

access transparency
availability

Practice Growth: What Do Patients Want?

It all boils down to access, availability,
and transparency.

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Are you looking to grow or build your practice? There are effective strategies for doing so which have remained the same for decades, and today's practitioners have many "new" tools to help them implement these strategies. In 1973, Sherwin Levy, DPM, and I delivered a lecture focused on the two practice building strategies touted at the time as being highly effective for growing a practice. These were: speeding patient access to the office and increasing doctor-staff availability to patients. This was decades before the introduction of personal computers, the Internet, cell phones, or fax machines—meaning that doctors were limited by a dependence on paper appointment books, land-lines, and telephone books. Although healthcare has undergone constant change since that time, it turns out that the same issues of access and availability are still considered the "gateways" to growth that they were decades ago.

In 1973, most doctors were utilizing "week-at-a-glance" appointment books. This tool, which was almost universally employed, consisted

of vertical columns of time slots, with one column for each day of the week. Obviously, the book limited the staff's ability to plan effectively and only allowed the doctor to see a relatively small number of patients daily, which critically hindered growth. Typical books had 20 treatment slots per day, and a doctor's daily schedule was "controlled" by those 20 slots—artificially limiting his/her availability. Further restric-

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them in ways that simply automated the same scheduling constraints as before. Many also continued to limit the number of phone lines into their offices in order to “save on overhead.”

Fast forward to 2019: A July 25, 2019 article in *Medical Economics* listed the six top conveniences that patients expect from today’s medical practices. These are: 1) availability, 2) easy online appointment-setting, 3) quick response to patient questions, 4) short wait times, 5) streamlined paperwork, and 6) transparent pricing. Another article published a month earlier in that same journal focused on meeting the demands of younger patients—Millennials and Gen Zs. These two groups listed the same six expectations and added another—“same day appointments”—to the list.

Significantly, patient expectations are all focused on the same issues of access and availability as were those of patients in 1973. Offering any of these “conveniences” increases patient satisfaction and serves as a magnet for growth. Whether you are currently in private practice or employed by a group, there is good reason for you to be making every attempt to meet these expectations.

Streamlining a practice to offer these services has never been an easy undertaking—which is why some practices remain stagnant while others continue to grow. Fortunately, meeting these challenges today is easier than ever before because we have abundant new technology which opens so many possibilities for meeting our patients’ expectations—technologies such as online appointment scheduling and multiple avenues for responding quickly to questions and streamlining paperwork—none of which were available in 1973.

On-line scheduling enables a patient to make his/her appointment at any hour, on any day, with no waiting on “hold” or creating disruption at the front desk. Return appointments can now be made by back office staff—or the doctor—from computer terminals located in treatment

rooms. Such scheduling is efficient because those making these appointments from the “back office” are most knowledgeable as to why patients are returning and the amount of time that will be needed for their care. Each of these options creates a more efficient work-flow, reduces patient wait time, and increases physician availability.

Although today’s trend towards larger, group practices has increased availability for many patients, there are still those in small groups or solo

are actually less expensive than they had expected. Another draw—offering same-day appointments—requires no special technology, but it does require a supportive mind-set. It would be helpful to read articles written on this topic to see if this is something that might work for you. This practice is especially helpful to those wanting to attract younger patients to their practices. [Note, an article on same day appointments was published in the October, 2019, issue of *Podiatry Management*].

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practice. Many tools for increasing availability are also open to these smaller practices. Any size practice can utilize forms that can be completed on-line before a patient’s visit. This process speeds up check-in and streamlines paperwork for both patients and staff. Quick responses to patient questions can also be enabled in small as well as large practices through email. The use of this tool is becoming standard practice for doctors who can now respond quickly and effectively to questions by email.

While some may worry about the liability of this practice, many larger, established medical centers use this technology today. It has, for example, become standard practice for all UCLA doctors to respond within 24 hours to patient emails received through the UCLA secure portal containing questions regarding treatment and requests for prescriptions. Not only has this practice had a positive impact on patient satisfaction and their perception of quality at UCLA, it also actually has improved quality of care because the process has facilitated patient compliance with prescribed treatment.

Transparent pricing is something else that patients want, and this is easily accomplished using a practice’s website. Perhaps, an unexpected benefit is that many patients are pleased when they find that services

In the effort to establish “pay for quality” policies, many measures of quality have been used to rate or rank doctors. It is significant that the one measure that has correlated consistently with “quality” is patient satisfaction, and meeting the seven “expectations” listed above is what, for most patients, delivers that satisfaction. Meeting each of these expectations is highly important to employers and payers as well and serves as a deciding factor for referrals, inclusion in certain contracts and networks, negotiating contract rates, and long-term practice growth. It would be worthwhile for any doctor to determine how well his/her practice, group, or employer is doing in these seven areas and then target improvement in any of these areas that s/he finds lacking. Implementing and optimizing all of these “conveniences” desired by patients will have a positive impact on your practice’s long-term success. **PM**



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