Staying Connected with Your Patients

by Henrik M. Nielsen, MA

Easy strategies and examples for leveraging re-sell opportunities and increasing patient retention with Blueprint OMS.
Over the years I estimate that I have visited over 500 hearing healthcare clinics and practices in the USA, in all kinds of settings. I have talked to even more hearing professionals. I have helped many of these hearing professionals with tactics for generating patient traffic and executing consumer marketing activities ranging from direct mail, radio, TV, advertising and even a few billboards. Some experience better results than others, but all of them are good initiatives for building a practice.

One area that I often have seen ignored is the use of consumer marketing strategies to reach existing patients. Many hearing clinics do little or nothing to reach out to their active patients on a regular basis. Such outreach could be for annual hearing evaluation recalls, hearing aid warranty expiration notifications, newsletters, new technology letters, birthday cards, holiday greetings and invitations for consumer events such as open houses or lunch and learns. These invitations or letters are especially important for targeting patients with hearing aids that are four years or older. The objective obviously is to upgrade these patients to current technology. Many hearing clinics do little to leverage resell opportunities to patients with old hearing aids and they are more or less relying on the patient herself to take action to buy a new hearing aid.

There are two main objectives when reaching out to existing patients. Number one is to leverage resell opportunities—not just in terms of selling a hearing aid to an existing patient, but also to leverage sales opportunities for other services and items such as extended warranties, batteries, clean and check fees, assistive listening devices and annual hearing evaluations.

The second objective is to maintain high patient retention. In other words you want to ensure that your patients do not forget about your clinic as their primary point for hearing health care. Failure to do this will result in your patients being lost to a competitor in your area. One key element to successful patient retention is to create regular ‘touch points’ or contacts that remind your patient about you and your clinic. In essence, creating and maintaining the relationship between you and your patients. This again will in part be accomplished with some of the type of mailings mentioned before.

The key to effective patient marketing is the ability to deliver the right message to the right patients at the right time. Here’s an example of this: In the middle of the current month, you want to send a mailing to all your patients that have a hearing aid where the warranty expires the following month. Those are all the patients that have an interest in receiving a letter about the warranty status on their hearing aids. The letter should have a call to action and could potentially be followed up with a phone call. Patients will respond and a certain percentage will decide to extend their warranty for peace of mind and in return provide an additional revenue stream for the practice.

Instead of doing mass mailings, the approach should be to do small and frequent mailings to a select subset of your patients meeting specific criteria that makes your message relevant to them. In the warranty mailing example, had we done a massive mailing to all patients about extended warranties and the peace of mind it provides, it would most likely have resulted in a limited response, especially from patients that have a relatively new hearing aid with many months of warranty coverage still in place. The message is simply not relevant to those patients.

How do you target such small patient segments on a frequent basis? An office management system with an effective marketing module is the answer. And it should be easy and effective to execute mailings, so that it gets done. Every month, every quarter or holiday season; whatever the frequency is for the specific mailing you decide to execute.
A number of office management systems, specifically developed for hearing health care clinics, are available. The one that I am familiar with is Blueprint OMS from Blueprint Solutions. Blueprint OMS offers a very easy to use marketing module with a number of predefined templates for common mailings. Let’s take a look at the warranty mailing example again. In Blueprint OMS you simply select the warranty mailing template, specify the warranty expiration date range, like next month, and select print. Blueprint OMS will generate a personalized letter to each of the patients with a hearing aid where the warranty expires the following month. The letter can be clinic specific and also reference the hearing aid make, model and serial number as well as the actual warranty expiration date.

Examples of other easy and relevant campaigns available in Blueprint OMS are mailings to patients based on ‘last appointment,’ ‘last hearing evaluation,’ ‘age of hearing aid’ or ‘hearing loss severity’. A wide range of data fields can be used for building specific queries and multiple selection criteria can be combined in one query. The key is to be able to target specific patients with a message or for the purpose of recalling specific patients for an appointment.

There is a wide range of output options, such as printing labels or envelopes, export to file for mail merge or using custom letters that are incorporated into Blueprint OMS, so that your practice-specific message can be used.

Figure 1. Example of template for a warranty letter. User simply specifies date range.

So, what is the potential when targeting patients with old hearing aids? Most clinics probably do not keep track of the average hearing aid age for patients buying a new hearing aid. However, let’s use a simple example for targeting patients with old hearing aids: if we can move the average hearing aid age re-purchase point, say from five and a half years to five years we just increased sales to existing patients by 10%. It is important to notice that this is a revenue increase that did not require adding a single new patient or require an expensive consumer marketing activity to generate the revenue increase. It was a simple outcome of targeting certain patients with a specific message.
A report can show the number of new patients gained from a specific mailing and how many hearing aids were sold to these new patients, along with total revenue. If the cost of the marketing activity is known, a return on investment calculation can easily be performed. This will provide insight into what marketing activities are effective, and will be instrumental in fine tuning a clinic's consumer marketing tactics.

In today's competitive environment, it is essential that a hearing health practice maintain a relationship with its patients, leverage resell opportunities and track effectiveness of marketing activities. An office management system can make this task very easy and worthwhile. With a typical cost per clinic for an office management system of around two thousand dollars per year, it will pay for itself over and over again in incremental revenue. This does not even take into account savings that result from plain efficiency improvements that an office management system can provide.

Another group of patients that should not be ignored is the group that was diagnosed with a hearing loss, but chose not to get hearing aids at the time of their initial appointment. These patients will most likely at some point in time buy hearing aids when sufficiently motivated. Once they reach that point, the objective is to have them come back and purchase from your clinic and not from the competitor down the street. The key is to create a relationship with these patients and create touch points. This can be done with newsletters, invitations to events or recalls.

Another important element of an office management system is its ability to track all consumer marketing activities and referral sources. These could be a specific ad in a newspaper, a specific mailing or a referral source such as physicians. This will provide valuable information about the effectiveness of a specific consumer marketing activity, such as a mailing.

A report can show the number of new patients gained from a specific mailing and how many hearing aids were sold to these new patients, along with total revenue. If the cost of the marketing activity is known, a return on investment calculation can easily be performed. This will provide insight into what marketing activities are effective, and will be instrumental in fine tuning a clinic's consumer marketing tactics.

In today's competitive environment, it is essential that a hearing health practice maintain a relationship with its patients, leverage resell opportunities and track effectiveness of marketing activities. An office management system can make this task very easy and worthwhile. With a typical cost per clinic for an office management system of around two thousand dollars per year, it will pay for itself over and over again in incremental revenue. This does not even take into account savings that result from plain efficiency improvements that an office management system can provide.

Henrik Nielsen, MA is President of Blueprint Solutions. Henrik Nielsen can be reached at: henrik@blueprintsolutions.us

Thanks to Laura Prigge, Au.D. for input and ideas for this article.