SMS in Healthcare

eBook

YakChat

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Introduction

In this brave new world, the healthcare sector faces a barrage of disruptive forces that are as unprecedented as they are universal.[1]

Continuous pressure on margins and rapidly changing technology go hand-in-hand with demands to improve the patient experience. Yet at the same time, patient satisfaction must be balanced with employee job satisfaction.

And there's another problem…

As healthcare consumers are more connected than ever before, we're told they fully expect their healthcare providers to be so too; except even more so.

But what does that even mean?

Quite simply, people want to be able to communicate with their healthcare professionals as easily as they do with their friends. Many healthcare providers communicate primarily by phone and voicemail, even though patients want to communicate in more convenient ways.

They expect their healthcare provider to contact them proactively with helpful information, including updates and reminders. They also want the ability to self-serve. But above all, they want to be able to respond quickly and easily to their providers when they need to.

All of which seems like a tall order.

Until you consider this:

Interactive SMS

Interactive text messaging can deliver all these benefits for patients, while at the same time boosting the day-to-day business of healthcare. Moreover, it can deliver them at a considerably lower operating cost than any other traditional method of communication.

1. Why Text?

Reach and Effectiveness

Most Americans (95%) now own a cell phone of some kind.[2] What's more, this figure is constant across every demographic. No other communication channel has that level of adoption, engagement - or impact.

SMS outperforms email and even social messaging apps such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, all of which makes text messaging unrivalled in its ability to connect with patients and healthcare staff in the fastest and, crucially, the most reliable way.

Convenience and Speed

But when texting goes two ways, it also becomes the simplest and most convenient way for patients and staff to interact with the text messages they receive, leading to more constructive engagements with key audiences.

Streamlined Support

2-way text incorporates outbound and inbound SMS into a single service. This lets Health providers send and receive texts to any mobile device from the convenience of their Unified Communications platform (UC), such as Microsoft Teams or Skype for Business, and engage in real-time, 1-on-1 text conversations with patients and staff.

With no need to log in or open an app, patients can easily confirm or reschedule appointments or reply to their health provider with any questions or concerns they have. This helps patients to feel supported and more in control of their healthcare and leads to a significant improvement in the patient experience.

For medical staff too, this always-on, 2-way channel of communication between themselves and their employers is a critical tool. When medical teams are on the move, they can be apprised by text of rapidly changing situations and emergencies and can respond instantly when they need to.

Cost Efficiency

Compared to other communication channels, SMS is an astonishingly low-cost intervention, no matter how many messages are sent or received.

Healthcare practices have traditionally relied on the phone to answer patient queries,

arrange appointments or contact staff. But calls are costly, time-consuming, and ineffective. Communicating by text, on the other hand, costs just pennies, making it eminently attractive to those health practices that want to keep costs low.

And the cost benefits don't stop there.

Cutting the cost of missed appointments

The financial impact of missed appointments to healthcare organizations is sizeable. A case in point is in the U.S. where no-shows cost more than $150 billion annually.

And this is precisely where text can help.

Take the UK's National Health Service (NHS) for example: In England alone the NHS loses £216m [3] a year to missed appointments. Often this is because patients simply forget to turn up. [4]

The NHS turned to SMS to address the problem, trialing a text-reminder service in ten hospitals. The results have been extraordinary.

Each hospital is now saving nearly £2m a year by cutting missed appointments, and they've reduced the number of patient no-shows by almost a third. They have also reduced their mailing costs by more than a quarter. A trivial detail? Not when you realize that the NHS spends a hefty £100m a year sending appointment letters by post. [5]

Increased Health Outcomes

Text messages are a critical and strategic tool for keeping patients motivated and engaged. And in the long term, they can positively impact health outcomes.

Medication adherence rates significantly improve, for instance, when well-timed medication reminders are sent to patients. But give patients the ability to respond to these texts and the benefits increase. Why? Because it gives patients a real sense of autonomy at a time in their lives when so much must seem out of their control.

And reassurance is everything. There is nothing more comforting to patients than when they receive real-time responses from their health provider to their concerns. In fact, such texts have been shown to reduce the number of repetitive support issues and repeat visits to clinics and ER. [6]

2. Legal Compliance*

So - SMS works, but under the U.S. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), or Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), are healthcare organizations even allowed to communicate with their patients via text?

The short answer is yes!

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)*

Recent changes to the HIPAA Privacy Rule have made healthcare providers understandably nervous about using text to talk directly with their patients. The regulations that establish U.S. national standards to protect individuals' medical records and other personal health information (PHI) appear murky at best, and nowhere is text messaging specifically prohibited or directly referred to within these regulations.

But there are several circumstances in which texting is perfectly permissible without infringing HIPAA regulations.

HIPAA and SMS Text: Remaining Compliant

Healthcare professionals can stay compliant when directly texting their patients in the following ways:

a) The provider has applied reasonable safeguards.

The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services provide advice relating to electronic communications, which presumably includes text messaging.

They state that providers can (and should) communicate electronically with patients so long as safeguards are applied to reasonably protect privacy. This can include limiting the amount or type of information disclosed through unencrypted communication.

b) The provider's text message contains no PHI. Although….

c) Recent advice from Roger Severino, Director of the US Department of Health and Human Services Offices for Civil Rights (OCR) - the HIPAA enforcement agency - states that Healthcare providers *can*, in fact, share PHI via standard text, so long as adhere to the following:

They advise patients that texting is unencrypted and, therefore, not secure.

- They gain patients' authorization.
- They document patients' consent.

d) If a patient initiates communication with a provider using text, the provider can assume that the patient finds this an acceptable channel of communication. But if the provider considers that the patient is not aware of the possible risks of using unencrypted communication, or has concerns about potential liability, they should alert the patient of those risks and let the patient decide whether to continue text communications.

e) If a patient specifically requests that their provider communicates with them via standard text, for example to receive appointment reminders, the provider can – and, indeed, should accommodate the patient's request.

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)*

GDPR is new legislation that gives individuals better control of their personal data, which is defined as any data that can linked to an individual, thereby identifying them.

GDPR applies to organizations in the UK, EU and to ***any organization in the world that processes the personal data of EU citizens***.

This is a key because GDPR standards are far tougher than those of HIPAA and non-compliance can lead to extreme penalties of up to $24m or 4% of worldwide annual turnover - whichever is higher.

GDPR and SMS Text: Remaining Compliant

Patients' health and genetic data are considered as a special category of data called 'sensitive data'[7] and should not be shared via unencrypted, insecure messaging platforms.

Nevertheless, as long as urgent communications or personal medical information is not included in the message, texts can be sent to individual patients and groups, provided certain measures are taken beforehand.

Organizations must ensure that they:

Adhere to GDPR's Key Principles

That all data is:

a) processed lawfully, fairly and transparently

b) collected for specific, explicit and legitimate purposes

c) limited to what is necessary for the purposes for which it is processed

d) accurate and kept up to date

e) is held securely

f) is retained only for as long as is necessary and for the reasons it was collected

g) Any personal data breach must be reported within 72 hours.

Obtain Consent Before Contact

GDPR requires that healthcare organizations obtain explicit permission from patients and staff when they use their data. This means that organizations must get clear consent from individual patients if they wish to contact them by SMS text.

Inform Patients How their Data will be Used

At the time consent is collected, patients must be advised of the type of information they will receive by text, (appointment reminders, prescription refill reminders, etc).

This is important, because organizations will only be able to text patients about the subjects they've specified or about issues that are closely related to these subjects.

Clearly Advise Patients on their Rights

Health organizations must inform patients that they can:

a) Opt-out of receiving texts at any time

b) Ask to have incorrect information changed

c) Restrict how their data is used

d) Move their patient data from one health organization to another

e) Object to their patient information being processed

The Role of SMS in Healthcare

So what are the ways in which text messaging can be used to advantage by healthcare professionals - to deliver a positive impact on patient outcomes and in the quality of patient care?

Reminders and Advice

Whether it's upcoming appointment reminders, medication prompts, prescription refill advice, or information about Medicare Advantage before people hit 65 – proactive texts can assist patients with timely guidance to help them achieve a quicker recovery and can enable health providers to better manage their patients' care and safety.

Appointment Scheduling

Appointment scheduling is where SMS really comes into its own.

Every busy healthcare practice knows that the no-shows, cancellations and rescheduling appointments are time-consuming, frustrating, and costly.

But 2-way text solves this problem. As patients are offered or reminded of appointments by text, they can also be given the option to respond. They can quickly and very easily confirm their attendance, reschedule the appointment for a more convenient time, or simply cancel the appointment if it's no longer required.

Letting patients respond to texts is a simple, convenient, and low-cost intervention. It optimizes patient schedules by freeing up unused appointment slots, enables same-day appointments, saves valuable staff time, increases productivity, and considerably improves no-show rates.

Preventative Care and Education

Text messages have a significant role to play in preventative healthcare. According to a

recent review of mobile text-messaging interventions and their impact on health improvement and behaviour change, there is strong evidence that the use of text messages has a positive impact on patient health outcomes and care quality. [8]

Interventions might include automated text reminders which can be sent to patients who are due for preventative screenings or services, or an informative message could be sent with advice about healthy living.

Actively sending a text to a patient with post-treatment information which includes a call to action to schedule an appointment if the patient is worried, better supports patients in between appointments and delivers significantly better individual healthcare outcomes.

Texts can also be used to keep health professionals updated. Whether it's new medical updates or changes to legislation, text messages can help to keep employees' skills and knowledge current.

Better still, when employees can respond to a text message instantly, this helps to keep them fully engaged in the mission of care giving.

News and Alerts

There is simply no other communication that is more efficient in a crisis than SMS.

With its phenomenal reach and impact, SMS makes it easy to keep patients, employees

and other critical audiences updated during any emergency and its aftermath.

Even if the network is congested, or there's no internet service, texts will still get through, making them indispensable in a crisis and ensures that the vital business of healthcare never stops.

For day-to-day alerts - SMS is also key. Texts are a great way to introduce new services or clinicians, while staff can be notified quickly of shift changes, maintenance schedules or meetings.

If a healthcare professional is delayed, a text can forewarn patients so they can adjust their schedules as necessary. But for maximum convenience, the patient should be able to respond to the message and quickly reschedule the appointment if they want to.

Motivation and Encouragement

Sending out supportive text message, providing motivation, information and advice has been shown to be highly

successful at helping patients reach their health goals.

In fact the UK National Health Service (NHS) sent out a programme of supportive text messages to help people stop smoking. It was found that those who received the texts were twice as likely to quit as those using other preventative methods.[9]

Supportive texts become even more powerful, when the respondent can reply with any queries or concerns they may have.

Remote Health monitoring

2-way text messages are a particularly good method of monitoring patient health. Not only can it improve the patient experience, but it empowers them to better manage their health and avoid trips to the clinician.

Automated text messages can be sent to patients asking them to complete a survey or self-assessment, which can be completed at their convenience and returned easily to the practice.

Once the results are in, follow-up texts can then be sent with medical information, instructions or advice. Patient engagement to support self-care and improve their health.

Conclusion

2-Way text messaging has the potential to transform the healthcare industry. Performed with care, text messaging is a powerful communication tool with incredible reach, and represents an astonishingly low-cost, low-effort way of keeping patients better informed, engaged, and involved in their healthcare. With its proven ability to positively impact patient health outcomes, 2-way SMS text ultimately boosts healthcare efficiency, productivity and the health provider's all-important bottom line.

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Contact Us to find out how you can leverage 2-Way SMS in your healthcare business or Click Here to find answers to the most frequently asked questions that have been put to us by healthcare professionals.

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* The information contained in this document is for guidance only and is in no way intended to constitute legal advice.