



Technology and Service in High Demand by Medical Groups

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The white paper, “The Purchasing Power of Today’s Medical Group Practice,” clearly established the potential of the market within medical group practices. Dollars are ready to be spent, but on what? What pressing demands do medical groups face, and how can your products and services resolve those pressures?

Everyone is trying to do more with less, and concerns about the economy fuel that fire. A medical group manager looks to technology to not only reduce staffing costs, but also to enhance the value of staffing resources. What does that mean?

Is there a product or service that automates a process that will allow staff to perform more effectively? How can we get nurses off the phone and back in the exam room with patients? What tools enhance the patient registration process so that the receptionist can warmly greet patients and set a positive tone for the visit?

With the focus on the recent economic stimulus bill’s health-care information technology (HIT) dollars, it may seem that the only technology of interest to a medical group is electronic medical records (EMR), but that’s far from reality. Numerous opportunities exist to improve the effectiveness of the front-desk process.

Practices are looking at patient registration kiosks and tablets to facilitate the sign-in process. Automated telephone and e-mail appointment reminder systems can free up staff time while establishing a consistently professional image. Desktop software to create electronic phone messages allows the practice to monitor patient service and ensure that no message falls through the cracks. Scanning insurance cards provides ready access for the billing office, especially an offsite office, without the extra chaos of pulling charts to hunt for photocopies.

Scanning documents in general can provide a practice with tremendous relief. Space is almost always a constraint, and if a practice can recover storage space and turn that into a revenue-generating facility, it’s won two battles. The superbills, or daily encounter slips, can be scanned and then shredded. Remittance advice statements can be scanned, and the opportunity to outsource the scanning via a document-management service or bank lockbox service returns not only valuable real estate to the practice, but also valuable staff time to patient care instead of scanning care!

Technology to increase an employee's efficiency will win attention every day. Something as simple as a second monitor for the billing staff working between an electronic remittance advice and the accounts-receivable system can save hours in a week. Handheld computers in the hands of the rooming nurse streamlines the patient intake process by providing a reference tool for the nurse and the patient when trying to remember what that little blue pill is for charting. In-exam room monitors, or tablets provided to patients, serve to educate and inform patients about procedures or tests, thereby saving nurse and physician time, ensuring a consistent and comprehensive message, and allowing the patient to optimize his or her time with the physician.

Network management, including security and disaster recovery, is front and center for everyone in light of all the stories of lost or stolen laptops and the risk of lost information when an office building is compromised. Technology support, upgraded equipment that provides more functionality, and training and education are all critical needs within medical groups. Managing the business of the medical practice is similar to managing the business operation in another industry. Medical groups must manage inventories, pay creditors, create income statements and balance sheets, track employee hours and run payrolls. The business tools and technologies used in the health care industry can provide management with critical information and streamline processes that may have been outsourced before technology "made them easy."

Most medical practices maintain some presence on the Internet. Typically, practice Web sites are little more than brochure-ware. Patients are looking to get more done online just as they do in other industries, and medical groups recognize the value of enhanced service to their patients via the Web. Providing interactive services for advance registration, scheduling appointments and messaging are examples of the second wave of functionality a medical practice looks to establish.

It is clear from a 2006 poll of health care leaders that patient communication is critical to address the top three major directions transforming U.S. health care:

1. Information technology tools for consumers to better manage and pay for care
2. Consumer-driven health care
3. Chronic care management

Online tools deliver results, are cost effective to implement, and meet today's health care consumers' expectations. For example, in a recent poll, 77 percent of adults indicated they would like e-mail reminders from their doctors when they are due for a visit or some type of medical care. And, from that same report, two-thirds of adults would like to receive diagnostic test results via e-mail. The poll also indicates that the availability of online services could influence to some extent how patients choose health care providers.

As medical groups continue to migrate to new and deeper technology functionality, the opportunity to re-invent the patient interaction increases with each iteration of technology. Something as simple as texting to a patient's cell phone to remind him or her of an expiring prescription presents a level of service and patient-care management that we could not achieve with the technology. Today's push toward electronic prescription transmittal creates a base for the next set of services that practices can provide to patients while maintaining an efficient operation.

Health care may at first glance appear to be a very specialized market, but it is a business like all others when it comes to operational efficiency and effectiveness. A simple tool like the pagers used in restaurants to alert patrons when their table is ready are popping up in medical practices to allow patients to make better use of their wait time. Technology tools and services that address the bottom line are as critical in health care as in any other industry. Remember, no margin, no mission!

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1 Reece, MD, Richard L. "The Top 10 Healthcare Innovations for 2006",
www.healthleadersmedia.com/view_feature.cfm?content_id=81999, Aug. 1, 2006.

2 Cummings, Jennifer. "Few patients use or have access to online services for communicating with their doctors, but most would like to"; Harris Interactive Health Care Poll, Sept. 22, 2006.

3 Cummings, Jennifer. "Few patients use or have access to online services for communicating with their doctors, but most would like to"; Harris Interactive Health Care Poll, Sept. 22, 2006.