

Introduction

As the population of the United States continues to grow, so too does the need for healthcare services and options. According to projections by Alexandria, Va.-based ProximityOne, the U.S. population will increase to 337.1 million by 2020, a 27.7 million-person increase from 2010. This, in turn, will result in a swell in the number of patients seeking care at medical facilities, hospitals, wellness centers, physicians' practices and holistic groups.

While patient growth certainly has its benefits, it also creates new challenges for facility administrators and their staff. Processes and procedures that previously were adequate may no longer be effective in handling a rise in new patients, prompting administrators to seek out alternatives and new technology and techniques to assist them and their patients.

One process affected almost immediately from an increase in patients is appointment-scheduling. A requirement for individual care or to attend seminars, events and other activities at most medical, healthcare and wellness facilities, this seemingly simple task can quickly become burdensome and challenging to staff members. This is especially true if the facility continues to rely on the most standard—and also most inefficient—manner of scheduling appointments: over the phone.

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While common in some office settings, scheduling appointments over the phone is a time- and resource-draining process that's also inconvenient for patients, especially in our Web-connected society where more and more individuals prefer to conduct common tasks—such as scheduling appointments—online instead of picking up the phone and calling them in.

Technological advancements like online scheduling software have made the patient-booking process easier for both administrative staff and patients alike. This white paper details the benefits of implementing an online scheduling system, considerations when utilizing it, and what to look for in a provider.

The Benefits of an Online Scheduling System

Commonly referred to by such names as online scheduling software, online booking applications and online scheduler, an online scheduling system is a Web-based application that allows individuals to conveniently and securely book their appointments and reservations online through any Web-connected device, such as a computer, laptop, smartphone or tablet. They typically access the online scheduling system through a “Book Now” button found on a Web site or page, or from a URL provided to them by the medical, healthcare or wellness facility. Once a date and time are selected, the system will automatically confirm the booking and instantly record it within the system, without any staff action needed.

In addition to online scheduling, online scheduling systems also come equipped with other beneficial features like automated e-mail and text message reminders, which the system sends out to patients and booked individuals on a specific date prior to their scheduled appointment; recording and record-keeping capabilities that make it quick and simple to access data associated with a specific appointment; and repeat patient reminders, which the system sends out automatically when a specified amount of time has expired between appointments.



The flexibility of online scheduling software enables it to be utilized for a variety of different services and activities at medical, healthcare and wellness facilities, such as:

- Scheduling patient appointments, treatments and services.

- Booking vaccine and inoculation clinics, as a flu shots.
- Scheduling on-site seminars, events and activities.

The benefits an online scheduling system for both administrative staff and patients and other booking individuals include:

As an example, let's look at a large medical facility that typically schedules approximately 100 appointments daily. Each appointment call is fielded by an administrative support staffer, who spends an average of four minutes on the phone. This equates to an average of 400 minutes—or almost seven hours—of time spend each day just to booking appointments over the phone.

Time savings.

Staff spends less time on the phone booking and managing appointments, thereby freeing up their schedule for more important and pressing tasks. Booking individuals also save time, as they no longer have to commit a part of their busy schedule to calling their medical, healthcare or wellness provider (or remain on hold, which adds minutes to the scheduling process).

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That's time savings just from scheduling appointments alone. Other tasks automated by an online scheduling system, such as automated appointment reminders, add additional time savings to daily operations.

Monetary savings.

The time savings experienced by a facility can translate into monetary savings, as both staff time and services translate into expenses and revenue, respectively. As staff resources can now be directed at other tasks, a scheduling system can eliminate the need for a staff member to work overtime or for management to hire new staff members to handle the work overload created by the appointment-scheduling process. In the latter scenario, the savings could be quite significant, as an average yearly salary of a medical office administrative assistant is \$36,000 (according to Indeed.com).

Additionally, the aforementioned automated appointment reminders can also create monetary savings by reducing the number of “no-shows” who fail to make their scheduled appointments. Surveys have shown that these types of reminders can decrease this number by 50 percent.

Let’s assume that the value of a single appointment at a medical facility is \$175 dollars, and that facility averages five “no-shows” each day. This equals \$875 in lost daily revenue. Now, if the number of “no-shows” was reduced by half by utilizing online appointment reminders, the facility would save around \$437 each day in lost revenue.

24-Hour Convenience.

Scheduling appointments over the phone usually requires an individual to phone in during office hours, as few facilities offer round-the-clock phone booking. This is an inconvenience for most patients, as they too are working at this time. Additionally, many individuals prefer to schedule their appointments online rather than over the phone. An online scheduling system allows for 24-hour scheduling, not just during normal facility or office hours.



Considerations

While the actual implementation of an online scheduling system is typically seamless and relatively simple, there are considerations that medical, healthcare and wellness facilities should keep in mind when transitioning to Web-based booking. They include:

Optional or required? One question administrators should answer is whether or not to make online scheduling a requirement. Requiring that all appointments be made online can certainly free up staff responsibilities and schedules, but it can also be a hindrance to those without easy access to the Internet or who prefer to schedule their appointments over the phone. Many facilities give their patients and clients the option of booking online, which typically brings good results.

Patient demographic. This could have an effect on the success of an online scheduling system whose goal is to provide online scheduling. Facilities, centers and practices with younger patients and clients may have an easy transition, as this group is typically Internet savvy and actually prefer to schedule appointments online. On the other end of the spectrum are sites with a large number of senior patients and clients. Although the initial determination may be that this group would not have an interest in scheduling online, a Pew Research Center Internet and American Life Project survey shows that social networking among Internet users ages 50-64 grew 88 percent—from 25 percent to 47 percent—from April 2009 to May 2010, while use among those ages 65 and older grew 100 percent from 13 percent to 26 percent during that same period. However, there still exists a significant percentage in this group that may not be comfortable scheduling online, which should be a consideration when determining how to

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best utilize a scheduling system (such as whether or not to require online appointments from patients). Case in point, a Pew Internet survey showed that, as of January 2009, 38 percent of U.S. adults age 65 and older go online, a much lower rate of Internet adoption than the general population percentage of 74 percent.

HIPAA compliance. Given the online interaction and transfer of information between a facility and its patients, compliance of Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) provisions is an important consideration when utilizing an online scheduling system. While dependent on technology, overall compliance also stems from the actual practices and

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procedures of a healthcare, medical or wellness facility. On the technology side, the scheduling system selected should include security and privacy policies that comply with HIPAA standards, such as encryption (SSL); system-user identifiers, such as logins and passwords; multiple user access levels; high-end physical server security; nightly backups; strong privacy policies; and timed log outs. On the operational procedures end, the facility should have strong internal policies regarding patient and customer information. In essence, the software itself should give the facility the ability to be HIPAA-compliant and provide it with the ability to adjust settings and preferences to ensure that this data is secured.

What to Look For in a Provider

A variety of online scheduling applications are available on the market today. However, they vary greatly in the types of features, functionality and services offered. Due diligence and research should be conducted when selecting an appointment scheduling software provider, given the important role it could play in the operations of healthcare, medical or wellness facility. Common considerations include:

Features and functionality. Although some features and functionality come standard with some scheduling systems, they can vary widely among the many service providers. A current analysis of both current and future needs can help facilities in the selection process. Creating a specified workflow typically requires the most time in the analysis process, and a provider should utilize the services of a team of specialists experienced with multiple variations of scheduling processes.

Professional services. Medical, healthcare and wellness facilities oftentimes have unique scheduling needs that stretch beyond the standard functionality of the system, as stated in the above. This is especially true of facilities with multiple locations, large numbers of staff and patients/customers, and a high volume of appointments. Many providers do not offer the professional services necessary to accommodate these needs. Inquire on what the provider currently offers and its limitations for customization and advanced services.

Security. As mentioned in the HIPAA compliance section above, security is a must when it comes to an online scheduling system. Reputable providers incorporate the latest security measures and practices, such as secure server databases, data storage and back-up procedures, processes related to failover and federal regulations, as well as the aforementioned HIPAA-compliant practices.



Cost. The cost of an online scheduling system for medical, healthcare and wellness facilities typically is determined by the scope of the operations and what the software will be used for. Smaller facilities may require just a basic set-up with a nominal monthly fee. Larger facilities and centers, however, typically will require more than just a basic subscription, especially if they utilize professional services, as mentioned in the above bullet item. Recognizing this, some scheduling providers offer a more cost-effective monthly package to accommodate the high usage and multiple locations common with most of these operations. (These costs would otherwise add up quickly if

purchased as individual accounts.) Reputable providers will write up a contract that includes all work to be done, requirements, the total cost of the work and monthly fees, and other information pertinent to both parties.

Customer support. 24-hour, live support should be a requirement when researching an online scheduling software provider. The ability to immediately reach a dedicated contact or support representative is imperative for a scheduling application that needs to be functional at all times and one that reaches across multiple locations.

Dependability. Longevity is usually a good tell-tale sign of a dependable service provider. Learn how long the provider has been in business. Another sign of a dependable application is feedback from other healthcare, medical and wellness facilities that utilize it in a similar fashion. Most providers are willing to provide references upon request.

Conclusion

The appointment-scheduling process, historically viewed as a necessary burden in medical offices, healthcare facilities and wellness centers, can be completely automated through an inefficient online scheduling software program. The benefits of implementing this technology touch everyone involved in the scheduling process, as administrators and staff can conduct their tasks more efficiently and accurately, while customers and clients have the ability to book their appointments and reservations quickly and more conveniently.

**To learn more about online scheduling software
and how it can improve your booking processes, visit**

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