



guide to patient acquisition and retention



scheduling and check-in processes | robust patient portals | care coordination

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Healthcare organizations of all sizes — from one-doctor practices to national health systems — benefit from effective patient acquisition and retention strategies. No two organizations are exactly alike, but the results of successful patient acquisition and retention are similar across the board.



Engaging patients more effectively can help organizations improve their financial performance and expand their share of an increasingly competitive marketplace.



Good patient engagement strategies lead to more effective and efficient care delivery. Unengaged patients have worse outcomes:

3x more likely to have unmet medical needs¹

2x more likely to defer care¹



Organizations can also drive greater patient satisfaction, and in the process become better poised for success under value-based care models.

Why now?

The coronavirus pandemic has put unprecedented demands on medical practices.

Clinicians have had to keep abreast of ever-changing virus-related knowledge and quickly transition to delivering much of their care via telehealth — which has profoundly changed the nature of the patient-caregiver relationship. Pressing pause on certain routine and elective services has been financially devastating in some cases.

Healthcare organizations are now serving as an invaluable source of credible information on the coronavirus, changes to their own operations, and how patients can keep themselves and loved ones safe and healthy.

And with the dramatic reduction in face-to-face encounters, it's incumbent upon them to do an even better job of identifying gaps in care and staying on top of the most medically vulnerable, including patients at high-risk for COVID-19 complications and those suffering from chronic disease.

Now more than ever, organizations must have an effective patient engagement strategy that both attracts new patients and retains existing ones.

Between March and April 2020, practices across the industry saw a

55%
decrease in revenue

60%
decrease in patient volume²

Three industry trends that pre-date the COVID-19 crisis are also driving the need for improved patient engagement:

More competition for fewer patients

- Healthcare consolidation is driving up competition for a limited number of patients. Given the potential clinical and financial benefits, the land grab is unlikely to stop.
- For organizations in especially competitive markets, adding new services or locations offers a way to acquire new patients while minimizing the chances of existing patients leaving.
- The ability to keep patients in a single health system makes it easier to track overall health outcomes, as well as performance on specific quality measures. Health systems can then capture more of the potential revenue these patients are likely to generate.

Growing emphasis on patient satisfaction under value-based care models

- Traditionally, to maximize revenue, healthcare organizations have focused on driving service and procedure volume.
- As healthcare pivots away from fee-for-service to fee-for-value models, revenue is increasingly tied to both patient experience and health outcomes.
- Programs like MIPS and Medicare's Hospital Value-Based Purchasing Program financially reward hospitals with better patient-reported experience scores.
- Patients can be asked to give feedback on every part of their experience, including factors like nighttime noise level and their clinician's communication skills.

Patients acting as healthcare consumers

- Based on their experiences in other

industries, patients expect their healthcare experiences to be fast and convenient. Technology has made it easier than ever to book travel, pay bills, and more — and patients now expect the same from healthcare.

- An explosion of new entrants into the healthcare market like Amazon and Fitbit has accelerated this trend.
- The rise of high-deductible health plans means patients have greater financial incentives to shop around for care. As a result, patients increasingly weigh factors like price, experience, and customer satisfaction when looking for care.

48.7%

of patients receive care from three health systems across a five-year span³

21.3%

of patients choose to remain in the same health system during the same timeframe³

2.8

different health systems deliver care to an average Medicare patient, one of the most loyalty-predisposed populations, over a five-year span³

Opportunities in every headwind

In the COVID-19 era, the number of virtual encounters has skyrocketed, and a robust telehealth solution has become a must-have for many practices and an important patient engagement tool. It's likely that healthcare's reliance on telemedicine is here to stay, as it offers numerous benefits, including increased convenience for patients and the ability to better track chronic illnesses through more frequent check-ins.

In response to COVID-19 and the “pre-existing” trends mentioned previously, healthcare organizations of all sizes are turning to technology solutions to improve patient engagement.

8x

More telehealth visits were scheduled across the athenahealth network in mid-April 2020 versus the beginning of March 2020⁴

91%

of U.S. health organizations have or plan to undertake a tech adoption initiative in the next 12 months to improve patient experiences⁵

47%

of planned health initiatives in the next 12 months are aimed at capturing patient experience metrics, second only to data analytics (50%)⁵

70%

of organizations list improved patient experience as a top benefit of tech initiatives⁵

Based on our industry research and insights gleaned from the billing and clinical activity of more than 160,000 providers on athenahealth network, we believe healthcare organizations will see the biggest impact on patient acquisition and retention if they can overcome these five pain points:

- Long wait times and cumbersome scheduling processes
- Barriers to returning for future care
- Limited or no reputation management services
- Limited patient portal capabilities
- Unorganized care coordination processes

This guide gives an overview of some of the tactics that healthcare organizations have successfully used to boost patient satisfaction — and where we think having the right partner at your side can make all the difference.

1 *Simplify scheduling and check-in processes*

The challenge

Long wait times after check-in and cumbersome scheduling processes are among the biggest drivers of patient dissatisfaction.⁵ Long wait times have been tied to both lower patient satisfaction and reduced likelihood that a patient will return for future care or recommend that practice to others.⁶ Together, these effects can harm an organization's financial performance. At the same time, in many cases, a lack of up-to-date appointment information prevents organizations from making informed scheduling decisions that would help them maintain the right schedule density for them and drive down no-shows and cancellations..

Tactics

Healthcare organizations can improve patient satisfaction by making the scheduling and check-in processes easy, accessible, and seamless. The pandemic has pushed many administrative tasks like these online and patients will be loath to return to business as usual with certain processes, given the conveniences.



Offer online scheduling on mobile and desktop devices that patients can access day or night.



Save time for your patients by allowing them to see and claim open appointment slots on your schedule.



Integrate your practice management service and scheduling solution to gain the visibility your staff needs to spot and proactively fill gaps.



Invest in a digital check-in solution that saves time for front-desk staff, who often juggle answering phone calls, scheduling appointments, checking insurance eligibility, and more.

How the right partner can help: Web scheduling

Online scheduling through the athenahealth patient portal allows patients to manage their appointments digitally. Staff is automatically notified when a patient schedules, reschedules, or cancels an appointment, and your calendars are continuously updated with the latest information, so you can spot vacancies and proactively fill them. Web scheduling can be paired with patient outreach campaigns, enabling patients who receive outreach messages to schedule an appointment within seconds or minutes of being contacted.

1 minute for patient to schedule an appointment via web scheduling
vs. 8 minutes to schedule an appointment over the phone⁷

77% of patients say web scheduling is important when choosing a provider⁸

4x higher patient retention rates⁹

5.5 hours of administrative time saved per month, per provider⁹

Customer success story:
Catching cancer earlier with
expanded outreach capabilities

Preventative health screenings are a key first step towards achieving better health outcomes. But finding time to perform the necessary outreach can be a challenge. In 2017, athenahealth helped an Indiana hospital get patients scheduled for lung cancer screenings without adding to its workload.

athenahealth designed an outreach campaign focused on direct mail, a channel that based on past campaigns is known to be especially effective with older patients. As a result of the campaign, 66 at-risk patients scheduled a screening. Nine of them were diagnosed with lung cancer at stage one or two, when there are no visible symptoms.

617

at-risk patients contacted for preventative screening

66

contacted patients scheduled an appointment

9

diagnoses of asymptomatic, early-stage lung cancer

2 Reducing barriers to returning for care

The challenge

During the pandemic, it has been critical that practices keep patients informed about office safety protocols, telehealth options, and the reopening of services. Add to these new concerns the age-old challenge: how do organizations reduce the barriers to returning for care, so patients don't seek treatment elsewhere? Confusion about which services patients need, which specialists to seek out, or which locations offer certain services can make returning for care a frustrating experience. That frustration is made worse by the limited provider-patient communication in between visits.

Traditionally, patients come in once or twice a year for a check-up and have little to no contact with their provider otherwise. Patients can easily forget when their last appointment was and even forget to schedule their next one. Limited or no contact with providers between visits also makes it more likely that patients won't know when they need specialist care. And if they do know, they may have to independently research providers, find locations, and schedule appointments on their own time — all of which is enough to drive some patients to a new health system.

62%

of high-risk patients on the athenahealth network had not had a doctor's appointment in the first 2.5 months of the pandemic¹⁰

80%

of patients report being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" before switching to a competing health system³

Tactics

To make it easier for patients to return for care during the pandemic, make sure you have clearly communicated when a telehealth session can replace an in-person visit and when it cannot. And as always, ensure that they know to seek out follow-up care, are incentivized to get care, and think to return to you for future care.



Proactively communicate a patient's next steps and ensure they understand their care plan. Enable your providers to do so by choosing IT services that support seamless integration between your EHR, practice management, patient engagement, and other services.



Programs that drive patient engagement in between visits and encourage patients to take steps towards wellness outside of the exam room are a good way to promote loyalty to your practice.



Create digital touchpoints along the entire patient journey to stay top-of-mind for patients, making it more likely that they'll return to you for care. The pandemic provides numerous opportunities to provide guidance to patients on how to decrease the risk of infection and keep themselves and their families healthy. Reaching patients when and where it's most convenient for them will improve the effectiveness of patient outreach.

How the right partner can help: Outreach manager

The outreach manager service within athenahealth's Population Health service allows your organization to reach patients at scale without adding to your providers' and staff's workload. athenahealth teams analyze your patient data to help you identify the right patients, conduct testing to identify the best content and cadence, and monitor performance throughout. Outreach campaigns can also be customized to your unique goals, to match your specific voice and tone, and to reach patients at the times and channels most convenient for them.

47% of athenahealth messages opened vs. **26%** industry average¹¹

37% of patients schedule an appointment within two weeks of contact¹²

3 Invest in reputation and list management solutions

How the right partner can help: PatientPop

The challenge

Shopping for care often starts with an online search for providers and organizations in a patient's area, including reviews written by current and former patients. It's only once a patient has gathered enough positive information that he or she will schedule an appointment. An organization's web presence is the first impression it makes on many patients, and when patients can't find the information they're looking for — or find too much negative information — they move on.

Tactics

Few organizations have the bandwidth to regularly track what their patients are saying about their experiences online. Reputation and list management solutions take on that work for you and help you:

PatientPop offers website and search engine optimization, online scheduling, and other tools to help you establish a prominent web presence that will attract new patients and get them scheduled for appointments. Easily track key metrics including search rankings and appointment requests from the PatientPop dashboard. With automated patient satisfaction surveys, you can increase your number of testimonials and start a continuous feedback loop with your patients. And when negative feedback comes up, PatientPop alerts you immediately so you can get started resolving your patient's issues.

PatientPop is one of over 270 partner solutions available to athenahealth clients.

78% more appointment requests on average¹³

20,000+ hours of staff time saved¹³

207,000+ web profiles optimized¹³

500,000+ appointments booked¹³



Track what patients are saying about your providers and organization, in addition to helping you understand how patients search for care.



Increase your visibility on third-party websites like Yelp and insurance websites to make it easier for patients to find your organization and your providers.



Capture and analyze the right data so you know where your organization needs to improve service delivery, and which patients to reach out to.

4 Offer a robust and comprehensive patient portal

The challenge

Patients are used to all-in-one online platforms in other industries. Millennials especially expect easy-to-use, feature-rich experiences whether paying bills or arranging travel. The same is increasingly true in healthcare. Patients expect to be able to manage all aspects of their care – including payment, scheduling, and prescriptions – easily, quickly, and on their preferred devices. The portal is also the ideal vehicle for keeping patients apprised of pandemic-related information, including your practice's safety measures, when an office visit is necessary, and best practices for staying healthy during the pandemic.

Benefits

The right patient portal helps providers, staff, and patients all get the most out of their healthcare experiences.

Providers can ...



- Ensure medication adherence and adjust treatment plans as needed.
- Shrink care gaps with target patient outreach campaigns.
- Stay up-to-date on their patients' health in between visits and save time in the exam room that would have been spent catching up.

Staff can ...



- Improve schedule density, while decreasing no-shows and cancellations.
- Check patients in faster by allowing them to complete health history forms, screeners, and more before their appointment.
- Gain back time currently spent on time-consuming work like making appointment reminder phone calls and following up on past-due payments.

Patients can ...



- Share their progress towards wellness goals in between visits.
- Get answers to their health questions on a secure channel.
- Schedule appointments directly into a provider's calendar.
- Order prescription refills, pay balances, view lab results, and access health records without having to make multiple phone calls.

How the right partner can help: athenaCommunicator patient portal

The patient portal within our athenaCommunicator service drives patient satisfaction with easy-to-use digital interfaces, effortless payment processes, secure provider communication, and easy access to personal health information. Patients who use the portal have on-demand access to their personal health records, secure message history, and care summaries. Automated appointment and scheduling reminders allow your staff to effortlessly nurture relationships and help patients stay engaged with your organization. And when patients need to speak to a human, live operators are available to both English- and Spanish-speaking patients and will help them address any urgent or complex issues well into the evening.

80% 18-month retention rate among patient portal adopters vs. 67% of non-portal adopters⁵⁶

5 Improve care coordination

The challenge

Healthcare is more decentralized than ever. Patients no longer expect to get all their care in a single location like a hospital. When organizations don't make it easy for patients and providers to coordinate care across multiple specialties and locations, they increase the chance that a patient will seek out another provider because of a poor coordination experience. Patients are more likely to return to an organization for future care if they have a positive experience navigating their entire health journey.

76% of patients age 50+ leave appointments confused about their next care steps³

Tactics

Organizations that can “quarterback” a patient’s care improve the likelihood of that patient staying in-network.



Make sure patients are aware of their next steps at every stage of their care journey.



Look for robust patient record sharing capabilities in your EHR to ensure all members of the care team have access to up-to-date patient information.



Data-sharing and formal or warm handoffs can help you get the most out of “bundling” services in a single location.

athenahealth marketplace partner spotlight: ChronicCareIQ

Providers can proactively engage patients through remote monitoring using ChronicCareIQ, encouraging them to save offices’ time by answering personalized health-related questions when prompted via phone, email, or text message. Responses of patients who use the app are automatically integrated into the EHR, and dashboards alert staff to those who need outreach. Other features include care-plan generation and prescription refill tracking. ChronicCareIQ is ideal for remote-patient monitoring and chronic and/or transitional care management, as questions about diseases are answered between visits so their progression is often counteracted sooner. Doctors can easily provide between-visit support for preventative care, while having more of their time allocated to acute cases requiring hands-on care.

ChronicCareIQ is one of over 270 partner solutions available to athenahealth clients.

While nothing can generate as much satisfaction as a meaningful relationship with a healthcare provider, wrapping that experience in convenient, easy-to-navigate processes can go a long way towards keeping more of your existing patients and attracting new ones.

Ultimately, the organizations that are able to understand the behavior and expectations of patients as healthcare consumers, retool their practices in patient-centered ways when the unexpected occurs, help providers drive better outcomes by empowering patients, and drive patient satisfaction will be the most successful.

Ready to find out how the right partner can help you?

Call 800.981.5084 or visit us online at athenahealth.com to schedule a meeting.



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about athenahealth guides

Learning and continuous improvement have always been at the heart of athenahealth's mission. We believe that when information siloes are removed, providers, staff, healthcare leaders, and patients all benefit — and healthcare can work as it should. Our guides distill best practice research on a specific industry challenge – sourced from our nationwide network and beyond – into actionable insights that healthcare organizations of all sizes can apply.