

ASK THE EXPERT... SUSAN SOLOMON

Question: What's the Best Database to Keep Physician Relations on Track?

This article appeared in eHealthcare Strategy & Trends, May 2006

Katie Simko, a clinical training specialist, has just completed another visit with a physician at Southern California's MemorialCare Medical Centers. It was a good visit. The physician picked up a few tips on using MemorialCare's digital imaging system. Simko also helped answer some questions about Memorial-Care's new clinical information system. After about 30 minutes with the doctor, Simko promised to make a return visit in about two months.

Before Simko leaves the doctor's office building, she finds a quiet spot to log onto her laptop. She locates an extensive file already established by her colleague on the doctor she has just visited. Simko enters information on her latest visit, as well as a promise to follow up. "Great," reads a message that pops up into her e-mail message box. "I was planning to make a trip down to see him next week. Glad you were able to take care of it and that we were able to coordinate."

It sounds so simple — a database for tracking visits with physicians. Yet, many hospitals are just starting to implement such systems. And, along with those hospitals that have already implemented physician databases, they are wondering how they ever got along without them.

"Unfortunately, healthcare is traditionally terrible at coordinating data," says Lisa Henry, director of marketing at PinnacleHealth in Harrisburg, PA. Her organization has been very satisfied using ACT for its physician sales team for several years.

Allison McCarthy, a Corporate Health Group consultant based in Glastonbury, CT, says that her company is currently studying databases used by hospital physician relations efforts. "My gut says 30 percent to 40 percent have a tracking system, whereas the rest are using an Excel spreadsheet or old-fashioned paper."

The MemorialCare database was originally designed to support an online physician referral program and gradually took on a life as a database rich with information about MemorialCare doctors and their practices. Physicians were invited to enter information about their practices for the Web site — including languages spoken, office hours, staff members, and affiliated medical groups. As the database grew, it became apparent that this information was also vital for those who interact with physicians on a regular basis.

"We recognized that this database could transform from 'who our physicians are' to 'what we're doing to assist them,'" says Bart Michela, the creator of the database program.

MemorialCare's physician database is stored in a Microsoft Access file and receives regular uploads from MemorialCare medical staff offices. With this database, Michela built a program that allows users to query physician contact records and add information about physician encounters.

More than 25 people regularly use the MemorialCare physician database. These individuals include the health system's marketing directors, physician relations personnel, as well as Simko and others who are involved with assisting physicians in utilizing new information systems.

"The problem was that we had many different groups that dealt with doctors, and none of them had a way to report to one another," says Michela. "Now, everyone can take a look at the physicians and encounters with them."

Michela adds that another unique quality of the database is that physicians are encouraged to enhance their own records for the physician referral tool via password-protected access on MemorialCare's intranet. "We want to make sure we have every physician's own story," he says. "[Everyone] benefits when this information is in the database."

Michela says that he is working on a number of enhancements for the system, including an intake tracking system that will allow users to monitor requests from physicians and when those requests are fulfilled. Additionally, he is looking for a better way to track physicians' affiliations with certain medical groups. "Our system doesn't always provide the information needed by all constituents, but we're getting there," says Michela. "This database certainly keeps us more connected than ever before."

Where to begin

Consultant McCarthy advises that every physician relations database should have the following basic features:

- An ability to capture basic demographic data on physicians (e.g., contact information, office staff information, office locations, hospital affiliations).
- An ability to capture the history of physician relationships, including a tickles system to help sales staff manage contacts.
- Program management capabilities that can be used by a sales manager to oversee the overall effort, prioritize initiatives, and monitor sales activity.
- The functionality to create meaningful reports.
- E-mail and calendar capabilities that can also produce staff performance and productivity reports.

McCarthy also recommends programs that allow remote access so that staff members can access data from their laptops.

Off-the-shelf solutions

For most healthcare organizations, setting up a database means using an off-the-shelf program and modifying it to meet the needs of users. ACT, Access, Engage, and GoldMine are among the most popular programs used by hospital physician relations professionals.

Sally Clark, director of physician relations at Susquehanna Health System in Williamsport, PA, reports that Microsoft's Access has served her organization well for nearly a decade, although the program has been customized by her information services department several times over the years. "Access is a very good program, but you need someone who knows how to customize it properly to meet your needs," she says.

Clark says Access is used to query physician records, record physician contacts, and perform typical tasks such as running mailing lists. On her "wish list" is having the database interface with physician financial and referral records.

At St. Louis Children's Hospital, physician relations staff are pleased with the capabilities of Engage Software, based in St. Louis. The company's tools allow users to segment and target a variety of audiences, as well as easily access an overview of all physicians recently contacted.

"We like Engage because it allows us to work in real time," says Kay Franks, marketing manager at St. Louis Children's Hospital. "We know the information is current." Franks notes that she is particularly impressed by Engage's reporting capabilities. "It's very easy for us to see patterns in the types of requests for assistance that we receive from physicians," she notes.

Engage Software has also assisted the hospital in developing a campaign micro-site for its fund-raising arm.

ACT from Norcross, GA-based Sage Software is another program widely used by hospitals. ACT allows users to centralize information, including contact details, notes and history, appointments, to-do items, communications, documents, and contact opportunities. The program is also adept at running mailing lists, helping physician relations representatives prioritize tasks, and producing reports. A new feature allows data to be synchronized with Palm and Pocket PC devices.

As with Access, those hospital organizations using ACT highly recommend in-house assistance to customize the program to suit the needs of a busy physician relations department. Some hospitals also report that training personnel on all the nuances of the program can prove challenging.

Programs just for hospitals

Even with hospitals very interested in programs that will help with their physician relations efforts, there are few products on the market designed specifically for hospitals' physician relations efforts. San Diego-based HealthLine Systems, maker of the Sharp Focus customer contact system, has launched a new program called EchoAccess. The program is specially developed for hospitals and designed to reduce the cost of redundant physician databases throughout a hospital, improve data accuracy, and automatically e-mail ROI reports to users.

MarketWare is a popular sales management program from MarketWare Software, Sandy, UT. Although not developed specifically for hospitals, the program allows users to manage complex sales campaigns. It also has extensive functionality for queries, communications, and reports. "There's some flexibility for customization with this program," says McCarthy, "but most users

find that it already has the right type of fields.”

Med-Track is an existing product that stands out. Developed by Virginia Beach, VA-based Horizon Group, the program is designed to help users build stronger relationships with physicians and create reports that demonstrate the impact of physician relations efforts.

In addition to maintaining demographic information on physicians, Med-Track allows physician liaisons to develop custom scripts and questions for use during their encounters with physicians. (Are you currently seeing inpatients? What brought you to this area? Do you admit to more than one hospital? Do you have plans for retirement in the next one?



Susan Solomon is vice president of corporate communications and marketing for MemorialCare Medical Centers in Southern California. You can reach her at ssolomon@memorialcare.org.

to five years?) ‘With scripts you can truly research a specific topic and get more targeted information,’ says Gregory Mertz, president of Horizon Group.

Another feature allows users to import data about individual physicians’ work at the hospital – admissions, outpatient services, charges, and DRG codes. Users can then run outcomes reports to determine if relationship-building and marketing efforts are having a positive effect on the hospital’s bottom line.

According to Mertz, Horizon Group developed the program several years ago when it discovered during several hospital consulting assignments that physician relations personnel were frustrated using Access and Excel to capture data on physicians. He explains that instead of helping these clients tailor off-the-shelf spreadsheet or customer management software to their needs, his company built the software “from the ground up” with physician relations personnel in mind.

It’s important to note that MedTrack is a Web-based, hosted solution, which makes it relatively easy to use. However, the program offers little opportunity for customization. Furthermore, information resides outside the organization’s firewalls.

Horizon Group last fall released the latest version of Med-Track, which includes tracking for referrals, CPT coding, expense tracking, expanded reports, and a new graphing and charting package. Another new version will be available by the end of the year. Med-Track currently costs about \$1,500 per year.

Interestingly, most interest in MedTrack has been from small hospitals with one or two physician liaison representatives. “I would guess that the smaller hospitals looked to us for a tool to begin to structure a program. Larger hospitals already have programs and haven’t realized how the product can make life easier,” says Mertz.

Mertz believes that his product is presently ahead of the curve and hospitals will soon realize that a program custom-built for tracking and measuring physician relations efforts is the best solution. “Our adoption curve is about 18 to 24 months away before things start to heat up,” he says.