

The New. World of Appointment Scheduling

Your PC and the Internet offer new efficiency for your practice and convenience for your patients.

Call any doctor's office for an appointment and chances are staff will record it on a computer or appointment book. But which is better, the appointment book or PC software?

If you're computer savvy, you'll vote for the PC-based system. If you're more cautious and don't feel comfortable with computers, you'll argue for a revival of the 'good ole' appointment book.

But, if you're a computer geek, you've already started telling your colleagues not to waste money upgrading their software because soon practice management services will be available on the Internet!

It's definitely a Web world, and the future is closer than you think. It's your choice. But just as in the treatment of dry eye, the options are many and one solution may not be right for every office.

And, just as in your selection of a treatment modality, it's always a good idea to understand both the best outcome and intrinsic problems associated with your selection.

APPOINTMENT BOOKS

Juggling patients with the rub of an eraser and flipping pages to find picky Mrs. Smith a 4 p.m. Tuesday slot sound like heaven to doctors and staff that have slow PCs and templates that refuse to

accept an appointment at 10 minutes past the hour.

During the 1970s, appointment books became affordable and, when staff was properly trained, these books met the needs of even the busiest practices. Because the office manager was typically the senior employee, it wasn't uncommon for him or her to be the only employee allowed to schedule patients.

Then came managed care. Eyecare providers could no longer afford the luxury of the 30- or 60-minute exam. Often practices downsized themselves right out of that office manager position. Those office managers remaining are busy filing insurance and looking for personnel in a job market in which unemployment is at a 39-year record low. No one has time to baby-sit the appointment book!

In today's faster-paced practices, the flaws that were always present in the appointment book system are glaringly obvious. Practices still using this system are plagued with human error, lack of flexibility and zero back-up in case of fire or other natural disasters. We know of one optometrist who was so afraid of fire that he brought the appointment book home with him each evening. That was, until his teenage son borrowed the car and the appointment book mysteriously disappeared. He had no way to determine what appointments were scheduled. The result was a significant loss of revenue.

By Marilee Blackwell, Senior Consultant, Hayes Center for Practice Excellence and Donna Suter, Practice Management Consultant, Hayes Center for Practice Excellence

Some typical problems with a manual system:

■ **Lost appointments.** It's easy for a staff person (typically the one with the least experience) to write appointment information on a sticky note and then to forget to add it to the book.

■ **Unfilled slots.** You may be stuck when someone tries to read an illegible booking or place a confirmation call to a transposed/incorrect phone number. And, if a patient calls to reschedule an appointment, you must erase the original appointment and record the new date and time.

■ **Front office stress.** You're frustrated with staff's inability to understand how you want your appointments made. Front office knows you're angry and this emotional stress causes them to work slower and slower. And when patients become annoyed with an excessive wait, guess who receives the brunt of their anger? You've got it — the front desk. No wonder this position experiences a higher rate of turnover than any other.

■ **Re-doing work.** "OK. Who forgot to order the new appointment book?" Oops, either pre-appointing stops completely or staff 'makes-do.' Staff is now doing yesterday's work today, twice: once when information is transferred to the patient information sheets and again when the schedule is copied into the new book.

■ **No marketing capabilities.** Staff using a manual system typically laugh when marketing is mentioned. Basic recall is enough of a headache for them; and, a traditional appointment book makes pre-appointing even more difficult.

PC-BASED SYSTEMS

Is it any wonder that the majority of eyecare practices are computerized? Filling out paperwork and assembling the patient charts seem like endless work in the hard-copy office. Offices that rely on paper can't quickly key in a patient name and access all the info they need to update or create a chart.

With PC-based appointment software, problems caused by illegible handwriting and difficulty booking appointments into the next year become a thing of the past.

Because computers can automate so many practice management functions, staff has more time to spend on practice-building activities — like recalls. Add a word processing module to your PC-based scheduling system and you're able to text-merge patient history information to automatically customize either a pre-appointed reminder card or letter with the patient's own information.

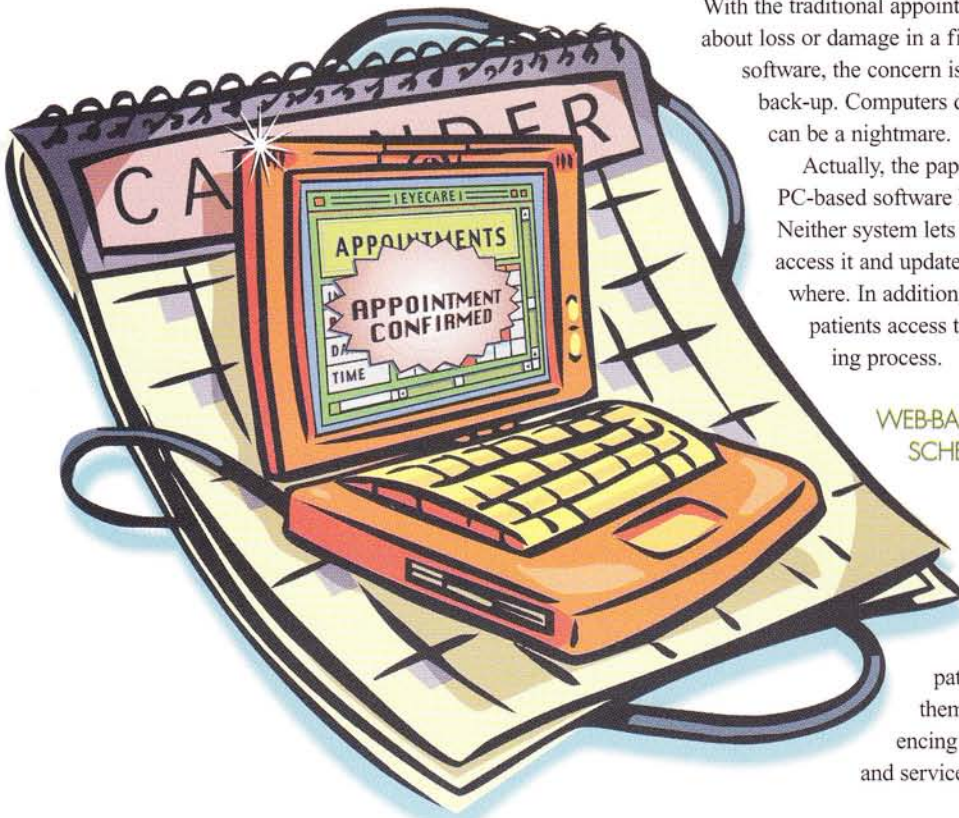
Even with the huge advancements of PC-based practice management software packages, problems are present. We'll never forget the practice that finally was convinced that keeping a back-up traditional appointment book was redundant only to have a computer crash the very next day, which froze files for a week. In this case, it wasn't the software, but the hardware. The doctors had decided that they only wanted to purchase either the software upgrade or the hardware, not both. The No. 1 complaint we hear from our clients is that every time technology changes they have to pay big bucks to upgrade their software. Because computers become obsolete about every 18 months, this is a major problem.

With the traditional appointment book, you worried about loss or damage in a fire or other disaster. With software, the concern is properly maintaining a back-up. Computers do crash, and the result can be a nightmare.

Actually, the paper appointment book and PC-based software have similar limitations. Neither system lets a non-networked user access it and update schedules from anywhere. In addition, neither system gives patients access to the appointment-making process.

WEB-BASED OR ONLINE SCHEDULING

The new millennium will see a dramatic change not only in the way healthcare providers practice medicine, but also in the way their patient populations view them. You're already experiencing patients wanting glasses and services as soon as possible.



Conduct an informal patient survey. Ask them if they mind calling your office at a certain time of day to schedule an appointment. And, as much as patients rely on answering machines to screen calls, you know how annoyed they are when their healthcare provider lets a voice mail system route calls to voice mailboxes.

Scheduling's next generation will address both control and time-of-day convenience issues. It will be Web-based and 24/7. Imagine an appointment system that's linked to your Web site, outside your actual facility. Each morning you'll log on and download the day's appointments. You're pleased to see that several non-confirmed pre-appointments confirmed via the Internet; and, patients hitting your site long after you and staff went home have filled that hole in your afternoon schedule.

You suddenly feel freer. You're worrying less about computer crashes because you can access the schedule from any PC with Internet capability. You're pleased that you can accommodate a key employee's request to telecommute while caring for an aging parent. After all, distance isn't an issue in cyberspace.

You no longer have to pay multi-station fees to a software company that never seems to have the time to offer technical support during your office hours. If you're a two-location, three-doctor practice, each doctor can access the schedule for each location from anywhere.

And you're saving money; with Web-based technology you don't have to upgrade your software every time hardware speeds up. One monthly maintenance fee includes automatic function upgrades.

By far the biggest benefit to Web-based systems is expanding your ability to market your practice. By offering online scheduling, patients have an incentive to 'hit' your Web site. Combine a scheduler available 24 hours a day with the 'ahhh' of never having to hear "hold please" and you've just given patients a big incentive to log on to your Web site: total control. This gives you an opportunity to educate patients about the benefits of coming to you for their eyecare needs.

With online scheduling, patients perceive they have more control. It's much easier for them to scroll through a calendar and compare it to their schedule than to have their response to "When do you want to come in?" be met with "Not available." Also, the patient can schedule the appointment whenever he feels like logging on.

In this virtual world, patients will even be able to change their appointments. Just as forgetting to buy a new appointment book and illegible handwriting vanished with the PC, this Web appointment maker has safeguards that eliminate duplicate appointments and

won't accept a 10-minute check in a comprehensive exam's timeslot.

Because patients who schedule appointments online can be confirmed online, staff spends less telephone time scheduling appointments and gathering patient information. You'll be able to download completed patient history and lifestyle questionnaires from patients booking in cyberspace. You can also "broadcast" e-mail reminders to save both staff time and postage.

If your computer system doesn't support Internet access, all the savings in personnel, overhead and increased patient satisfaction may seem too good to be true. However, the benefits will far outweigh the costs. By the end of 2002, 59% of all U.S. adults and teens will use e-mail. Traditional reminders (including labor) cost between \$1 and \$2. A similar e-mail reminder, including labor, would cost between 1 cent and 25 cents. This means that you can send e-mail to at least four times as many patients or potential patients for the same cost as traditional reminders.

Would you love the benefits but are already nervous about the downside? The techno-phobic may be uncomfortable with this new system. However, as America's work force becomes younger, the computer/Internet learning curve will diminish.

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WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU?

Yes, relief is in sight from the worries associated with PC-based practice management software. Along with that sigh of relief comes a big smile of anticipation. The current Internet universe is estimated at more than 130 million people. So many users looking for information and seeking ways to save time. So many people looking for a cure to Computer Vision Syndrome!

What technology will you use? Appointment books? PC-based scheduling? Cyberspace access? Soon you'll have to make the choice. At some point, everyone will have access to a computer and the Internet. As more people go online, Web-based scheduling will become more and more important.

Within a few years, all the different practice management functions (recall, scheduling, billing, accounting, patient history, etc.) will be integrated. Linked by a smart computer that never sleeps, never takes vacation and doesn't quit just when you have them trained.

When this happens, imagine the possibilities. Now, you may be spending 15 minutes with each patient. The average time an Internet user spends at one site is 55 minutes. Educated consumers spend more and are a better referral source.

Think how successful you could be with all your practice's information seamlessly integrated and available at the click of a mouse.