7 QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN EVALUATING PATIENT COMMUNICATION SOFTWARE

When you're evaluating patient communication software, it's important to keep one simple truth in mind: What's good for your patient is good for your business. A patient-centered software solution that delivers good oral health outcomes will also deliver a profitable outcome for your practice.

We talked to Micah Dickerson, VP of Product at Lighthouse 360's, award-winning patient communication software, about the major benefits practices should expect from a modern software solution.

"Whether you're in the market for a new patient communication software, or just taking a hard look at your current solution, a good place to start is that your solution should provide 3 overarching benefits: An improved patient experience, increased office efficiency, and a return on your investment," he says.

So how do you know your chosen patient communication software solution will fulfill the "big 3"? Specific software capabilities that enable those benefits should be considered prior to making a choice. Here are 7 questions to ask yourself as you review the options:

1. How does the software facilitate communication between your patients and your practice?

Automated communication functions are a feature of any patient communication software. But automating with the patient in mind delivers a positive patient experience.

Effective communication respects patient preferences. Your millennial patient may prefer a text, but your boomer patient may prefer a phone call or postcard. Can the software automate either approach?

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When it comes to text messaging, a one-way text to the patient can be an effective reminder of an upcoming appointment, but the most fruitful communication occurs when you can also have a dialogue. Does the software you're considering allow two-way texting so a patient can notify the practice if they are unexpectedly delayed? And can the practice easily text patients back right from their patient communication software—right on their office computer?

You want to stay top of mind but not inundate your patient with reminders. Does the software intelligently set up the appropriate cadence of reminders as the appointment time approaches? (It's not just about sending them the initial appointment after all, but also reminding them at the perfect time to reduce costly no-shows).

Likewise, separate communications to members of the same household can be redundant and confusing. Can the software consolidate reminders into a single message to the individual responsible for managing the appointments?

2. Can the software make new patient registration a positive experience?

Waiting room time is tedious, yet many practices ask patients to spend 15 minutes or more filling out paper forms when they arrive for their first appointment. In addition to delaying patients, this can also cause a backup in the practice schedule. Patient communication software can provide a better first impression of your practice. Can the software you're considering collect that information prior to the appointment? Can the patient submit their information as easily as sending it from their phone? If your practice has specific forms to fill out, can the software include those in the new patient registration message? Available technologies such as Patient FastTrack from Lighthouse 360 allow patients to submit this information, and even electronically sign documents right from their smartphones, adding new levels of convenience for patients and greater efficiency for practices.

3. Can the software promote better oral health outcomes for the patient?

Reducing the number of no-shows and cancellations is good for business. Just as importantly, schedule compliance is good for your patients' oral health. A patient-centered software solution helps your patients comply with recommended appointment cycles and treatment plans.

If your patient is coming in every 11 months for their routine hygiene visit but the doctor recommends every 6 months, they've fallen off track. Can the software you're considering automatically detect gaps in recommended appointment cycles and send a recall reminder?

Likewise, the dentist may have recommended a treatment plan that the patient hasn't scheduled. "This can represent significant missed revenue, but it also means the patient has not complied with the 'prescription' the dentist has given them. We want the patient to follow through for the sake of their own oral health," Dickerson says. Automated Treatment Plan Reminders are a key feature that helps motivate patients to complete their recommended treatment.

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Case acceptance can improve when the patient is optimally reminded about the recommended treatment and its benefits. Can your patient communication software automatically remind these patients?

4. How does the software help the practice attract, retain and reactivate new patients?

In large part, dentistry is a relationship business. The right patient communication software can make those relationships easier to form and keep.

Reading reviews from other patients plays a major role in how people choose a dentist. Google ranks as the top review site, with 64 percent of consumers saying they will check Google before visiting a business. Can satisfied patients easily post reviews with the software you're considering? Is it intelligent enough to detect the patient's preferred review platform (Google, Yelp!, Facebook) and automatically direct them to that site? A Gmail account, for example, may be a good indicator that your patient's preferred review site is Google.

If you're out of sight, you're probably out of mind. Outbound communication to patients — even in the form of marketing — helps maintain the connection with your practice. Software that enables customizable e-newsletters, email marketing, and social media can keep oral health and your dental practice top of mind. Even a birthday message or holiday greeting can be a valuable touchpoint for maintaining visibility with your patients. Does the software give you the ability to easily market your practice to your patients?

Some of your patients may have fallen off the radar entirely. Reactivation of dormant patients is a potential gold mine for the practice but can mean hours of digging through files if done manually. Can the software automate your chart audit and identify patients for reactivation?

5. Can the software help lessen the burden of repetitive daily tasks?

Fundamentally, patient communication software is designed to eliminate the drudgery of repetitive, manual tasks for office staff.

"Office managers tell us the number of tasks they're required to do increases every year. What we find, though, is that their staff doesn't increase even as the number of tasks grows," says Dickerson. "A software system like Lighthouse 360 that works as another member of their team is important, because it frees them for work that needs their expertise and allows them to focus on patients and issues that need that personal attention."

By automating appointment reminders and other routine communication, the software frees office staff to focus on critical business, such as helping a patient with their insurance claim. Equally important, the time saved can be devoted to work that requires a human touch, such as calming an anxious patient. Is the software capable of allowing you to focus on the work that matters most?

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A Lighthouse 360 survey discovered that, on average, practices were able to save 16 hours per week using their patient communication software. That's two full days of work for one person. Further, 64 percent of those surveyed said their practice efficiency has improved as a result of using the software.

6. Can the software alleviate office stress?

Life is full of stressors. In a dental office, a last-minute scramble to fill in a cancellation is a stressor that can be avoided with the right patient communication software. Does the software offer a feature to help fill cancellations, or will you spend a good portion of your day on that task? Lighthouse 360's unique Fill-In feature accomplishes this by detecting cancellations and helping find patients to take the open appointments.

Staying organized, especially as you start your day, can go a long way to reducing stress. Does the software deliver daily checklists to your desktop when your day begins?

We tend to be happier when the work we do has meaning. The hours saved through automation and better organization can be devoted to higher value tasks, such as one-to-one patient interaction or managing your practice's social media pages. According to the Lighthouse survey, 80 percent of respondents said the overall happiness of their staff improved after using the Lighthouse 360 software.

7. Can the software help to grow our business?

Quite simply, when all the foregoing capabilities are working correctly, the schedule is fully booked, and booked out further into the future. Imagine if you could book the schedule 6 months out versus 2 weeks out.

With the right patient-centered software solution, gains for the patient and practice can be significant. For the dental office specifically the Lighthouse 360 survey found, on average, that:

- No-shows were reduced by 40%
- Recall time was shortened by 41%
- Dormant patient reactivations were increased by 25%
- Monthly practice production grew by 30%

If you have a schedule filled months out with new and returning patients coming in on schedule, the revenue will follow. When you compare the cost of patient communication software to the cost of just a handful of missed appointments, or to the value of a completed treatment plan, the return on investment is easy to calculate.

To learn more about how Lighthouse 360 helps with these 7 areas, visit www.lh360.com.

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