Impact of automated patient appointment reminders on orthodontic practice no-shows

By Diana P. Friedman, MA, MBA, and Tim Williams, BA, MS

The internet age has dramatically altered communication patterns. Face-to-face interactions continue to give way to digital message exchanges. Channels for these digital communications have rapidly morphed and expanded over the past years toward a faster, more interactive means of exchange.

This is the reality that faces orthodontic practices — interaction with current and prospective patients will predominately take place online. In order to maintain a productive level of engagement, orthodontic practices have to identify effective ways to leverage these new channels of communications. Patient engagement not only drives retention, but new patient acquisition — two cornerstones of a profitable practice. Research has consistently shown patients welcome the adoption of digital interchanges.

A national research study by Sesame Communications documented that 92 percent of orthodontic patients stated they find it more convenient to find answers online rather than calling the practice. The same study found that orthodontic patients prefer SMS text and email reminders over phone reminders four to one.

Automated appointment reminders

Sesame Communications pioneered the first automated appointment reminder system for dentistry in 1999. Automated patient reminders enable the practice to confirm scheduled appointments via email, text messages or automated voice reminders. Sophisticated patient portals let patients define their preferred method of contact. This type of service not only provides a great convenience and benefit to patients, it can dramatically improve efficiencies for the practice.

Increased production is at the epicenter of a practice’s financial performance, impacting cost structure, revenue flow, and ultimately profitability. Appointment no-shows have a devastating impact on practice financial performance. In a 2012 national research study, 20 percent of orthodontists stated their top need was to reduce no-shows in the practice. Automated reminders have the potential to cost effectively and efficiently address this need.

Research shows that today almost 70 percent of orthodontic practices have some form of automated appointment reminder solution. However, until recently there has been very limited research to document the impact these solutions on no-show rates and practice production. With advanced systems costing $500 per month on average, the Return on Investment (ROI) justification for this investment has, to date, been a challenge.

New practice production study

Sesame Communications recently announced the results of a breakthrough study measuring the impact of automated patient appointment reminders on practice production. The study analyzed five years of performance data and tracked the detailed confirmation and patient attendance rates on 19,773,041 appointments across 427 practices.

The study tracked no-show rate changes, both pre and post-implementation, of automated appointment reminders. The study found that orthodontic practice no-shows were reduced by 21.85 percent.

The data clearly demonstrates a positive productivity impact when integrating automated patient appointment reminders into the practice. First-year fees for this service should be recovered within the first six months post-activation. Additionally, time previously used by the administrative team on confirmations can now be leveraged to build relations with patients, market the practice and activate patients.

Conclusion

Automated appointment reminders dramatically reduce practice no-shows and positively impact production. It enables communication in the patient’s preferred method. It improves efficiency and profitability. Finally, 90 percent of dental professionals agree that automating patient reminders gives them peace of mind that all patients are consistently contacted prior to appointments.

About the authors

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A national research study by Sesame Communications found that orthodontic patients prefer text and email reminders over phone reminders four to one. Photo/www.sxc.hu