

Online Patient Communication in the ObGyn Practice

Steve Williams, CPA

In the June 2009 issue of *The Female Patient* we provided tips on “Creating and Maximizing ObGyn Practice Web Sites.” Here we will explore another facet of maximizing your Web site and Internet presence, as well as online patient communication.

With the ever-increasing use of and reliance on the Internet by patients, it has become imperative for many ObGyn practices to have an effective, complete online presence. This not only means a fully functional Web site but also other online tools that make interacting with your practice a more useful and easy experience for the patient. Consider some of the following ideas as they apply to your practice and local market.

WAYS TO COMMUNICATE

Patients always appreciate useful information, and the Internet provides a rapid means to disperse it. There are numerous avenues to do so, including:

- **E-newsletters and e-blasts:** These can be a powerful Internet marketing tool, especially when integrated with a Web site. You will want to design the e-newsletter or e-blast so readers will visit your Web site to learn more, set appointments, etc. Also consider sorting by birth dates or other key dates for special offers. Some ideas for content include:
 - ObGyn news and updates
 - Office news (eg, services and personnel)
 - Patient care tips

Steve Williams, CPA, is the Managing Partner and Partner in Charge of Healthcare Services at HMWC CPAs & Business Advisors, Tustin, CA, specializing in consulting services to medical practices, as well as tax and financial planning.

- Reminders to set appointments
- Profiles of staff members
- Discount offers (eg, Special of the Month in aesthetic centers)
- Job openings.

- **Social networking:** ObGyns can benefit from Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites in terms of information collection (eg, medical news updates or CME opportunities), internal communication (including clinician to clinician, and clinician to staff member regarding nonurgent matters), patient relations, and marketing (eg, press releases and daily health tips).

However, it should be pointed out that use of social networking sites should not be unrestricted. Clinicians should generally avoid use for any matters that require urgent and/or timely action, direct communication with patients and their families, or answering inquiries regarding details about patient care. Also, protect updates by limiting colleagues or office staff who are allowed to view them.

- **Blogs:** A blog is a user-generated Web site where entries are made in journal style and then displayed in reverse chronological order. If you are willing to devote the time to develop and maintain a blog, this can be useful for patients to communicate their thoughts through the comments function on the blog. While this is popular in some sectors, there are a few downsides for the ObGyn practice, such as patients offering advice to each other online or sharing concerns about their care or your practice.
- **Webcasts and podcasts:** These are media files that are distributed by subscription (paid or

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unpaid) over the Internet for playback on mobile devices and personal computers. Since they can be downloaded automatically, patients may like the instant access to specific information they have sought, such as the latest data regarding the effectiveness and timing of mammograms.

- **Webinars:** A webinar is a seminar (paid or unpaid) conducted over the Web. It is interactive between the presenter and audience, as a type of Web conferencing. For example,

you could provide a webinar on “The Latest Developments in the Use of Hormone Replacement Therapy.” Of course, this application requires your personal time for preparation and presentation. If marketed effectively, your webinar can reach a broad audience.

It is important to maintain a highly professional presentation with any of these online tools, because your practice is being represented in each and every piece of communication. Take the time to do it right, both in content and presentation (eg, avoid the common mistake of doing it cheaply).

Carefully consider your resources before committing to any of the above communication techniques.

PATIENT PORTALS

Patient portals are online applications that allow patients to interact and communicate with their health care professionals, usually providing secure, password-protected access. Most are available on the Internet 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, so patients can enjoy easy access versus waiting on hold for a phone call to the office—which is an additional patient-relations benefit for clinicians.

Patient portals can be integrated into your practice’s existing Web site, set up as a stand-alone Web site, or used as a module added onto your existing electronic medical record system. Features may include personal health records, patient registration, electronic payment, appointment scheduling, medication refill requests, patient/physician messaging, physician biographies, satisfaction surveys, and more.

As you might imagine, portals have the potential to improve your practice in many respects. For patients, in addition to the easy access, the benefits are streamlined communication and secure transmission of information (vs e-mail and attachments). Staff may find it easier in terms of documentation than some existing systems in the practice. Further, if utilization of online scheduling can be increased to a higher percentage, it would allow for flexible staffing for the scheduling department. The staff can address these requests during the slower times of the day or even start at 5:00 AM if they so choose. Your overall administrative costs may decrease as well, due to reduced processing times required by staff, paper and printer supplies, postage, and other expenses.

GETTING STARTED

Whichever methods of Internet communication you choose to implement, it is generally recommended that you at least do something. Your patients will increasingly expect it, and your competition might already be doing it. To help you to determine which course to take, you might want to take the time to perform a simple survey with patients as they check in, asking on a scale of 1 to 5 which of the above options would be most useful to them. The time and money committed will likely more than pay off in terms of patient satisfaction, enhanced operations, and improved profitability.

The author reports no actual or potential conflicts of interest in relation to this article.

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