



Connecting With Your Patients: Got E-Mail?

By Bill G. Felkey



YOU PROBABLY KNOW by now how to get in touch in the quickest manner possible with all of the important people in your life. Some of the people you need to reach carry cell phones and are available by that technology almost 24/7/365.

Others carry their cell phones on vibrate but respond quickly to text messages. Some check their office telephone voicemail religiously. Still others like their fax machine to present them with a piece of paper that they can hold in their hands. If you ever want me to do something, I'm an e-mail guy. My e-mail package inbox is my ongoing, virtual "to do" list that I can check from anywhere I am on the planet.

If you think this idea is *anywhere near being revolutionary*, it's not. *The major chains across this nation* are actively using this channel from their Web sites, pharmacies and call centers.

On average, I receive about 100 e-mails per day. I delete about 20 of those a day without opening them because they are obviously SPAM (junk mail) and/or I know I don't have time to go to gadget universe on a given day and shop for a newly launched technology. Sure, I use filtering and SPAM blocking rules on my e-mail inbox, but Viagra ads from Canada, stock purchasing tips, and a few real estate or bank refinancing deals seem to find their way in despite my efforts to block them. This, of course, means that the rest are HAM (good e-mails) that I actually do need to deal with.

Every time I write an article or give a continuing education seminar, I invite the people reading or hearing my message to ask me for more information or to enter some

dialogue about the topic. In this way, I have created a network of thousands of people globally who can potentially ask for my help or give me an insight into health care technology that I wouldn't otherwise have. But enough about me.

A TREMENDOUS COMMUNICATION TOOL

You live in a community with thousands of patients already in your pharmacy "network." You have electronically captured their names, addresses, telephone numbers, insurance information, an active drug profile (with inferred disease states from the indications of these drugs), and you even have information about the other members of their household. These are data elements in a database that can serve as the foundation of a very effective and affordable marketing effort for your practice. Have you actively acquired the e-mail address of your patients? Do you allow patients to e-mail you? How quickly do you reply to the e-mails you are receiving personally and professionally? Do you have a staff member who is assigned to triage your pharmacy e-mail inbox? I would suggest, for selected patients, that e-mail, carefully managed, can become a tremendous communication and engagement tool to the most important people in your practice, your patients.

If you think this idea is anywhere near being revolutionary, it's not. The major chains across this nation are actively using this channel from their Web sites, pharmacies and call centers. They have contests for employees and give prizes out to those who can sign on the most e-mail accounts. Pharmacists typically have

Continued on page 54 ➔

decided to use one of two e-mail strategies. Some use an “opt out” strategy where they send e-mails out to large number of patients and give patients the opportunity with a single click on the e-mail to unsubscribe from any topic area in which they are not interested. Other pharmacists do an “opt in” strategy that allows patients to select only those areas in which they are interested and gives them the upfront option of not receiving any e-mails at all as one of their preferences.

I want to state one caution about using e-mail to communicate with patients that is relevant. I can stand at a mail server on my campus and read every e-mail that is sent to each of the faculty, staff and students on campus. Therefore, you need to be non-drug specific in your messages, encrypt sensitive e-mails, or refer patients to a Web site where they have to log on to authenticate their identity to protect yourself and them under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

The use of e-mail can be focused on daily operations such as consumer relationship marketing (CRM), broadcasting chronic medication refill reminders (by prescription number only please), doing new product announcements directly related to only those conditions with which the patient has been diagnosed, and forming communities of patients who share the same illnesses or health/lifestyle challenges.

The pharmacist usually moderates these virtual communities to correct inaccuracies in the information and/or settle potential disputes on what to do or how to do it. You can choose to either create an e-mail connection between you and your patients by a “do it yourself” method (or delegate it to one of your tech savvy techs) or you can choose to use an external company to manage this marketing effort for you (simply Google e-mail marketing).

DESIGN OPTION CONSIDERATIONS

However you decide to approach e-mail as a marketing strategy in your pharmacy, there are several design options you will need to consider. First, your e-mails can be created so that they are specifically branded to your pharmacy and be graphically attractive if you decide to send them out in an HTML (Web-like appearance). In this format, links within the text of your e-mail will take patients directly to the Internet for additional information or to interact with the electronic commerce side of your practice to “shop” online. Secondly, you can decide

to have each e-mail personalized by filling in fields such as the patient’s name and can quickly generate tailored messages that are customized to an individual patient. You can connect to your e-mails to external databases for updating patient lists and for determining if any of your e-mails are bouncing, remaining unopened, or if patients wish to unsubscribe from your e-mail program.



Finally, here is the biggest decision of all. Do you see opening this channel between you and your patients as a “time robber” or as a natural opportunity to expand your services to your patients? If you see it as an opportunity, why not drop me an e-mail and I will send you some additional resources to help you start the process. As I said earlier, I already get 100 emails a day, what’s a few more? You can contact me by e-mail at felkebg@auburn.edu. **ap**

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