

# Knocking Out No-Shows

Pam Albers got a flat tire on the way to her appointment at your office. She legitimately can't make it in and calls to reschedule. Your appointment scheduler is sympathetic and understanding. But what about the other four people who didn't show up for their appointments today?

Appointment cancellations and no-shows can cost practices tens of thousands of dollars every year. One study estimated that no-shows stripped a family practice residency clinic of 14 percent of anticipated revenue. But, it's not just lost receivables. It's also the cost of idle staff, equipment and overhead – expenses that must be covered regardless if a patient shows up or not.

The magnitude of the problem varies between practices. Members of the Medical Group Management Association reported a median of four percent of appointments are broken.

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## Query the Problem

The first step to ending no-shows is to identify trends in missed appointments and their underlying causes. A query of your practice management software for all no-shows over a specified time period may be revealing. You can output the data into tables and graphs that allow you to isolate variables, such as patient characteristics (age, diagnosis, gender, new versus established), appointment parameters (day of the week, time of day, procedure versus follow-up visit) or even provider.

“When our clients take time to analyze their no-show trends, they will often identify specific subgroups of patients that need intensified reminder systems,” explained Matt Bigler, senior vice president of sales for POS. “We can help a practice customize a reminder system for different patient populations.”

## Reminder Systems Work

Reminder systems can greatly improve appointment fulfillment. Written reminders, such as preprinted postcards featuring the office logo, are ideal as a stand-alone reminder or in conjunction with phone reminders.

Another option is to send a reminder letter with blank patient forms enclosed in the envelope. Patients will appreciate the opportunity to complete the forms at their leisure prior to arriving in the office. Phone call reminders allow the patient to verbally confirm the appointment and reschedule if necessary. One primary care practice found that phone call reminders 48 hours in advance of an appointment cut missed appointments from 25 percent to 10 percent.

Some practices obtain mobile or work phone numbers where patients can be reached during daytime hours. Others choose an automated phone system that dials patients in the evenings when they're more likely to be home and generates a report confirming appointments for the following day.

Regardless if you use a written, phone or e-mail prompt, the reminder should reach the patient at least two days prior to the scheduled appointment. This gives the patient time to notify you of a necessary schedule change. It also gives you time to plug a new patient into that time slot.

“It helps if the front office maintains a list of scheduled patients who want to be seen sooner than their appointments and have flexible work hours,” added Bigler. “This often allows the practice to fill in vacant appointment slots, sometimes just hours before the appointment time.”