

Small health system uses proactive digital outreach to triple vaccine performance

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With cooler weather also comes the influenza season. As any health care professional knows, flu can cause serious illness, driving up hospitalizations and even leading to death for vulnerable populations, especially older adults. Getting more patients vaccinated is critical to reducing the number of hospitalizations and deaths and is strongly tied to getting the word out on vaccination events, especially among seniors.

In recent years, it's estimated that 70 to 85 percent of seasonal flu-related deaths in the U.S. occur among people 65 and older, with 50 to 70 percent experiencing a seasonal flu-related hospitalization, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In 2023, clinicians at Goodall-Witcher Healthcare, part of the Bosque County Hospital District serving approximately 18,500 residents in central Texas, decided to leverage digital technology to engage more of their vulnerable populations and reduce the predictable influx of flu cases. Located in the heart of Clifton, a small rural town 90 miles southwest of the Dallas-Ft. Worth metroplex and 35 miles northwest of Waco, the health care system treats 40,000 patients annually at their 25-bed critical access hospital, two outpatient clinics, home health care agency, and other health care services.

On average, about 100 flu vaccinations are administered at each vaccine event by Goodall-Witcher Healthcare's Clifton and Whitney Clinics. Over the past two years, however, they noticed a significant drop in patients participating in annual vaccine events at community clinics, decreasing to just 20 or fewer people getting their flu shot in 2021 and 2022. Along with leaving patients unprotected, this low turnout resulted in lost hours and low productivity for health care workers staffing the clinics.

While clinic administrators attributed a decline in influenza rates during the COVID-19 pandemic to people staying home or masking up when going out, they feared flu cases could come back strong due to low vaccination rates following the pandemic. Carrie Obenhaus, R.N., clinic director at Bosque County Hospital District dba Goodall-Witcher Healthcare, worried that their current outreach methods weren't working, explaining that historically, the patient community — who are mostly retirees 65-plus enrolled in Medicare — is alerted to annual vaccine events through paid Facebook ads and printed marketing flyers posted around town.

To boost flu vaccination rates in 2023, leaders of Goodall-Witcher Healthcare's Clifton Clinic created a digital marketing strategy to better reach their patients. Some stakeholders expressed concerns about whether digital communication would appeal to older retirees, but the growing use of the health care system's patient portal challenged those assumptions. A 2021 Pew Research Center survey found that internet, social media sites, and smartphone use among individuals over 65 has grown substantially in the past decade.

"I figured that if the community is getting on board with using our portal to communicate with us, they might be more receptive to a digital campaign," Obenhaus says.

Power of the patient awareness campaign

The Clifton Clinic tested its first flu vaccine digital campaign, allowing for informative, educational, and ultimately empowered communications that prominently featured the organization's logo. The tailored broadcast messaging and logo legitimized Goodall-Witcher Healthcare's brand identity and awareness, helping to create an emotional connection with the patient audience to foster longer-term engagement and loyalty. Campaign tactics included:

- Developing a list of targeted patients seen over the past two years and distributing the campaign's actionable flu shot vaccine event messaging a week before the event.
- Including a link to a chatbot in the outbound campaign.
- Sending a second targeted online reminder message to the 340 people who initially engaged with the chatbot a day before the vaccine event.
- Augmenting the campaign with paid educational ads in local newspapers to reach seniors who relied on traditional marketing for their information needs. This pushed the annual vaccine event's digital content to consumers while pulling them in.

Thanks to the robust marketing campaign, the Clifton Clinic annual vaccine event more than tripled its attendance, with 65 patients showing up to receive their annual flu shot. Obenhaus also surveyed patients to determine how they learned about the vaccine clinic. Fifty-three of the 65 respondents said that they learned about the event from the proactive text messages using digital campaigns.

New patient campaign plans on the horizon

"Since the patient response to the flu vaccine clinic event proved such an improvement, I plan to pull data from our EMR system to create and distribute personalized campaigns to promote multiple health care services," Obenhaus says.

Currently, Goodall-Witcher is developing a campaign that promotes their patient portal to help decrease phone calls and simplify communication exchange between staff and patients, such as lab tests and results, annual adult health and wellness visits, and more. "Our goal is to increase our portal engagement in 2024 by 20 percent," Obenhaus notes.

Goodall-Witcher Healthcare receives on average 10,000 phone calls per month, mainly from the older adult population who prefer speaking to a health care worker. Three full-time employees were hired recently to manage the incoming call volume. "Transitioning our community to using the online technologies being put in place would greatly improve health care access and convenience for more people, as well as streamline staff productivity and time," Obenhaus adds.

Another campaign is planned to increase mammograms and colorectal exams. Obenhaus foresees digital campaigns playing an important role in reporting baseline quality care metrics as the rural health care system expands their focus on preventive screening.

Ultimately, Goodall-Witcher Healthcare plans to use flexible digital communications to assist with overall general communication, including safety messages, appointment notifications, building closures due to inclement weather, and phone outages. Previously, patients were notified by social media messages or videos posted to the health care system's Facebook account and phone calls or voice messages from staff.

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