Case Study: Positive Outcomes with Automated Patient Messaging for Lab Results and Appointment Reminders

Abstract:
Using automated patient messaging to augment provider-patient lab result communication as well as for appointment reminders resulted in improved workflow and significant no-show reduction for an internal medicine practice.

Story:
At Elmbrook Internal Medicine in Brookfield, WI, daily operation had grown increasingly busy. Practice services were in demand, and the staff was fully occupied — yet as the practice was working hard to give patients the best care, office staff found themselves spending ever more time walking to and from the filing area, tracking down charts, and individually phoning patients about lab results — with great energy going into simply managing the communication process.

“Our staff was spending a lot of time refiling charts due to patient calls,” says Lemmie Reiss, Elmbrook’s Office Manager. “We had to individually retrieve charts to relay results and then replace each one.” With over 30,000 appointments and over 16,500 lab tests annually (and growing), each minute the Elmbrook staff had to devote to contacting patients was becoming increasingly burdensome in terms of labor costs and declining efficiency. The seemingly minor process of relaying information had turned into a major distraction for the staff, who otherwise could have been proactive about contacting patients.

But even that process was presenting drawbacks. Reiss says, “It was very time consuming, especially if patients weren’t home. It would at times take us 3-5 calls per patient to deliver results, or we would have to wait on the patient to call us back.”

This ultimately meant less time for other tasks, such as reminding patients of upcoming scheduled appointments. With no-shows at about 9% of total visits, Elmbrook’s administration was well aware that appointment reminders were an important and appreciated part of patient communication — but with only so many hours in the day, they were physically unable to contact all patients. “We only had time to call new patients,” says Reiss. This was favorable neither for the practice nor for patients.

Elmbrook knew there had to be a better way, and began investigating the PhoneTree Patient
Messaging and PhoneTree Lab Results products. Based on positive feedback from colleagues, Elmbrook looked to PhoneTree Patient Messaging for a singular reason: proven positive outcome.

“It was recommended by fellow practitioners due to their happiness with outcomes,” says Reiss. “We hoped it would ease the staff’s burden of making and returning phone calls to patients.” With patient test result communication, Elmbrook’s goal was twofold: (1) notifying patients about results being available, and (2) fielding incoming calls from patients calling in for results. PhoneTree Patient Messaging and PhoneTree Lab Results delivered for the practice on both counts.

Elmbrook implemented PhoneTree Patient Messaging to automatically notify patients once lab results became available, with instructions given according to the results. “Our approach is that when they leave the office, we tell them to expect a call from us regarding their results,” says Reiss. “When we get the results we separate the ‘normals’ and ‘non-normals’ and only the ‘normals’ are notified to call PhoneTree Lab Results.” Patients then have 24-hour access to their results via touchtone personal identification numbers assigned at checkout.

Outcome:

“Patients love it,” says Reiss, “because they know when their results are ready — they can get their results quickly and go on with the day. As well, our ‘non-normals’ receive more attention because we’re not interrupted throughout the day to deliver ‘normal’ results.”

Reiss adds, “With PhoneTree Lab results, we spend less time on the phone and fewer charts are out of the filing room. We’ve seen a sharp reduction in call volume.”

Reduced incoming call volume, however, wasn’t the only benefit Elmbrook had started to experience.

With PhoneTree Patient Messaging, every Elmbrook patient was also automatically receiving an appointment reminder call — not just new patients, as before. The result: an 83% reduction in no-shows.

This calculation may sound unrealistic, but as Elmbrook’s pre- and post-installation numbers illustrate, the overall rate decrease of 83% was calculated to be approximately 1.4 patients per doctor, per day. Reiss says, “When we implemented PhoneTree Patient Messaging, our no-show rate dropped dramatically from about 12 per day to 2 per day.” At almost $100 per patient for a 7-provider practice, this reduction in no-shows translated into a substantial return on investment for Elmbrook — in addition to the reduction of disruptive incoming phone calls, chart handling, and relaying lab results, all to the relief of Elmbrook’s staff.

Reiss concludes, “Workflow has improved, and with fewer no-shows they can focus on essential office duties such as referring our ‘non-normals’ and scheduling. They love it.”

Daily Lost Revenue as a Result of Missed Appointments

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