



The Path to Practice Profitability: Is Patient Self-Scheduling a Secret Weapon?

If you've been to a supermarket or pharmacy lately, you've witnessed the emergence of "self-service" check-out, where customers can sidestep long lines, expedite the purchase process and get on with their day. They don't want to wait around for someone else to scan or bag their groceries—they'd rather just do it themselves, fast. 73% of shoppers prefer to use self-service technologies versus engaging with sales associates. That's because, for most consumers, convenience matters.

Access is the expectation.

Thanks to the proliferation of mobile devices and smart technology automation, like self-service check-out has become the norm in so many aspects of our daily life. Consumers of all ages are more comfortable engaging with technology than ever before. They expect it –more specifically, they expect the access and speed technology delivers.

And it's not just in grocery and retail. Think about digital transformation in home entertainment and the rise of streaming services like Netflix. 25+ years ago, renting a movie was a frustrating, time-consuming process. You had to drive to Blockbuster during business hours, walk the store and peruse countless titles to find something you wanted to watch and then wait in line to check out. Today, Netflix gives you immediate access, 24x7, via the familiarity of your own devices and from the comfort of your couch. Better yet, a data-driven menu presents selections you're most likely to enjoy based on your past viewing habits. You click on what you want, and in mere seconds, you're watching your movie of choice on your terms.

Self-service expectations are changing healthcare.

Of course, digitization has metamorphosized almost every sector imaginable, both business-to-consumer and business-to-business. Perhaps the sector where it's poised to have the most significant impact is healthcare. The statistics show:

- 76% of consumers go online to learn about health and wellness-related topics.
- 64% of consumers search for provider reviews online.
- 43% of patients prefer to book an appointment online, with that percentage on the rise.
- 90% of patients would consider abandoning a provider that doesn't offer digital access.

Simply put, patients want –and expect –all the same technology-driven speed, convenience, personalization and access in their healthcare-related interactions that they enjoy in other aspects of daily life.

Age is just a number.

Contrary to popular belief, it's not just younger demographics that have gone digital. A 2021 study by Pew Research noted that smartphone and tablet usage has increased significantly in consumers aged 50-64 and 65+ since 2012. And those numbers are continuing to rise as older Americans get more comfortable conducting interactions online. Interestingly, COVID had a hand in driving this increase with 72% of baby boomers saying that they use more technology since the pandemic than they likely would have had the pandemic not happened at all. For non-baby boomers, that number is 85%.

As for younger generations, they're simply online all the time—approximately half of consumers ages 18-49 say they're online constantly. And when it comes to healthcare, an overwhelming 90% of millennials book medical appointments via the web or a mobile device.

No surprise there, right? Maybe so, but what is surprising is that this younger, more tech-savvy demographic is also embracing treatments and procedures traditionally associated with older populations. For example, ophthalmology practices are seeing a decline in the average age of cataract patients—a recent study from the Mayo Clinic showed that 20% of all cataract surgeries are performed on patients under the age of 65. And there are similar trends across other specialty areas, which means practices should expect to serve an increasingly tech-savvy patient community in the years to come—to stay competitive, they have to think ahead about the digital proficiency and preferences of future patients and be ready to adapt accordingly.

Automation doesn't minimize the patient experience... it maximizes it.

The key question for practices considering digital transformation is where to start. They may worry that modernizing operations could compromise the patient experience, ultimately impacting patient retention or, worse, patient outcomes. However, practices (and their patients) that have embraced automation realize exactly the opposite –with technology, they can create a far more streamlined and efficient experience that benefits both patients and staff.

In defining a strategy for patient engagement modernization, practices should start by conducting a thorough evaluation of their own patient base, including patient patterns, preferences and expectations. For example:

- How long does it take for a patient to schedule an appointment over the phone? How many minutes are they on hold? How many require a call back to confirm?
- How much time does the staff spend on manual administrative tasks like patient scheduling or check-in? How many hours per day and days per week? How is that time covered during vacation schedules? How much is that costing the practice in overtime or incremental headcount?
- How many appointment slots go unfilled during any given day or week? How many patient no-shows does a practice typically see?
- How many claim denials does the practice face in a given month? What is the impact on monthly cash flow?

Understanding these patterns will help a practice realize where automation can have the most immediate impact. One practice conducting a similar pre-automation assessment discovered that it took a patient more than eight minutes to schedule an appointment over the phone, on average. By introducing patient self-scheduling and self check-in technology, the practice was able to slash wait times, streamline the administrative process and create a much better patient experience... all while lowering expenses and preventing staff burnout. In fact, their use of online patient engagement technology has reduced call times by as much as 70%.

Remove the friction from patient scheduling.

One of the earliest patient engagement touch points, appointment scheduling, presents the greatest opportunity for improvement. Automating this critical first moment of introduction can make or break the patient experience, even determining whether the prospect goes on to book the appointment and become a patient at all. By implementing the right online scheduling solution, practices can eliminate unnecessary friction and create a more convenient experience right from the beginning. What should a practice look for in an online scheduling system:

- **Mobile Access:** Patients should be able to use their smartphone, tablet, laptop or any other device to access the practice's online scheduling system, 24x7, at their convenience. They should also be able to receive digital notifications and engage with the practice leading up to the visit from those same devices.
- **Intelligent Scheduling:** Practices need a system with built-in intelligence that matches the patient with exactly the right providers, based on criteria like profile, condition, history, provider preferences, etc. It should show the patient only the time slots those providers are available, ensuring the patient doesn't inadvertently schedule an appointment incorrectly. This also helps to maximize providers' schedules so they can see more patients.
- **Eligibility verification:** Among the most essential capabilities of a patient engagement platform is insurance eligibility verification, which flags issues with the patient's insurance coverage in advance of the appointment or procedure. Staff are alerted to a potential problem and can proactively address the matter with the patient or the insurance company and bring it to resolution quickly; thus, reducing the likelihood of claim denials and protecting practice cash flow.

Eliminating friction from the scheduling process sets the stage for a positive and productive patient experience, which is especially important when you consider patients may be coming to the practice in a state of distress. They may be anticipating or following up on a troubling diagnosis and don't need the frustration that comes with waiting on hold or arguing about an unexpected insurance claim denial. Or the patient may simply be balancing a busy schedule, caring for children or taking a break from the workday and appreciate –or even expect– a streamlined and convenient scheduling process.

If you automate, they will come.

Consumers have embraced technology and automation in just about every other aspect of their lives. They want a similar experience when they engage with a provider or practice. Of course, practices must be prepared to deliver or risk losing prospective and existing patients to practices that have already undergone digital transformation. Case in point: one practice reported a 590% increase in new-patient acquisition with the introduction of online scheduling—this includes a boost in last-minute appointments, which helps to fill open slots and maximize provider schedules.

The fact is patients expect their providers will modernize their businesses via the adoption of new technology, especially in a sector like healthcare. And while access, convenience and speed are important, a practice's level of modernization also reflects the likely quality of treatment and care they deliver, which should be the ultimate criteria in choosing any provider.

Experience the impact of digital transformation first-hand. Contact Clearwave for a demo of its Patient Engagement Platform, including Clearwave Patient Scheduling and Clearwave Patient Check-in.

ABOUT CLEARWAVE

Since 2004, Clearwave has been the healthcare industry's most comprehensive patient engagement platform. Its technology has empowered specialty practices and health systems to improve profitability, productivity and patient access.

Healthcare organizations choose Clearwave for its ability to simplify patient scheduling, expedite intake, automate insurance eligibility verification and create true financial transparency for both patient and practice. Clearwave helps practices accelerate cash flow and improve digital patient access.

We've scheduled, checked in and verified eligibility for more than 100 million patients across the US, and those numbers are growing daily.

To learn more about Clearwave, [request a demo](#), or meet us at clearwaveinc.com