

## August 2002 Chiropractic Economics

### Computerized Scheduling: Boost Patient Retention the High-Tech Way

*By Derek P. Greenwood*

Sometimes when we get busy with the demands of our day-to-day practices, patients can and have dropped out of our thoughts. Then one day, you and your staff find yourselves saying: "What ever happened to so and so?"

You start to think about a certain patient who has been faithful to your practice for years. That patient may have even been in for an appointment a few months ago, you seem to recall. Somehow, though, this patient has managed to disappear from the appointment book, tragically unnoticed.

Has this type of scenario occurred in your office? Undoubtedly it has, and you are not alone. Patient retention problems are all-too-common, and they have been known to stifle the growth of practice's across the country.

As for those patients who have dropped out of care, perhaps they told themselves they "didn't need" chiropractic anymore, or maybe they now visit that nice new doctor's office clear on the other side of town. What you need to do is take every step you can to avoid these types of situations.

Everyone knows it's much more expensive to bring a new patient through your doors vs. keeping one you have, yet rarely do we take the time to ward against the recurrence of patient drop-out.

#### **Facts and Figures**

How much do you spend to bring in a new patient? Do you track your return on investment (ROI) for each marketing and advertising activity you implement?

In the advertising world, the success of an advertisement or ad campaign is monitored not only by a percentage of increase in sales, but by how many leads are generated per dollar spent (this is the ROI).

In a chiropractic office, you must look at it this way. If you were to spend \$1,000 on a small Yellow Pages ad and you received 10 new patients from it, it cost you \$100 for each new patient you brought in.

A savvy advertising business owner will look at all of the business' ads and promotions and figure out how much each cost to generate a new patient. Then, of course, you eliminate the least productive marketing and advertising activities, while increasing those efforts that generate new patients at lower costs. More bang for the buck, so to speak.

Now let's look at how much it costs you every time you have to say: "What ever happened to so and so?" As a ballpark, you can estimate that you will spend about \$100 to attract a new patient to your office in order to "replace" one you've lost. Then, if you offer a free or discounted exam and consultation, you should figure in about another \$80 or so. You also need to factor in the wages you paid your staff to verify the new patient's insurance and start a new file, plus your time spent educating the new patient.

The most significant chunk of money lost is the irreplaceable future income from the established patient who is now not receiving care from your practice. To compound it all, there is the potential that the drop-out patient's grievance - if there is one - can reach other patients' or potential patients' ears. The effect can snowball.

If you add to this the fact that the patient who has dropped out may not get the needed care, you begin to see the size of the wound that is bleeding away your hard work. Money - the prime indicator of growth, profit, and potential of any business or practice - is pouring out at a dramatic and uncontrolled rate in this scenario.

It's easy to see how each patient you lose can add up to more than \$800-\$1,000 in direct and indirect lost revenue the first year, and tens of thousands of dollars over several years. If you add up your expenses of bringing in a new patient, plus the potential financial impact of a lost patient, you will find the totals alarming and discouraging.

### **Computerized Scheduling**

What can be done about this problem? Lots! The answer lies in effective patient retention management. Of course, the basics are important: Reminder calls and other steps need to be taken to help ensure patients come in for their appointments. It's important to make sure missed appointments are followed up and that future appointments are set consistently. Appointment logs should be meticulous, and bonuses should be paid to staff for recovering patients. Special future appointment calendars and appointment books are another effective tool.

However, even with all of these strategies in place, there's still room for improvement. The answer lies in some of the new sophisticated computerized appointment books. In the past, the computerized appointment book was feared and even hated, but now it has become a necessity for practices that want to continue building their businesses.

What does a modern computerized appointment book look like? Pretty much like your paper one... but with a twist. The computerized books are much more flexible. If you wanted to change your paper appointment book from 15-minute appointment intervals to 10-minute intervals, you would need an entirely new book, and you would need to rewrite every scheduled appointment. A computerized appointment book can make the change in seconds.

Want to change the order of the columns? It's simple with a computerized book. What happens when a patient calls in and asks when his or her next appointment is? With a paper book, you or your staff will have to frantically start flipping pages, trying to find the patient's name. In a computerized appointment book, the answer is only a few clicks away.

Computerized scheduling also allows you to print copies of the computerized book for any and every staff member. If you have a large practice with multiple computers, you can have simultaneous access to your appointment book from anywhere in the office. This can be an enormous time-saver for you and your staff; for the patient, the speed of response is one of those intangibles that helps raise their confidence.

### **Patient Retention Management**

Now, let's discuss the single, most important benefit provided by these new-generation computerized appointment books: patient retention management. Some of these software programs can automatically check and find patients who are late for appointments. When the programs "locate" late patients, the patients' names are flagged by the software so your staff can follow up.

In addition, depending on the software, the front-desk staff may be prompted to reschedule and make a report of the missed or late appointment in order for the flagged item to be removed. The information can be printed and be given to the doctor for the patient's file. This way, the doctor need not worry about no-shows while treating patients. By checking the reports at the end of the day, the doctor will know everything that happened.

A few of the new generation computerized appointment books also come with a "no future appointment" feature. Imagine getting a report of everyone who came in on a certain day but

somehow left the office without a future appointment set. This report then becomes a call-out log to help with your staff's patient retention management efforts.

By investing in a new-generation computerized appointment book, you can stabilize, preserve, and grow your clinic's revenue. Excellence in patient retention management is the answer, and the timely new-generation computerized appointment book is an extremely effective tool to help get you there.

*Mr. Greenwood is the founder of EON Systems, Inc., and is the designer of "The Practice Solution 2000," a new-generation computer program for chiropractic offices. Before founding EON Systems in 1989, Mr. Greenwood worked as a consultant with hundreds of practices across the country, teaching and installing office management procedures. He can be reached at 800-955-6448.*