

PATIENT SATISFACTION

Using web-based surveys to connect with your patients

Practices of all shapes and sizes can use the internet to conduct economical, reliable surveys that give your patients a voice, and provide valuable information on improving service and care.

The beginning of a new year offers an opportunity for individual physicians and medical groups to review several aspects of the performance of their practices. While it is customary to reflect on the previous year with respect to financial performance and the growth of the practice, a methodical and objective survey of your patients can help you reinforce what worked well, and can identify areas for improvement.

By leveraging existing cost-effective survey software, your practice can create an anonymous survey that is available to patients on the web, by mail, or both. Surveys printed on paper and mailed to the patient are effective, but increasingly, many practices are looking to web-based surveys as flexible and economical alternatives.

Note: For an informative article focusing on paper-based patient satisfaction surveys, visit <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/990100fm/40.html> (Family Practice Management)

Making the connection

Patient satisfaction surveys are a great way to learn from your patients, and to give them the opportunity to speak up about their experience with your practice. Patients that are reluctant to voice opinions and concerns in person will appreciate the chance to give specific feedback on medical care, service, and policies in an anonymous forum. Providing this opportunity reinforces your commitment to quality in every aspect of their experience as your patient. Group practices can even design their surveys to account for the fact that patients may be treated by multiple physicians.

A thoughtfully designed survey communicates the intention of the survey clearly and simply, and provides easily understood instructions and questions. A small, informal “pilot” test with a few patients can help you refine your wording where necessary, before you launch your survey more broadly. At every opportunity, express gratitude for their participation, and remind patients of the anonymity and confidentiality in the survey program.

Publicize your survey with small flyers left in area with a high level of patient traffic, such as the reception area or waiting room. Your flyer should include a brief explanation of the program and its purposes, as well as the address for the web survey. If you have a website for your practice, you should also be able to link directly from your website to the survey. A web-based survey can also increase the visibility of a practice's website to its patients.

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What to include in your survey

While much of the patient's experience with your practice depends on the quality of the medical care, a broad range of administrative and service issues contribute significantly to overall patient satisfaction. Especially in highly competitive medical fields, the success of a practice can be hindered if patients consistently encounter administrative and service problems such as long waiting times, difficulties with insurance providers, or a lack of courtesy among staff members.

Regarding patient care, it is wise to include aspects of good medical care in the survey. Measure whether your patients are satisfied with the discussion of recent medical history and symptoms, procedures and examinations, and follow-up care. Give patients the opportunity to rate each aspect of care with respect to quality, and whether discussions are thorough and informative.

By asking specific questions pertaining to a broad range of elements of the patient experience, you can reinforce the policies and procedures that are well-received, and identify and prioritize areas for improvement. Including open-ended questions such as "What do you like best about our practice?" and "What areas of our practice need improvement?" give patients the chance to put their feedback into their own words, and allows them to comment on areas that are not covered in the rest of the questionnaire.

Working with your results

In the planning stages of your survey, before the launch, consider the types of planning exercises and policy decisions that will be influenced by the results of your survey. This is an important step because it will help you keep the necessary questions from falling through the cracks, and it will help you establish a plan for interpreting the results you will receive.

Having a sufficient sample size on which to base conclusions is sometimes a concern for some individual physicians and emerging group practices. Many believe that a survey must have hundreds of replies to be scientifically valid. As a rule of thumb, it is only necessary to gather 50-60 replies per physician to be considered scientifically valid. Even smaller surveys can still provide valuable insights into patient satisfaction that may not be available from anecdotal feedback.

One of the advantages of web-based survey tools is the ability to process the results more quickly and efficiently than paper-based surveys which require transcription of written responses into an electronic format. Most software and applications that apply to web-based surveys allow the user to pre-program reports that update throughout the questionnaire administration, so that you can monitor results continuously. High-quality survey tools also provide a way to modify the questionnaire during its administration.

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The bottom line

Even though some web-based survey tools require an up-front investment in licensing fees, this approach is ideal for practices that are dedicated to an ongoing periodic program of measuring patient satisfaction. For those practices that do not plan on repeating the survey within in the next few years, a tool requiring a short-term monthly fee may be better.

Many practices may seek professional support for planning, administration, and analytical responsibilities associated with the survey. There are several firms that specialize in patient satisfaction surveys, which is important due to the sensitive nature of the relationship between a patient and the practice. A firm specializing in patient satisfaction surveys may also add more practical insight into how the practice can improve care and service.

The patient satisfaction survey is an enormously valuable tool as it provides the practice actionable information, the first step in getting a competitive edge. With the proper analysis, your survey results can help you go beyond merely identifying areas for improvement by helping you prioritize them based on their severity. Through this prioritization exercise, you will be able to focus on a specific and definite set of corrective actions whose effects can be monitored in subsequent surveys and other forms of patient feedback.

Survey results, when part of a periodic program measuring patient satisfaction, can also help you set objective and measurable performance targets at the individual, team, and practice level. Besides just reinforcing the practice's commitment to quality to the patients, a patient satisfaction survey will also reinforce that same commitment to every member of the staff in a tangible and measurable way.

Putting it all together

Web-based survey tools can help medical practices of any size and specialty conduct scientifically valid patient satisfaction surveys that provide valuable insight into many aspects of the practice's performance. Periodic measurements, part of an overall long-term approach to patient satisfaction, can be facilitated through the use of web-based tools, not only to administer the questionnaire but also to get to the important results quickly. Most importantly, you'll be providing a way to improve your relationship with your patients.

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