Bridging the Expectation Gap

Is your practice offering an "Amazon" experience?
Are you losing patients to one that does?

It's a digital world. Travel, banking, the taxicab industry — the digital revolution is driving seismic changes in consumer expectations and business models. Consumers search, compare, and purchase round the clock, wherever they are and whenever convenient, courtesy of their mobile devices. Yet in healthcare, consumer expectations created by their online experiences are colliding with the healthcare industry's analog response. Healthcare has been slow to transition, considering itself somehow different, not easily compared with booking a trip or reviewing a restaurant online. Consumers see it differently. They don't just want digital access — in growing numbers, they *expect* it.

In a 2016 study, Accenture reported that 77% of patients see the ability to book, change, or cancel appointments online as important. Accenture's study on patient engagement projects that almost two-thirds of patients will book online appointments by the end of 2019. **That's 986 million appointments digitally self-scheduled, equating to $3.2 billion in value in 2019.** Can your practice or health system afford to pass up a share of that market?

Patients Want the Amazon Experience. Do You Offer It?

More than one-third of physician practices state that patient growth is very important, according to the 2014 Great American Survey sponsored by Kareo. Nearly half also report that patient satisfaction is a priority. Do those priorities translate to your patients? **A recent Accenture study reported that it takes eight minutes, on average,**

to schedule an appointment over the phone, with at least 30 percent of that time spent on hold — unlikely to add to patient satisfaction. Digital self-scheduling will leapfrog call centers — and lend a competitive edge. More than three out of four patients want the ability

By the end of 2019*

66% of health systems will offer digital self-scheduling

64% of patients will book appointments digitally

38% of appointments will be self-scheduled

986 million appointments digitally self-scheduled **=** **$3.2 billion** in value

to schedule appointments online. Online scheduling is an effective tool to bridge the expectation gap, increase patient engagement, and boost practice volume.

Research shows that more than 75% of patients search online before booking an appointment with a physician. That means that for many patients, their first introduction to their provider is through his or her online presence. **Visibility online with accurate, up-to-date, relevant information matters.** And don't underestimate the power of star ratings. Love them or hate them, more than half of patients looking online will pass by a doctor who doesn't have a star rating. Just like consumers want to know about a restaurant's menu, location, ambience, and price point, and likely won't go to one with poor reviews, they expect the same transparency from their doctor, including information about the provider's education, location, insurance accepted, and languages spoken, as well as fellow patients' reported experience. Online scheduling conveys all of this information to prospective and current patients anytime they are looking. And it allows them to take the next step and book an appointment: A Google/Compete study reports that about 44% of patients who found physicians and practices on their mobile devices book an appointment.

Differentiate Your Practice, Grow Network Keepage

Keeping up with bookings, rebookings, and cancellations via phone is cumbersome. Reminder and follow-up calls add to the burden for office staff, and these processes create opportunities for errors and cause frustration for both office staff and patients. Even with electronic booking, the volume of telephone calls and manual interventions is high, driving down efficiency. Consumers want convenience and accessibility; physician booking systems often provide frustration and delay. Integrating online self-scheduling frees up office staff, reallocating their time to other functions and allowing them to spend more time with patients face-to-face during visits.

What about no-shows? Research finds that one of the common causes of no-shows is forgotten appointments. Automated reminders sent from online systems keep patients informed of upcoming appointments, freeing staff from sending reminder calls and messages. In addition to no-shows, open slots are another lost revenue opportunity. If a patient calls into your office, they may fill an open slot. What about the patient scrolling online after office hours? The new patient? Online scheduling opens a new channel to these patients and creates an additional way to fill your slots. Fully 55% of

all appointments booked through online systems occur after normal business hours. Couple this access to new volume with the opportunity to reduce administratively burdensome tasks on already overworked office staff and the positive results are compounded.

With leakage rates of up to 30%, health system networks are losing patients, visits, and revenue. SCI Solutions surveyed hospital CFOs about top revenue-generation strategies and found that more than half of CFO respondents reported focusing on leakage as a source of revenue growth. Online scheduling is one way to minimize your network leakage — thus increasing your keepage — and capitalize on your competition's leakage. It's also an opportunity to improve care coordination by securing follow-up appointments and

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44% of patients who found physicians and practices on their mobile devices book an appointment

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scheduling diagnostic testing, other subsequent care, and preventive care easily and effectively. If your health system already employs online scheduling, bolster its reach and connectivity by leveraging your online scheduling platform.

When a patient chooses your practice or system for care, how do you ensure they get their subsequent care from you as well? Digital platforms offer effective provider/patient matching to facilitate scheduling of referral or follow-up appointments by emergency departments, clinics, or doctors' offices. When patients are handed a paper referral sheet and instructed to call for an appointment the next business day, the opportunity to lose that patient is significant. If the ER or practice can book that appointment quickly and efficiently online with your practice before the patient is discharged, the likelihood of retaining that patient in your system grows.

Digital Doesn't Mean Disengaged

Concerned that a digital experience creates distance with your patients? That patients will miss the personal connection of speaking with staff? Some patients will still choose to call. But many others — who won't miss the telephone call, list of menu options, and hold music — can access and schedule appointments with ease. The consumer directs the experience, feeling more connected and more in control. A 2016 study by Stax reports that 80% of consumers will choose a physician who offers online scheduling over an identical one who does not. Further, Intuit Health reports that 40% of patients would consider switching providers for online access.

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What about the impact on the physician and the practice? Physicians are concerned that online systems will create "one size fits all" scheduling with little flexibility. But sophisticated scheduling systems allow physicians to customize rules and set preferences to meet the practice's needs and maintain flexibility — length of time by visit type, new patient visits only in certain slots, and so forth. Worried that the practice won't have adequate time to gather needed information for an appointment? Create a rule limiting how close to the appointment time a patient can book online. Start with early adopters, engage physicians in customizing the system, and begin with a portion of the practice's slots. Once physicians are more comfortable, transition more slots to online booking.
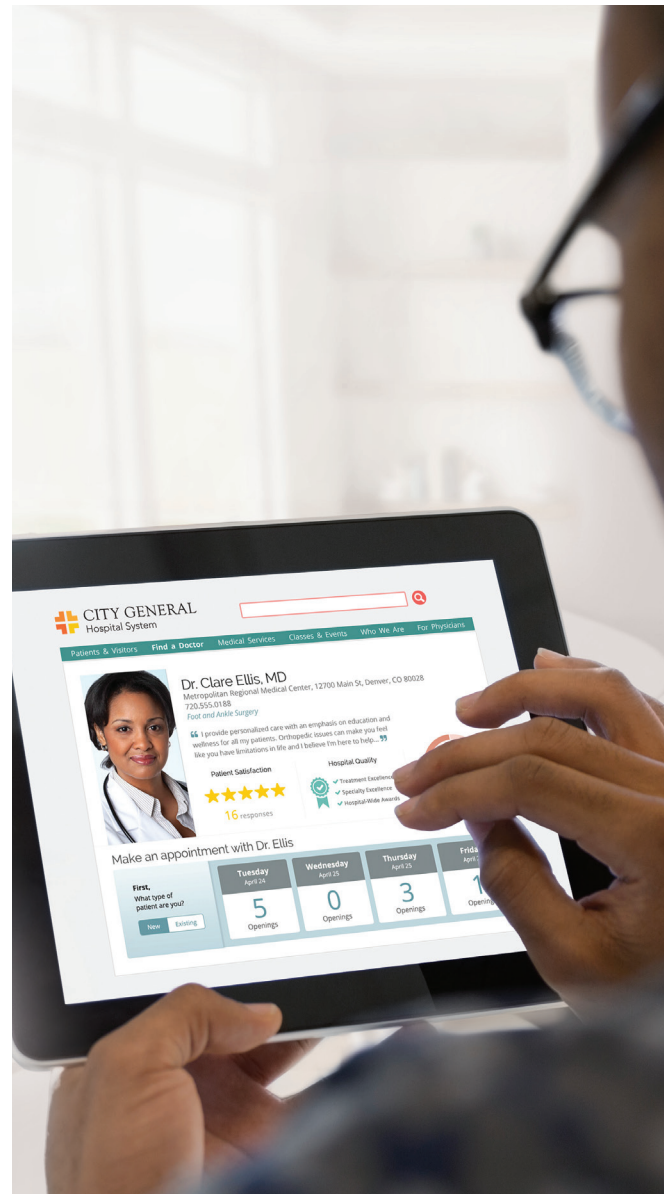
Conclusion

Today's and tomorrow's patients are looking online — so help them find you. With almost 40% of appointments projected to be self-scheduled in just two years, practices that don't offer accessible, digital scheduling will lose out to those that do. The productivity and efficiency gains can positively impact patient, staff, and provider satisfaction. Online appointment scheduling is a critical ingredient to your practice's success. **IP**

About the Author

ELLEN BANACH is an experienced healthcare executive with expertise in developing and executing strategies to drive revenue growth, build service lines, and improve operations in competitive environments. She can be contacted at **Ellen.Banach@verizon.net**.

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