

# Using Technology to Maintain a Personal Touch with Patients

Patients do not want the convenience, efficiency, and lower costs achieved with better use of technology to compromise personal interactions with the doctor.

BY NAREN ARULRAJAH

With the ever-growing competition in the field of medical and cosmetic dermatology, patients have wider choices when they plan to visit a dermatologist. Secondly, the online information explosion has ensured that every potential patient is fairly well-informed and knows what he or she is looking for from a dermatologist. Many patients attach a lot of importance to dermatologists able to maintain a personal touch with them, despite their busy schedules, and provide them with personalized care and attention.

The challenge of personalized care to patients becomes greater for larger groups of healthcare providers offering services under a common umbrella, and not as single-provider practices. Such a consolidated approach to healthcare delivery is an effective way to manage costs, but from a patient's perspective, it can be off-putting due to reduced familiarity levels and personalization. A larger-sized practice can be more daunting for many patients, and this is an area that leading dermatologists need to address closely.

## PERSONAL INTERACTIONS

While Internet-based tools are well-accepted by most patients who use them to self-manage their dermatologic care, they do not usually want to do it at the cost of sacrificing their time with the dermatologist. The leading global management consultancy firm Accenture conducted a survey of 1,100 patients in the US, which revealed that 90 percent of patients prefer to use online tools for functions such as accessing medical records, fixing appointments, and self-managing their healthcare. However, about the same percentage of people also say that they would like to

preserve their personal interaction with their doctor when needed.

The survey results indicate that patients want technology to widen their choices, not limit them. Patients appreciate the convenience, efficiency, and lower costs achieved with a better use of technology, but they do not want it at the cost of compromising personal interactions with the doctor. Some experts suggest that technology must be employed to augment the services that a medical professional can provide, rather than becoming a substitute for personal care. A visit to the doctor's office can be supplemented with various online activities that a patient can perform. A lot also depends on the doctor, who should have the necessary technological support of experts to ensure the doctor-patient engagement is enhanced, not compromised.

## EMPOWERING PATIENTS

Dermatologists and other medical professionals can not only achieve a competitive advantage by using online technologies, but they can also deliver greater value and empowerment to the patients at a lower cost. To give more empowerment to the patients, it helps to provide them with online self-management tools, but more importantly, the patients must be educated about the availability and usage of such tools. A dermatologist can guide patients to perform specific online tasks to enhance their empowerment, and make their visits to the office more effective.

For instance, the doctor can advise a patient about how to access his or her medical records online, and to actually review them before the next scheduled appointment. This can help address the concerns and queries of the patient



more effectively during the visit. Similarly, the patients can take a look at their laboratory test results, and thus have a more informed discussion with the doctor during a visit. Doctors need to view online technology and tools as something more substantive for a patient than just a means to fix an appointment.

Mobile technology and its integration with the Internet have led to a host of new possibilities to transform the overall patient-care experience. Personal healthcare and monitoring devices in combination with online technologies are able to improve the engagement levels between a doctor and a patient. It ultimately leads to superior and more efficient care at a lower cost. Various technology companies are busy creating innovative medical applications that will enhance the value and effectiveness of personal health devices.

### BENEFITS OF ONLINE APPOINTMENT SCHEDULING

Competitive dermatology practitioners are keen to embrace Internet-based technologies in every respect that can improve the patient experience without adding to the patient's cost burden. One of the most basic and critically important areas where online technology can add to the convenience of patients is automated patient appointment scheduling via the Internet. An efficient online system of scheduling appointments is useful both for the dermatologist as well as the patient.

Some dermatology practitioners still continue to believe that online appointment scheduling compromises the necessary "personal touch" at the outset itself. Therefore, they persist with the traditional system of scheduling appointments, irrespective of the practical convenience and efficiency that the online system offers. However, recent studies have suggested that more patients are now in favor of making appointments online rather than using paper and pen.

Since the patient wields total control with an online system, it becomes more personalized in that sense, compared to the traditional system. The online system allows a patient to schedule an appointment with the dermatologist 24/7, which is a key differentiator in favor of this system. Callers do not have to keep waiting for their call to be answered. Online patient appointment systems also empower hearing-impaired patients. Automated schedulers are also capable of generating patient reminders for the appointment, which helps reduce no-shows.

### ONLINE MARKETING AND PERSONAL TOUCH

A dermatology practice that has implemented effective online technological systems can enjoy an enhanced over-

all image of the practice. Patient-doctor communication becomes more efficient, and everyday protocols of the practice become more streamlined. Having a professional dermatology website is the most basic standard of technology today. A website can not only serve as a powerful gateway to attract new patients to the practice, but it can also reinforce the high-tech perception about the practice for existing patients.

During a discussion with a patient, the dermatologist can refer to the website when necessary, so that the patient can have a ready reference available. It helps educate patients about the dermatology practice and the specific procedures and treatments that concern a patient. New patients evaluating more than one dermatology practice are more likely to have a favorable impact about a practice with a powerful and educational website.

With a creative use of the latest SEO techniques, the dermatology website can receive a flow of targeted local patients. The website becomes the first visual introduction of such patients to the practice and presents an image of the practice standards. The patient will form an impression about the quality, branding, precision, experience, service, and reputation by reviewing the website.

Digital images and videos of various dermatology procedures and before and after pictures can serve as a highly effective promotional tool for a dermatology practice. An enriching, educational, and interactive website experience is a virtual personal touch that a dermatologist can provide to potential patients at large, encouraging them to engage with the practice more closely. ■

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