



SMS in Healthcare

Improve care provision with
ubiquitous communication





The Australian Healthcare Industry is consistently one of the largest national contributors to the labour force. The Healthcare and Social Assistance Industry employed the greatest number of Australians (1.3 million persons or 11.4% of total employment) in 2010-2011¹. As well as being key to the Australian labour force, healthcare also contributes largely to our services consumption. According to the ABS in 2012-13, 12% of people saw a general practitioner more than 12 times, and 33% consulted one between four and 11 times.²

With this in mind, it's obvious that healthcare is an important part of Australian life. There are also many different types of institutions within the healthcare sector. All of which need to collaborate to improve the health of Australians, making effective communication both important and difficult.

Some larger institutions, such as hospitals, can employ hundreds of staff caring for thousands of patients. The large network of stakeholders that need to remain connected, ensures the necessity for the quickest and most accessible medium for communication. Nothing is more important to an individual than their health and the health of their loved ones, so healthcare providers have to continuously communicate with patients and family members of patients efficiently. This also requires the best available avenue for reaching these audiences.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012, "Employment in Australian Industry"

² The Conversation, 2014, "FactCheck: does the average Australian go to the doctor 11 times a year?"



Evaluating communication mediums for Healthcare services

The healthcare sector is broad and encompasses many different forms of services and institutions, from small local general practices to large public hospitals. There are so many available avenues to communicate in a digital era, but finding one to meet the specific requirements of healthcare businesses is vital. It must be personalised to deliver the sensitive information that can be related to health. It must also be able to contact mass numbers of stakeholders including patients, families and staff. A rigorous analysis of all the different mediums for communication within health services is necessary to determine the most suitable channel.

Email

Email is a popular and accessible means of communication across broad groups of people, however there has been a rise in mistrust of email recently due to the frequency of email spam. Market research from 2009 estimated that in 2013, 84% of email traffic would be spam, a 3% increase from 2009³. With figures like that, it is understandable why people are becoming more resistant to opening emails. When it comes to the important information

being transmitted relating to the health and wellbeing of patients, it is not worth risking that the information be ignored. SMS is the more trusted avenue of communication for the general public, with a 98% open rate compared to a 22% open rate for emails⁴.

Furthermore, email is a more time-consuming avenue to facilitate communication between stakeholders during implementation of health services. When it comes to healthcare, the longer a patient waits to receive information on how to look after an illness, the less effective the treatment. Furthermore, if communication is too time-consuming for healthcare providers, this can create further delays in the treatment process. On average it takes 90 seconds to respond to an SMS, compared with 90 minutes to respond to an email⁵.

Phone calls

Phone calls are a traditional medium for communicating in the healthcare sector. They are perhaps the most reliable way to make sure a message has been delivered and understood. However, they are resource-draining in terms of occupying valuable employee time and cost a

3 The Radicati Group, 2009, "Email Statistics Report, 2009-2013"

4 Frost & Sullivan, 2010

5 SnapHop, 2012, "Mobile Marketing Statistics"



significant amount of money through phone bills. SMS can be automated to instantly contact thousands of people in seconds, and can cost as little as six cents a message. Not to mention, phone calls also occupy the time of the receiver as well. Whereas, SMS messages are read on average within five seconds⁶, taking up no time for the recipient at all, and done at a time convenient for them.

Phone calls can often be ignored as well if they are not perceived to be urgent. If people are in meetings, for example, they will ignore a phone call whereas they are able to discretely read a text message. SMS is direct to the source, as 91% of adults have their phone within arms reach, 24 hours of the day⁷.

Social Media

Social media is among the newest communication channels, there is no doubt that it is rising in popularity and already dominates a large sphere of internet activity. Social media is extremely popular among younger demographics.

According to Pew Research Centre, the frequency of use of social networking sites corresponds with age, with younger demographics being more prevalent users.

In 2014, Pew estimates that 89% of online adults aged 18-29 use social networking sites. However, only 69% of online adults between the ages of 50-64 do. Even less than this, 49% of online adults aged 65 and over use social networking sites⁸.

However, the healthcare sector involves a diverse range of age brackets that need to be effectively reached. According to the Victorian Government, "there is a strong correlation between older age and demand for medical and hospital services. Currently, people over the age of 70 years use 46 per cent of multiday patient stays in public hospitals."⁹

Therefore, communication about health services needs to be accessible for all Australians, across all ages, including more mature age brackets. Social media cannot address this criterion of ubiquity as the medium for communication across healthcare.

Furthermore, recent research conducted through the University of Oregon states that "96% of smartphone users text message, and 98% of text messages are read compared to 29% of tweets and 12% of Facebook posts."¹⁰ Despite smartphones allowing access to internet at all times, SMS still prevails as the most common form of contact for smartphone users above the social media channels.

6 UOregon University Blogs, 2014, Emma Hsu, "Mobile Marketing"

7 Morgan Stanley, 2010

8 Pew Research Centre, 2014, "Social Media by Age Group over Time"

9 Department of Human Services, 2014, "Improving care for older people"

10 UOregon University Blogs, 2014, Emma Hsu, "Mobile Marketing"



SMS

Consistently over time, SMS has remained the most ubiquitous medium for mobile communication. In fact, in 2010, with 4.16 billion users, SMS was the single most popular data channel in the world ¹¹.

Ubiquitous in its accessibility, SMS is still popular among younger audiences, but familiar to older audiences as well. There is no need for internet access in order to reach audiences with SMS. Recipients don't even need to be immediately available for conversation to receive the information. The message will be there for them as soon as they have a moment to look, which is every five seconds

on average ¹². There is also the option for audiences to respond immediately, increasing the effectiveness of services available by speeding up treatment processes.

SMS allows direct access to the millions of mobile users in Australia in a simple and easy way for healthcare providers. Using SMS will allow healthcare services more time to care for patients and organise their business.

Furthermore, if an acknowledgement for an SMS is required, this can be simply added into the process through two-way SMS communication. An example of this is "reply with YES to acknowledge message."

Maximising the potential of SMS communication in healthcare

Planning staff shifts

Nothing is as detrimental to an effective business as insufficient personnel. For Healthcare organisations, it is even more important that there is enough staff to cover the duties, because peoples lives may depend on it. Healthcare organisations vary in size, but from small practices and clinics to hospitals, staff rostering can be difficult and time-consuming. Having nursing or administration staff calling up nurses on the roster to fill shifts is time-consuming and expensive, as well as inadequately utilising their skills.

Using an automated SMS service to communicate available shifts to all staff at once can save staff hours of work, and businesses lots of money off phone bills. SMS can also allow for easy confirmation from staff that are able to fill shifts. This increases the effective organisation of the roster and ensures the highest quality service can be offered by healthcare facilities.

¹¹ The Atlantic, 2011, "Why Texting Is the Most Important Information service in the world"

¹² Uoregon University Blogs, 2014, Emma Hsu, "Mobile Marketing"



Appointment reminders

Across many industries, businesses are sending out appointment reminders through SMS services to ensure optimal attendance to appointments. It is a prevention strategy drawn from the inevitability of missed appointments. People are busy, appointments are booked far in advance, and they are easily forgotten.

Missed appointments in healthcare are somewhat more serious than missed appointments in other businesses.

The cost of the wasted opportunities to see other patients is detrimental to business, but there are other, greater consequences.

Not only is the time slot wasted for other patients who may need treatment, but the individual scheduled may become more unwell due to having failed to receive treatment on time. Or if the appointment is just a check up, the recognition of potential health problems may be delayed, and given time to escalate.

Healthcare providers should send out easily accessible and affordable SMS reminders to prevent the professional and personal consequences of missed appointments.

Outpatient follow-ups

For certain services, follow up communication is necessary to ascertain the state of patients recovery or progression, and to identify any potential problems as soon as possible. Facilities can dedicate a large amount of time to this process unnecessarily. Calling up patients to make sure everything is alright is very time consuming. More often than not, the patient will simply be recovering or progressing as expected anyway.

Arranging an automated SMS service can save this time, checking in with one message to happy patients will suffice. If the patient responds with any dissatisfaction, SMS can also direct them to contact their medical professional immediately to discuss options.

SMS can also be stored in mobile devices, making it a practical choice for reminding patients how to care for themselves at home during recovery times as well.

Staff attendance

Healthcare services are collaborative; staff meetings are essential for the proper treatment of patients across various departments. Sending out SMS to staff with the details of important meetings and reminder messages closer to the time of the meeting will ensure maximum attendance. This will facilitate easy time-management for employees and improve the level of care that can be provided as a result.



Choosing an SMS provider

The growth of SMS providers has been staggering in recent times, which is mainly due to its identification as a leading communication tool, and demand for the technology being high. It can therefore be difficult for healthcare organisations to determine which provider is best suited to their business. The best SMS suppliers in Australia will be able to provide a number of distinguishing features and services to maximise the potential of SMS in healthcare.

Direct connections to major networks

Delivery is the most important factor determining the effectiveness of SMS communication. Strong connections will ensure the best delivery results and make sure messages make it to their recipient and do so in a timely fashion. There is no point in choosing a medium that boasts speed and reliability, if the results from your provider don't match this.

Customer service

While many SMS services are intuitive to use, it is reassuring to find a provider that will be able to assist with any difficulty that may be faced when implementing an SMS communication strategies. Support should be available across a number of channels including phone, email, social media, and could even be offered through a website chat option, so as to always offer the highest standard of assistance.

Ease of use

The purpose of SMS applications should be to simplify the communication process and reduce workload for staff, while increasing the scope and efficiency of communicating with patients and other stakeholders. SMS applications should be easily navigable and easy to use.

Database cleansing

It is a common problem to have to negotiate around outdated customer databases. External follow up care for patients that have recently sought medical treatment can be reliant on the ability to contact them afterwards. This can be extremely difficult if databases have inaccurate details. The most suitable SMS providers for healthcare organisations will offer a service to assist with cleaning data. This will ensure that the messages are being delivered to the intended recipients.



Integration with current preferences of operating systems

The best SMS providers will offer multiple avenues of incorporating SMS into the daily operations of healthcare organisations, such as an online platform, an email SMS platform and an API. Having an API allows customers to integrate SMS with their current systems and applications. Not only do the top providers offer an SMS API, but they will also offer Software Development Kits (SDKs) in multiple development languages.

Reporting SMS delivery results

It's important that the status of SMS sent can be tracked, so that organisations are aware when their messages have been delivered. This is essential when deciphering the quality of data and understanding results obtained

from SMS campaigns. Without this information, effective treatment may be hindered as important healthcare information may not be readily available for patients. There is also the possibility of sending thousands of messages to numbers that do not exist. That's a lot of wasted money.

Experience with other healthcare providers

As with any service provided, there is no substitute for years of experience and expertise. The most suitable SMS provider for healthcare organisations will have worked with other healthcare organisations previously and delivered excellent results. They will have been established for a long time, and as such will have ironed out any potential mishaps.

Esendex

Esendex is one of Australia's leading business SMS providers, with a focus on delivering high quality, secure and reliable services. Esendex holds one of the highest industry reputations for SMS provision. The company has over ten years of experience within the SMS industry, delivering a high-standard SMS solution to well over 20,000 customers. Customers have included many of Australia's largest healthcare and health insurance providers.

Esendex boasts direct connections to the major networks in Australia, guaranteeing an exceptional delivery rate. The Service Level Agreement (SLA) is committed to 90% of messages being processed within five seconds and 95% within twenty seconds, although this standard is largely exceeded, with delivery rates usually hitting around 98% and 99% within 5 and 20 seconds respectively.



Bupa Care Services

Bupa Care Services is one of the largest aged care organisations in Australia, with over 60 sites nationally. One of the facilities that has utilised SMS is Bupa Berwick, which employs around 125 staff. They use SMS services through Esendex for filling available shifts, organising staff meetings, sending out motivational messages and for other general communication purposes.

The administration staff have greatly benefited from the introduction of SMS services, stating that they have saved numerous working hours per day. They were also able to completely stop using agency nurses as their staffing requirements are now met internally. Shifts are also being filled by staff they wouldn't usually have called but were able to contact via SMS because it feels less intrusive.

"Using SMS has saved our staff time and effort which enables them to focus more time on caring for our residents," one Bupa representative said.

Bupa Care Services has also implemented SMS services to send out motivational messages to their staff to encourage them to continue their good work.

Conclusion

The Australian Healthcare Industry involves many different stakeholders; medical professionals, patients, families of patients, administrative staff and more. The information necessary to communicate can sometimes be sensitive, because health is such a personal topic. For this reason the medium for communication chosen should be personalised. This medium is SMS, with everyone carrying mobile devices today, SMS guarantees efficient and personal contact with audiences to convey sensitive information.

The medium for healthcare communication also needs to be ubiquitous, because health and healthcare are topics that relate to every individual. Communication needs to be open and easy. SMS also provides for this factor, as it is a basic feature on all mobile devices. Many organisations within the healthcare industry are already harnessing the power of SMS to address their communication needs. From addressing internal administration issues, to providing extra external care to patients following facility visits, SMS is the most suitable channel for communication within the healthcare sector.



Questions? Get in touch



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