

Building Dermatology Patient Relationships with AI Chat and Text Messaging



Automated communication tools could actually be the secret to a personal touch.

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>> The foundation of any relationship, including the doctor/patient relationship, is communication. However, it's not just about the way you talk to your patients. They have already formed an opinion about the practice long before treatment begins.

Most likely, the first communication a person has with a practice won't be with the doctor. It might be a conversation with a receptionist, a text message, or even an automated chat. While newer, high-tech contact methods might seem counterintuitive to a focus on personal service, they can actually improve patient communication and satisfaction.

WHY YOUR WEBSITE NEEDS A CHATBOT

The long-predicted rise of AI (artificial intelligence) in business, marketing, and daily life has arrived. Chatbot technology was one of the fastest growing trends in 2019, and it shows no signs of slowing. Yet some dermatologists have resisted implementing chatbots on their websites. Automated conversations seem counterintuitive to the personal service that is so important to patients.

Who would want to converse with an AI-driven, non-human? As it turns out, a lot of people do. More than two-thirds

of consumers have used a chatbot for customer service within the last year, and one-third want to see more businesses offer this option, according to statistics published by Outgrow. When implemented properly, a chatbot enhances, rather than detracts from, your standard of customer service.

People have not only come to accept AI, but also embrace its convenience. Roomba vacuums the floor and Alexa turns off the lights. Why not enjoy the convenience of a chatbot to answer simple questions about dermatologic care? Health concerns don't take weekends off, and people don't like to wait. A chatbot provides an interactive experience and the satisfaction of instant responses any time of day or night.

For practice owners, the greatest benefit is the ability to capture leads any time of day or night. Many people won't bother calling when they know your office is closed. They might plan to call later but move on and look at a few other dermatology websites first. By the next business day, the person might have chosen another doctor or completely forgotten about calling. A chatbot allows you to capture leads in the moment of interest. If the query is too complex for the bot to handle, you will have the person's

contact information and the ability to follow-up.

DON'T OVERLOOK THE POWER OF SIMPLE TEXTING

Text messages are simpler and shorter than voice calls. They give people the flexibility to multi-task and the ability to have a private conversation in a public place. The simplest way to tap into this trend is by adding a "Text us" option on your website, which allows mobile users to contact you with just a tap. However, texting is also a great way to communicate with patients (with their permission, of course).

The average response rate for text messages is 7.5 times higher than email, and three-quarters of consumers don't object to receiving opt-in branded texts. That makes texting the ideal medium for sending coupons and special offers, encouraging patients to leave reviews, aftercare follow-ups, and appointment reminders.

A recent Vanderbilt Medical Center case study shows the real world benefits of SMS implementation. Under the previous system, a patient would receive an automated voice call appointment reminder with a request to press a button on the keypad to confirm. Despite the simplicity, only 30 percent of patients confirmed. The

Dos and Don'ts of Implementing Text and Chat Technologies

- **DO** offer as many communication options as possible. Add a click-to-text button and chatbot on your website. Make your phone number and email easy to find. Respond to social media messages.
- **DON'T** make it difficult for patients to reach a real human. People like the convenience of chatbots, informative websites, and even educational pre-recorded phone messages. However, they don't like it when these are the only options. Make sure your phones are consistently answered during posted office hours without long hold times and that after-hour messages are returned promptly.
- **DO** take care in choosing your software, and make sure your webmaster has the skills to handle implementation. A chatbot—or any other feature—that does not work properly will quickly chase people away from your website. More importantly, the quality of your website impacts people's perceptions about your practice and about the level of care that they expect to receive.
- **DON'T** violate HIPAA. If you intend to send or request any PHI (protected health information) via text, chat, or any other means, make sure you know the laws. Your communication must be private and via HIPAA compliant technology, unless you have appropriate patient authorization. Remember that privacy laws cover social media, despite the relaxed and open nature of these platforms.
- **DO** communicate with patients on social media. Increasingly, people use platforms such as Facebook Messenger to contact businesses. Additionally, you want to respond to comments on your social posts in order to encourage engagement. Since there are multiple popular social platforms, most of which offer several ways to communicate, it would be overwhelming to check them all throughout the day. To improve response rate and save time, make sure that you or your social media manager is receiving notifications.

new system offered patients a choice of voice or text message reminders.

Not surprisingly, Vanderbilt's overall confirmation rate rose, with more than half of text recipients responding. Furthermore, the confirmation rate among people who chose voice reminders increased to 37 percent. This highlights the popularity and high engagement rate of SMS messaging. However, the confirmation rate for voice reminders also increased slightly, which highlights the importance of offering options. By nature, people are more satisfied and compliant with something they choose rather than something that is imposed on them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Most people like texting, and a growing number appreciate the convenience of chatbots. Even more importantly, they want the convenience of options. Keep an eye out for emerging technologies and trends, such as voice-activated chatbots, video calls, interactive website elements, and the latest social media features. Using multiple channels to reach out and giving people a variety of contact options is essential to forming good patient relationships—even before people become patients. ■

Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dermatologists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you're looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call 855-598-3320 for a free strategy session with Naren.

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