

Proactive Outreach: Keeping Your Patients Happy and Your Costs Low

Outbound self service solutions deliver higher patient satisfaction and reduced costs for Healthcare Providers

Section 1: Executive Summary

Healthcare facilities are facing many of the same challenges and demands as other industries. As a Healthcare Provider it can be difficult and costly to provide the kind of personalized care and service that your patients expect. Bringing technology and knowledge together in innovative ways will help your organization achieve its goals.

Incorporating Proactive Outreach into your patient relationship strategy helps you provide superior care, increase business efficiency, and improve financial performance. For example, reaching out to patients with automated appointment reminders and enabling them to reschedule services can substantively reduce “no shows” and improve revenue streams. Automating account reminders and providing self-service payment options is a cost-effective way to proactively collect co-pays as well as post-procedure unpaid insurance balances. These straightforward proactive services can have a big impact on patient satisfaction, staff productivity, and can add significant revenue to the bottom line.

While many of the examples used in this white paper relate to general business and the ability to improve customer service, these same practices are directly applicable to Healthcare Providers. Servicing the patient *as the customer*, Healthcare Providers can apply the techniques and solutions described below to develop more personal patient/customer relationships, strengthen trust, and reduce costs – providing a clear return on investment.

Over the years there has been a trade-off in business between speed and a more “personal touch.” However, doing business faster is not always better. Often it means impersonal and less-than-satisfactory service. Customer service plays a critical role in winning and keeping customers, yet there is a perception that

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BENEFITS OF PROACTIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE SOLUTIONS

- Provides relevant, up-to-date information to customers
- Creates a closed-loop link between business processes and customers
- Offers options for immediate customer response
- Enables superior customer service without adding agents
- Allows agents to be available for higher-value, complex or sensitive transactions

providing more personalized service is too costly. The key question remains: How can you find the right balance between providing superior customer care and keeping costs manageable?

This white paper provides an overview of *proactive customer service*. By implementing new and innovative strategies, your organization can anticipate customer needs – and automatically deliver targeted, relevant offers and services – resulting in delighted customers and improved revenues.

Proactive customer care involves using relevant data and information from business systems to create automated, personalized customer interactions. These customer touches integrate self-service options, enabling immediate action. The response can be handled automatically, without agent intervention or, if the interaction is more complex or sensitive in nature, the customer can be directed at any point during the contact to a live/skilled agent to complete the transaction.

Section 2: Finding a competitive edge: Differentiation through superior customer service

According to Forrester Research¹, a positive customer experience is directly related to a customer's willingness to conduct repeat business. Up to 72% of customers surveyed said they would return as long as they had a positive experience the last time they interacted with the business. If not, they would consider going to a competitor. Interestingly, according to the same research, fewer than 50% of businesses have “a somewhat disciplined and clear strategy” for managing customer experience.

Providing tailored experiences to your customers is one way to ensure customer loyalty and keep revenue streams flowing. Providing more personalized service can begin with a gesture as small as a reminder or notification, while at the same time enabling customers to act on that information easily and immediately.

Exceeding customer expectations with pre-emptive, personalized touches

Let's take a hypothetical example: A radiologist service allows its patients to sign up for their annual checkup reminder. Each annual “event” triggers an automated notification to the patient's phone. The reminder incorporates a self service feature that allows the patient to immediately schedule their annual checkup. Since the system has the basic patient information, it is a fast and painless process to schedule the appointment, thus resulting in a very satisfied patient. From the providers perspective, the entire transaction can be completely automated, reducing internal resource costs, and ensuring maximum schedule utilization.

This example illustrates the benefits of reaching out to your customers before they even realize they have a need, and offering them the option to immediately respond. The practice gets a new appointment, and this happy patient will likely be coming back. Providing timely, relevant notifications to any type of patient or customer can be an invaluable service – from birthday reminders, to scheduling appointments, to providing order status updates,

¹ “The Customer Experience” Research/September 2008

to maintenance and upgrade notifications. Combining the notifications with back end business processes and automated transactions is what makes proactive customer service a win-win for customers and businesses alike.

Giving your customers the power of choice

Automated reminders are convenient, but multi-channel options provide more opportunities to reach customers via their preferred interaction method – whether it's voice, e-mail, text, or chat. Everyone is different. It's what makes us human – and unpredictable. However customers choose to interact with you, the ability to provide multiple options and personalized interactions on their terms will keep them coming back. Businesses can now consider planning communications across the customer life-cycle and delivering these messages via the mode of communication (email, phone, text) that makes most sense based on the customer preference or the type of information to be delivered. Urgent alerts, like bank overdrafts, can be sent via text, while sensitive information which may require immediate agent follow up, like medical exam results, can be delivered via phone.

Section 3: Outbound communications – It's not just about collections anymore

In the past, “outbound communications” has been misconstrued as a euphemism for unwanted dinnertime calls. Proactive customer outreach moves beyond automated dialers and pre-recorded telesales messages. While there still is a place for more traditional applications, proactive customer service provides organizations the opportunity to build positive customer interactions and relationships. By linking customer data and business processes to outbound communications, businesses can deliver timely, relevant information and break through the clutter of communications. It's about anticipating customers' needs and exceeding their expectations to develop trust and loyalty.

Consider traditional debt collection. If this is a key part of your business, then you probably have it down to a science. But what if you could improve the collections process and help manage the customer life cycle by automatically reaching out to customers before their bill is due?

Life gets busy, and sometimes people forget to pay their bills. How grateful would they be to receive a reminder a week before a payment is due, and via the method of their choice – perhaps e-mail? Another reminder could be sent the moment the payment becomes past due, but before they get into hot water. This time a phone call would probably be more appropriate. In many cases, voice is still the most effective communications medium, and is less likely to be overlooked or ignored.

All of this can be done automatically, without the use of expensive agent resources by linking business systems to communications technology. To further encourage a fast resolution, the customer could be offered the option of paying by phone, going beyond the widely used link in an e-mail. It is exactly this type of closed loop link between business process and the customer which enables efficient customer service and helps reduce the cost of service.

With this small change in strategy toward anticipating your customers' needs, you could dramatically reduce costly bad debts and generate new revenue. At the same time, you have turned your collections process into a customer service, helping to avoid late fees and damage to credit ratings. It creates the goodwill that will keep your customers loyal and allow your business to stand head and shoulders above the rest.

Section 4: Packing a punch to the bottom line with efficiency and effectiveness

Proactive customer care is about strengthening relationships with timely, personalized and interactive communications; it also involves making your business operations more efficient, and making your employees more effective.

Reducing costs with automated agents

In order to achieve effective and personalized outreach and response, outbound communications can be tightly integrated with interactive response capabilities. Automated information and self service work together to improve the customer experience, while increasing efficiency in the contact center.

For example, it's beneficial to automatically remind someone that their subscription to your magazine is about to expire or that it's time for an annual physical. It's even more powerful to provide them with the ability to service themselves and renew their subscription or make their appointment themselves. Imagine the cost savings of being able to do all of this without incurring additional human resource expense.

Automating routine and simple customer service transactions frees up skilled employees to focus their attention on handling more complex, sensitive or high value interactions. Health care and businesses can then offer customers more customized service where it makes the most sense.

In this way, proactive outbound with self service enables you to cut the high cost of reaching customers, and enables you to bring in new revenue without adding new resources.

INNOVATIVE STRATEGY RESULTS IN RAPID RETURN ON INVESTMENT

The University of Alabama's Health Services Foundation needed a more efficient way to collect on outstanding patient accounts with small balances. Their existing process was cost prohibitive. So much so, in fact, that collecting on these accounts was sometimes costing them more than the outstanding balances themselves.

The institution implemented an automated outbound communications strategy that integrates proactive outreach with self service options to automatically reach out to customers and more efficiently collect revenues.

The solution paid for itself in just a few short months, and it is now generating over \$50,000 in additional revenue each month. In addition to the leap in revenues collected, the University of Alabama's Health Services Foundation has reduced agent staffing by 27 percent due to the ability to automate communications and reduce and redistribute workloads. Adding an appointment reminder functionality for additional savings on the existing infrastructure was just the icing on the cake.

Section 5: The appeal of proactive outreach for every organization

Regardless of the industry you are in, there is always an opportunity to “wow” customers. The fundamental objective of any successful proactive customer outreach strategy is to anticipate your customers’ needs, and reach out to them with useful, timely and personalized information, while at the same time empowering them to act on it. Everyone has experienced some of the following situations:

Routing around the inconvenience of a cancelled flight while reducing the load on the contact center

Getting to the airport on time and making a flight can be a harrying experience. When you rush to make it and *then* find out your flight has been delayed, or even cancelled, it can be extraordinarily frustrating! Imagine what a relief it would be if your airline reached out to you, not only with timely information that your flight has been cancelled, but also with the ability to confirm a new flight, right then and there. The need to wait on the phone with the booking call center or in line at the ticket desk to the airport goes away, at the same time, the load in the contact center in such peak times is reduced significantly.

Treating appointments with personalized care and fully utilizing schedule availability

A healthcare clinic is experiencing a large number of missed appointments. It is costly to the clinic – and to the patients, who are charged a fee for each missed appointment. The clinic realizes this, but its small reception staff can’t handle the extra work of personally reaching out to its patients with reminders.

REALIZING THE POTENTIAL OF AUTOMATED OUTREACH

Here’s a real-world example. The service department of a national power tools company was faced with a challenge. Once a tool was repaired, there was no automatic procedure in place to notify the tool’s owner. Customers were required to call to inquire about repair status. Employees often were distracted from repair work while responding to these inquiries. As a result, repairs took longer, revenue was delayed, and customers were frequently unhappy with the service. Given the financial impact, the company needed a new strategy.

The solution was a proactive communications application that integrates outbound and interactive response systems. An “automated agent” notifies the customer of the tool’s status and cost of the repair. If a tool is not picked up within five days, the customer is contacted again.

The value created by this simple implementation is impressive. Previously, average time on the shelf for a repaired tool was 39 days. The company hoped to reduce this time to 30 days. In actual production, shelf time is now down to an average of 10 days – far exceeding the customer’s expectations. Employees are more productive, because they’re not interrupted as frequently by callers. The service department is deriving a tangible financial impact, since they are now able to recognize repair revenue sooner. This company achieved a positive ROI within six months of implementing their proactive customer service solution.

Instead, the clinic implements a solution that combines automated outreach with self service options, allowing them to contact each patient to remind them of their upcoming appointment, and offer the option to reschedule if the time is no longer suitable. At the same time, they can be reminded of any procedures that need to be followed, or items they need to bring to their appointment. To fill open slots, the hospital can offer patients a call-back if an earlier appointment time becomes available – another remarkable customer service and efficiency gain at little incremental cost.

This same technology could be used to automatically reach out to patients with timely reminders that co-pays or fees are due – or past due – and provide options for immediate payment via touchtone or speech recognition. This means higher revenue for the clinic and happier patients – a win-win result and a positive return on investment.

Section 6: Being *Customer-Ready* drives superior customer care

As we can see from the preceding examples, driving more personalized customer experiences, while at the same time streamlining business processes, can be very rewarding. There are many facets of a successful proactive customer care strategy.

A customer-centric organization knows their customers intimately, and they use this insight to provide innovative customer service at every opportunity. The business is always available, and ready to serve the customer via the most preferred method. The business anticipates their needs, and proactively addresses them through an intelligent mix of proactive outreach (automated and live), information-based routing for inquiries, self-service options and multi-channel capabilities.

Knowing your customers, and finding the right communications strategy, work in synchrony to help you provide the kind of superior services and care that will make you a formidable competitor. When used properly, proactive outbound communications can have a huge impact on your bottom line, and on the way your customers feel about you.

Section 7: Partnering with Avaya to implement your customized solution

Avaya and its business partners are uniquely positioned to assist you in implementing an appropriate solution to support the full customer experience lifecycle. Avaya offers feature-rich and well-designed contact center solutions. It supports massive scalability, high availability, and highly secure solutions backed by an industry leading service organization.

For more information on how Avaya can give your enterprise a leg up on the competition, contact your Avaya Client Executive or Authorized Avaya BusinessPartner, or visit us at www.avaya.com

About Avaya

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The Avaya logo consists of the word "AVAYA" in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The letters are closely spaced, and the 'A's have a distinctive shape with a slight curve at the top.

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