce the number of calls automatically placed on hold. We have found that it is better to quickly answer all calls, and if you need to place someone on hold to do so in a manner that displays respect and empathy.

2. **Impatience:** Your front-desk staff has many high-priority tasks at hand when a call comes in, but providing callers with rushed, one-word answers to their questions is a surefire way to create a negative first impression.

Improvement Step: People often call doctors' offices with some trepidation and nervousness (even for cosmetic treatments). Taking the extra minute to present a caring attitude can do wonders to put a caller at ease and making her trust your office's advice. Make sure your front-desk staff is educated about your procedures to a degree that they can, in turn, educate callers in a calm and caring manner. Unfortunately all the best intentions can fly out the window when someone is rushed by conflicting priorities. One simple technique your office staff can do to help improve a caller's first impression – before picking up the phone, take a deep breath and **smile**.

3. **Not Asking:** The most common mistake made by front-desk staff is simply not asking the caller to book an appointment. We hear it over and over. Calls lasting 10 minutes and longer with clearly qualified, prospective patients end with no attempt by the office staff to ask for an appointment. If the front desk doesn't understand that this is part of their role, it won't happen naturally.

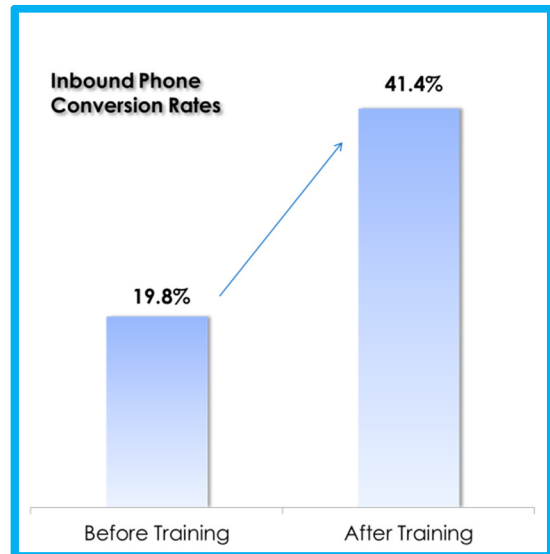
Improvement Step: If the caller is deemed to be a qualified, prospective patient, ask when they she come in to see the doctor. This isn't about "sales", per se, but rather it's about advising the prospective patient to make a decision and take the next step. Remember, many callers are dealing with a scary situation – a health issue – and often will be indecisive. Asking the question, "When are you available to come in and see the doctor?" helps them receive the treatment they seek.

Case Study: There's Always Room for Improvement

eDoctors was approached by a leading cosmetic dermatology practice to help improve their marketing spend and grow their patient base. As a first step, we gave the key sources of inbound patient queries—their website, their Google Places page, their Yelp listing, and a handful of paid directory sites—different phone numbers so as to instantly sort where the queries came from.

After tracking call volumes, conversion rates and general front-desk practices with inbound calls we determined that the practice was doing quite well. Their average conversion rate was 19.8% -- high, relative to many of their peers. Our work was cut out for us if we were going to demonstrate improvement.

Despite their success, we noticed patterns in the office's call-handling tactics that were not ideal. For instance, the front-desk staff was quick to quote procedure prices without learning a little more about the prospective patient. This immediately sent the caller into comparison-shopping mode rather than solution mode and prompted them to call other providers. Also, too often, whoever answered the phone simply failed to ask for an appointment. With a caller in shopping mode and a less-than proactive front desk, many people hung up without becoming a patient.



Over the course of two months, the eDoctors team provided feedback and training that built the skills and confidence of the front-desk staff. Since then, the facility has more than doubled their conversion rate – from 19.8 to 41.1%. Even better, calls coming in from their Yelp pages are converting at a rate of 52.4%.

Measure and Improve

If you find that your front desk is suffering from low inbound conversions, hope is not lost. The eDoctors team has worked with numerous practices and seen dramatic improvements as a result of continual tracking, skills training, and, in some cases, strategic resource investments.

With one of our clients, a cosmetic dermatology practice, three months of monitoring and coaching improved the office's conversion rates from 19.8% to 41.4%. This more than doubled the return-on-investment from their marketing spend. In another example, an infertility clinic recognized that the increase in conversions and resulting patients that would come by hiring a incremental, dedicated phone rep far outweighed the investment. With continued tracking and managing of that dedicated person against measurable performance metrics, conversions have exceeded the initial plan.

The value of your office phone has never been greater. It is still the focal point through which the vast majority of new patients book their appointments. With increased use of the Internet to find care providers, prospective patients are significantly less tolerant of long phone delays, and inattentive (sometimes even rude) staff. Patients are turning the act of finding and choosing a physician into a consumer sport and, as such, it is becoming increasingly important for physicians to take their cues from the business world: It is vital to understand the value of these patients and find ways to increase this value. Don't fail at the first step in the process. Don't lose a patient before they even become a patient. Track, manage, and improve the capabilities of those answering your phones.

¹According to Pew Internet's "Health" report (March 2012) 64% of US consumers are now turning to the Internet to research health issues. Also, according to PWC's "Social Media Likes Healthcare" report (April 2012), 40% of US consumers have reported that online information has influenced the way they coped with a chronic condition, their approach to diet and fitness and even their selection of a specific doctor.

²This quote is often attributed to Lord Kelvin but has been adopted by many business thought leaders including W. Edwards Deming, Peter Drucker, Bill Hewlett and others.



For More Information on how eDoctors can help
your practice grow, please contact us at:

1.866.499.5661

or visit

www.edoctors.com

