

How Modern Communication Patterns and Expectations Affect Medical Practices

AN EVIDENCE-BASED GUIDE





FIRST, A LITTLE MOTIVATION...

Rise of Mobile and Texting

Less than 25 years ago, nobody on Earth had ever sent a text message. Now, we send more than

6 billion

every day in the U.S. alone, and that's not a typo.^{1,2}

4 out of 5

people find it frustrating or worse to be stuck by a phone or computer while waiting for customer support.⁴

A third of people don't ever want to be put on hold, and another quarter are unwilling to wait even

1 minute

for someone to pick up.⁶

84%

of people use online self-service resources to solve their customer support issues, more than choose the phone or any other channel.⁷

95%

of Americans now own a cell phone.³

30%

of people no longer bother to listen to their voicemail.⁴

75%

of millennials would rather text than talk with customer support.⁴

82%

of people want to contact companies through means other than phone or email.⁵



NEW EXPECTATIONS

On-Demand and Self-Service

The average wait time is now more than

18 days

for a new patient to see a physician.⁸

67%

of patients might consider a virtual visit when their regular provider is not available within 1 day.¹⁰

2 out of 3

people would choose a physician who offers a patient app over one who does not.¹²

Medical record portal sites struggle to break

30%

adoption among patients, despite wide availability and reimbursement incentives.^{13,14}

A 1-star increase in a restaurant's Yelp rating leads to a

5-9%

increase in its revenue.¹⁷

Patients rank the ability to be seen quickly and without an appointment

1st on a list

of more than 50 possible features of a medical clinic.⁹

25%

of the American population uses a physician review site in any given year, with 59% of people considering them important in selecting a doctor.¹⁸

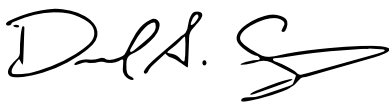
2 out of 3

patient calls involve an administrative task, such as appointment scheduling or medication paperwork.¹⁶

Now, the main thread...

These disconnected figures are tantalizing even in isolation, but when added together, they tell a powerful and unmistakable story: The way that our society communicates has changed dramatically, and medicine has been left behind.

Join us in this guide as we build the full narrative, based on the best available evidence, and show a straightforward way out of the mess.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D.A. S." with a stylized flourish at the end.

David Craig, MD
Medical Director

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Medical Communication Is Failing

When communication technology changes, medicine changes. The field itself is so dependent on sharing information that the only question is when, not if, any new way of communicating will be adopted. The telephone, for instance, was already being used for medical care just three years after its invention, and practice today would be flatly unimaginable without it.¹⁹ Now, with the rise of the Internet, text-based messaging, and digital telephony, a communications sea change is upon us once again, but this time, medicine has fallen behind. The modern patient is developing needs and expectations that the typical healthcare organization isn't meeting, and it's time to understand them or risk losing the connection altogether.

At Spruce, we develop and sell a medical communications platform, but that's not the point of this guide, and you won't find a sales pitch inside of it. Instead, we want to share what we've learned over the years that we've been involved in modern medicine, constantly studying trends and interacting with thousands of practices to help them address their ever-evolving needs for better communication and care technologies. We did this work as a necessary part of building our business, but the results stand on their own, and the data are clear that the communication landscape has changed fundamentally. Whether with Spruce or a different solution, medical practices must now also change.

How We Communicate Has Changed Drastically

The evidence is clear that communication patterns have changed materially over the past decade, leading to permanent alterations in the way we interact not only with each other but also with businesses.

Let's examine three of the most important aspects of this shift in society at large, and then we'll address how they impact medicine specifically:

1. Diversification of communication channels (a.k.a., the ascendance of texting)
2. Changes in expectations
3. Evolution of word of mouth

1. DIVERSIFICATION OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The phone call has dominated communication for the past 100 years, but a new era is dawning, and text-based communication has emerged as the most notable novel contender.

Recent research shows that 95% of Americans now own a cell phone, with 81% of these opting for a smartphone, an increase of 120% over the same figure six years ago.³ Furthermore, 97% of smartphone owners regularly use their phone for text messaging, making it the most common activity on the devices, even above voice calling.²⁰

More evidence of the decline of the phone call can be seen

in the parallel death of the voicemail message. Large carriers have been reporting a drop in total voicemail volume among their subscriber bases for some years, and about 30% of people now say that they don't bother to listen to their voicemail at all.^{4,21} Contrast that sobering reality with data suggesting that 82% of people read every text message that they get, even ones that come from unknown numbers.²²



64% of people now say that they would prefer to use texting over voice as a customer service channel.

In further support of the ascendance of text messaging, 64% of consumers with texting capabilities now indicate that they would prefer to use texting over voice as a customer service channel, a number which increases to 75% for the millennial demographic.⁴ Unsurprisingly, such people are also very likely to think more positively about any company that is willing to text with them.

Voice calling has declined, being mainly supplanted by texting, but there is also a second and equally important trend found in the general proliferation of modern communication channels.

People today have their choice of numerous, near-instantaneous communication modalities, including email, texting, online messaging (e.g., WhatsApp), and social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). Each has a purpose, and there is growing demand for service providers to support a multitude of them for customer service use.

Eighty-two percent of consumers, in fact, now want to be able to contact a company through channels other than a standard phone call or email, and this preference is shared nearly equally across age groups.⁵ Already, a third of people will use social media or live website chat to contact an organization when they have such options available.



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2. CHANGES IN EXPECTATIONS

Our society is also changing its expectations around communication, with a growing demand for communication and service delivery that can occur quickly, at any time, and in any place.

Eighty-one percent of people agree, for instance, that it is “frustrating to be tied to a phone or computer to wait for customer service help.”⁴ Fitting with this, nearly half of us would now prefer a text conversation over waiting on hold to speak with an agent. And for millennials, this number becomes almost two-thirds.

Long hold times are actually the second most despised customer service experience, just after having to contact a company multiple times for the same issue, with 69% of Americans considering it “extremely frustrating” to wait on the phone.²³ Close to a third of people also feel that companies should never put them on hold, and another quarter are unwilling to wait there even one minute, with corroborating data showing that 15% will hang up within 40 seconds.^{6,24}

We’ve also adapted our idea of convenience when it comes to location. More and more, people want problems solved remotely and virtually, when possible. Failing that, they’ll look for a way to have necessary goods and services delivered directly to them, and only as a last resort will they be willing to travel somewhere to achieve a goal.

There's perhaps no better example of this trend than the rise of Netflix. The company first crushed physical rental stores by sending movies directly to people in the mail, but they then proceeded to cannibalize their own mail-order business with a streaming offering. Today, less than 5% of Netflix revenue comes from their DVD business.²⁵ Amazon Prime has similarly doubled its subscriber base over the past two years, as consumers vote with their wallets for remote purchasing and speedy delivery.²⁶

Modern expectations for speed of service also tie in with an increasing desire for self-service options and after-hours availability. From check deposits to grocery store lines, people are steadily turning toward companies that allow them to accomplish tasks on their own and whenever they want to.^{7,27} This is especially true for customer service issues, with 84% of Americans using online self-service resources to solve their problems, more than choose the phone or any other support channel.⁷



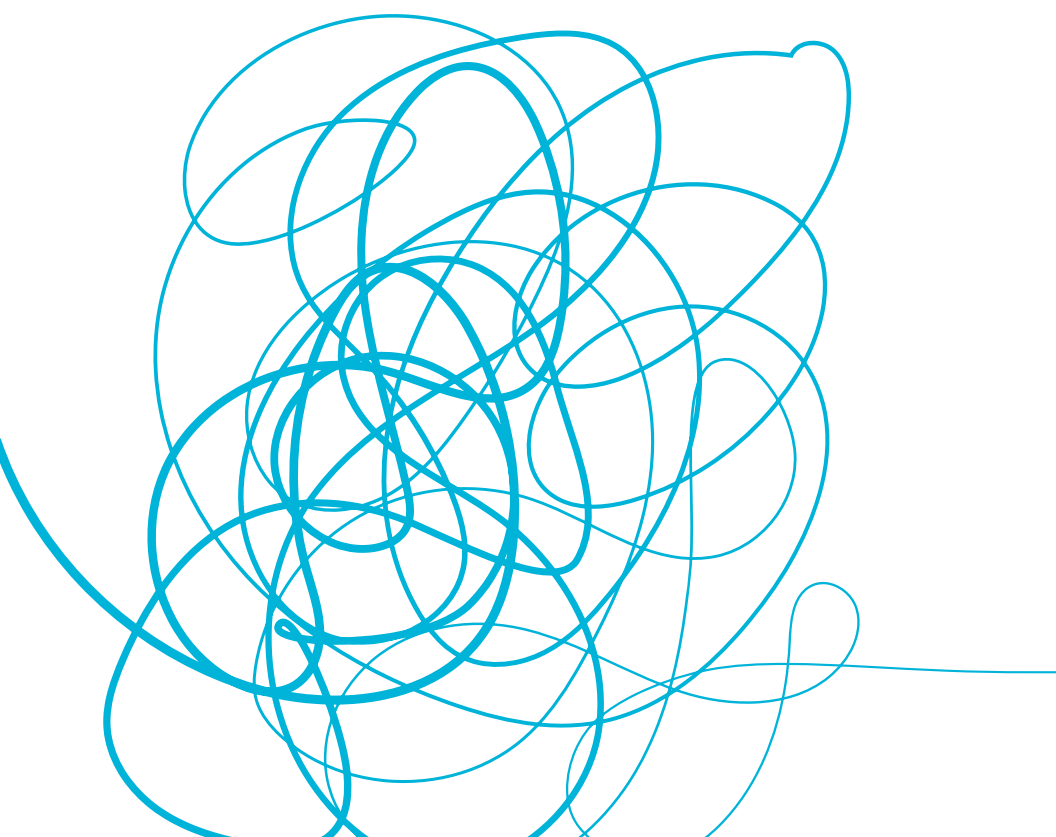
84% of Americans use online self-service resources to solve their problems, more than choose the phone or any other support channel.

3. EVOLUTION OF WORD OF MOUTH

Word-of-mouth recommendations have always been critical to any growing organization, medical or otherwise, but changes in communication norms are altering the playing field. What used to be accomplished exclusively through chatter among friends and family has now moved online, with review sites like Yelp providing much of the third-party assessment that we all depend on for decision-making.

Recent research has quantified the Yelp effect, demonstrating that a one-star increase in a restaurant's rating on Yelp leads to a 5–9% increase in its revenue. This effect does not occur for chain restaurants, though, presumably because consumers have alternate sources of reputation and quality information for such establishments.¹⁷

Medical practices are more like independent restaurants than national chains, however, so reputation and word of mouth on rating sites would be predicted to have a significant impact on their fortunes. Indeed, nearly a quarter of the American population uses a physician review site in any given year, with 59% of people considering them important in selecting a doctor.¹⁸



How These Changes Apply to Medical Practices

There is compelling evidence that our society has changed both the way it communicates and its expectations around service delivery, but medicine as a field has not kept pace. The medical world still revolves around the phone call, the fax, and long wait times, and this is no longer a sustainable situation.

1. COMMUNICATION

There is ample signal that patients want more modern communication options for use with their care providers. Nearly two-thirds of patients, for instance, say that they would choose a primary care physician who offers a patient app over one who does not.¹² Seven percent of patients even say that they would go so far as to switch providers if it would get them access to virtual visits.¹¹ In some cases, nearly 20% of patients report contacting their physicians via social media, often despite physician resistance or institutional policies forbidding it.¹⁵

While patients are expressing a clear desire for increased electronic communication, however, medical practices are often not answering the call. Thirty-seven percent of patients report that their primary care provider does not make available any modern means of communication, and only 7% say that they have accessed their health information online.^{12,15}

There is also evidence to indicate that patients react well when providers do embrace modern communication. All Smiles Dental, a dental practice in San Francisco, has a five-star Yelp rating and 271 reviews, 42 of which explicitly mention texting with one of the dentists at the practice who has adopted the communication channel.²⁸



Portal adoption rates have struggled to break 30% among patients.

Efforts to increase electronic access in medicine have often centered around web-based “patient portals,” but the slow adoption of these appears to indicate that patients don’t actually like them. Despite significant advantages, such as being tied to reimbursement under Medicare and easy availability in most electronic health record systems, portal adoption rates have struggled to break 30% among eligible patients.^{13,14} It is unlikely that the portal will be anything more than a bit player in the future of patient access, and the field should instead look toward technologies that patients are already choosing, such as texting and app-based communication.

2. SERVICE DELIVERY AND ACCESS

There is also evidence that medicine is failing to meet service delivery expectations. The average wait time for a new patient to see a physician is now more than 18 days, and this is even longer for people with Medicare or Medicaid.⁸ Patients, however, are not tolerating this, as is evidenced by the recent proliferation of urgent care centers and other alternative service providers.²⁹



The average wait time is now more than 18 days for a new patient to see a physician.

Even patients with established physician relationships will not put up with much of a delay in access: 67% of patients say that they might consider a virtual visit if their regular provider were not available within one day, a number which increases to nearly three-fourths if that delay becomes a week.¹⁰

In another study of patient preferences in primary care, six of the top ten most-desired clinic attributes related to access and convenience. Patients ranked “walking in without an appointment and being seen within 30 minutes” first among 56 possible clinic features, for instance, and they ranked “24/7

access” fifth, reflecting a strong desire for after-hours care options. Importantly, patients chose most of these features over items that are traditionally valued in healthcare, such as being seen by a doctor instead of a physician extender or getting to see the same provider each time they visit the clinic.⁹

In addition to speedy care and after-hours availability, self-service patient support will also become increasingly standard over time, a shift that has the potential to save real time and money when applied to cost centers like practice administration. Studies indicate, for instance, that two-thirds or more of patient calls in many healthcare settings involve an administrative task, such as appointment scheduling or medication paperwork, with a full quarter being made solely for a non-medical function.^{16,30} Providing self-service options, such as online booking or automated refill algorithms, for patients to deal with these types of administrative tasks will delight them while simultaneously unburdening your staff.



Two-thirds of patient calls involve an administrative task, such as appointment scheduling or medication paperwork.



How You Can Adapt

The vast majority of medical practices have failed to respond to the recent seismic shifts in communication that are now evident throughout our society. This is especially unfortunate, as these new technologies can provide huge benefits to providers and patients alike, and opportunities abound to increase efficiency, elevate care quality, and improve patient satisfaction. Luckily, it's not actually that difficult to find and take advantage of them.

1. GO MULTI-CHANNEL

When it comes to modernizing communications and service offerings, the number-one action item for every practice needs to be going multi-channel. Phone, email, texting, secure messaging, social media: You need to make it possible for your patients (and your prospective patients!) to reach you how and when they want to.

This doesn't mean that you have to be on-call 24/7, though, so banish that thought. Find a modern technology platform that lets you set availability schedules, create auto-responder messages, configure variable notifications for individual team members, and generally add a touch of "smartness" to every channel. When implemented correctly, such functions will actually save you time and effort, since you'll be able to handle more patient issues without the overhead of a live telephone call and during times that are convenient for you.

It's also important to pick a solution that funnels all of your new channels into one place, so that your team can have



Two out of three people would rather hand out parking tickets than repeat themselves to customer service.

a unified view of all patient communication. This will help ensure that nothing gets missed or overlooked and that patients won't have to repeat themselves when they change contact channels, something that makes more than 70% of them irritated.⁵ In a dramatic but illustrative statistic, two out of three people would rather hand out

parking tickets than repeat themselves to customer service.

Modern communication channels can also raise concerns over protected health information and HIPAA, but these issues are addressable. The law is actually written quite elegantly and in a forward-thinking manner, and the right combination of technical safeguards and patient education can allow any organization to adopt technologies like texting without violating ethical or legal requirements. Any company that provides healthcare communications services should be an expert in this, so make sure that your vendors can competently talk through the relevant issues and help you design workflows that address them.

For full disclosure, multi-channel healthcare communication is one of our specialties at Spruce, but you don't have to use our platform to achieve it; there are many possible solutions. Just consider that it's no longer enough in medicine to have a phone line and a fax; it's time to expand your options.

2. BE ON-DEMAND

Everybody wants to do things at times of high intent. When you are hungry is when you're most willing to spend time and money on food, and when you are sick is when you most want to see the doctor. Modernizing your practice means embracing this and finding ways to be on-demand for your patient base.



**Modernizing your practice means
finding ways to be on-demand for
your patient base.**

Again, this does not mean that you have to be on call permanently. One simple change you can make, for example, is to adopt online appointment booking. If a patient is sick at 2am, they will likely understand that they can't reach you immediately, but they will enjoy the fact that they can book time with you in a self-service way for an urgent appointment

slot. If they don't have this option during their period of highest intent, you risk losing them to an emergency room or other immediate alternative.

Another powerful way to increase your accessibility is to add telemedicine to your practice. This doesn't have to be expensive or complex, and you should think of it as simply another channel in your multi-channel communications. If patients can have their basic health issues addressed while they're at home or work or even during off-hours, they'll be ecstatic.

Telemedicine doesn't always have to mean live video, either; it can often be as basic as

using secure messaging to answer garden-variety questions about post-operative care, newborn feeding, drug reactions, and other bread-and-butter issues. Recent changes in state law and payer policies also mean that telemedicine is more reimbursable than ever before, so it doesn't have to be uncompensated work.

Full disclosure again: Spruce natively supports multiple forms of telemedicine. You don't have to use our platform, though, and there are many workable options. The only thing you



**Adding
telemedicine to
your practice is
a powerful way
to increase your
accessibility.**

can't afford to do is ignore telemedicine; it's here, and your patients will find it somewhere when they want it.

3. GO TO CHARM SCHOOL

When people switch healthcare providers, it's usually because somebody moved. But when a patient's decision isn't location-related, 85% of the time it's because they're unhappy with something at their current practice, not because they were lured away by a competitor.³¹ In fact, nearly a quarter of non-location-related defectors cite “poor bedside manner” as the direct reason for their departure, and patients rank office staff rudeness among the top 10 missteps that are likely to make them leave a practice.^{12,31}



Patients rank office staff rudeness among the top 10 missteps that are likely to make them leave a practice.

It's clear that the manner of your communication is just as important as your availability, and you should make sure that your practice is up to speed on its charm. One great way to do this is to “secret shop” your own organization. Call in at various times of day (or text, if you support it!) and see what the experience is like. Is it fast? Is everybody friendly? Do you

get called back if you hang up or leave a message?

That last point is especially important. In our own investigations here at Spruce, we have come across practices that don't return every voicemail, and fewer than 10% will proactively call back numbers that don't leave a message. Ignoring such expressions of intent means that you're missing patients during their time of need, which is bad both for medicine and for business.

4. TEND YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE

People will talk about your practice on social media and review sites whether or not you choose to engage with those services. Given this, the only smart play is to find them and curate the conversation. Having a useful and up-to-date website and Facebook page are two initial steps, but you should also keep an eye on your Yelp presence and on any reviews that might be left for you on sites like Healthgrades.

Many physicians feel uncomfortable asking patients to rate them on review sites, which is understandable, but there are creative ways to encourage such behavior without seeming salesy. If you implement after-visit satisfaction surveys, for instance, you can use the results to automatically direct happy patients to Yelp, while dissatisfied patients are immediately brought to your staff's attention for outreach. This technique is used widely outside of medicine, because it accomplishes two important things at once: increasing positive exposure while simultaneously catching negative reviews before they become public and beyond your control.



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Brave New World

You know intuitively that the phone call is no longer the only game in town and that the demands of human health don't respect business hours or busy signals. Now you've seen data supporting those thoughts. If we've accomplished our goal, you also know that it's time to act on this new reality and to take your practice where it needs to be to continue communicating with patients, now and into the future.

Spruce is a communications and telehealth platform that enables medical care outside of the four walls of the office. If you're interested, you can [schedule a conversation](#) with one of our practice experts and learn how you can enable multi-channel communications, modern care workflows, and efficient telemedicine for your practice today and for the future. Okay so maybe there was one sales pitch :)



Get in touch.



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