

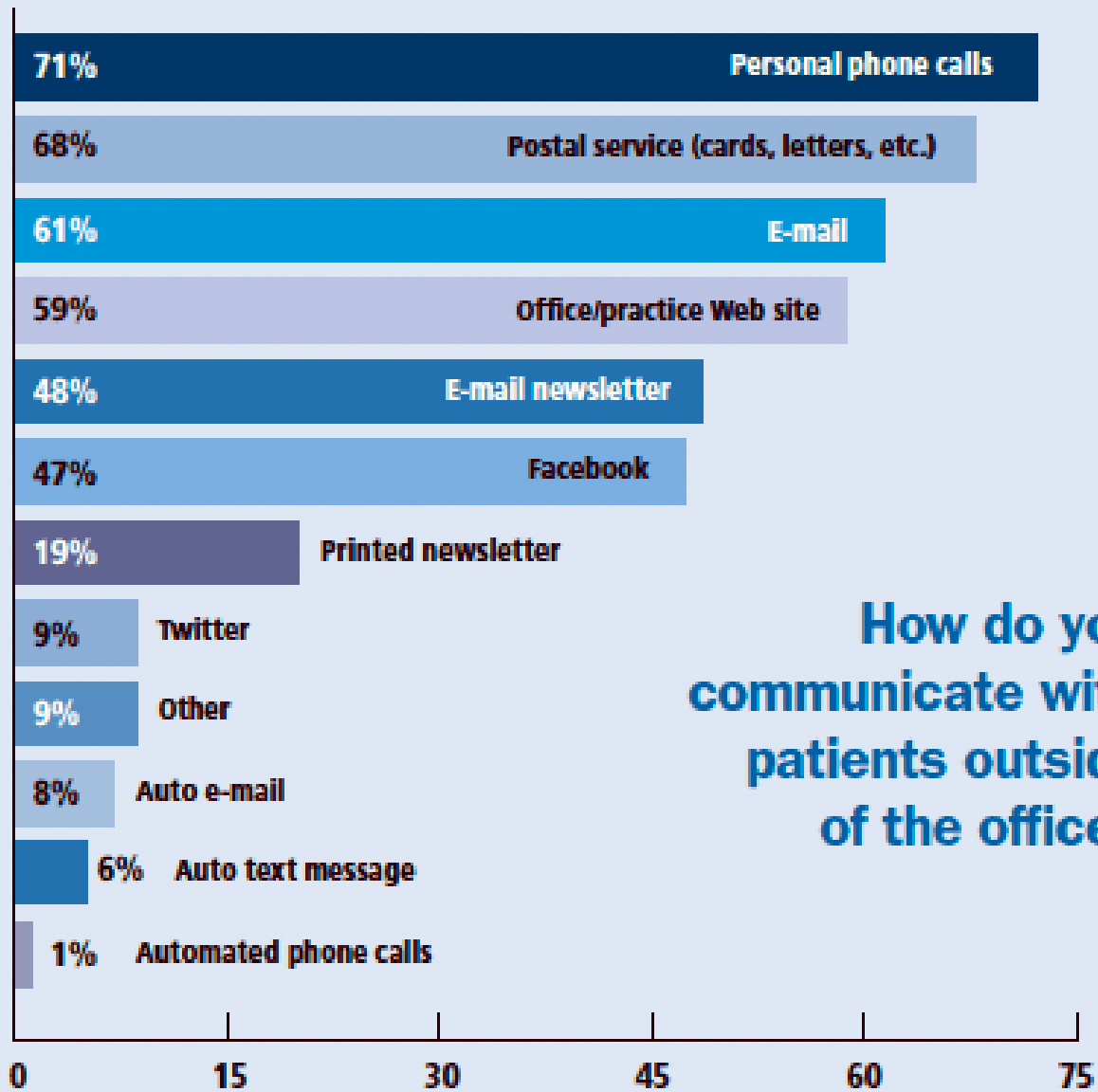
Going the Extra Mile: Communicating With Patients Outside the Office

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Communication is critical in any relationship; that includes the relationship between doctor and patient. According to a recent survey, only approximately 76 percent of doctors of chiropractic communicate with their patients outside the clinic, even though 94 percent of DCs know it is either very (57 percent) or somewhat (37 percent) important. In short, while most know communication is king, finding the best way to communicate can be a challenge.

When asked about the best method to communicate, one doctor stated, "If I knew, I might do it." Caroline Bartley, DC, of Colorado, stated that she is "using a combination of Web site / Facebook / Postal / E-mail." A DC from Vermont noted that "it depends upon the patients' contact preferences; most like to be contacted by e-mail rather than the phone, but they ultimately decide." Another DC from Arizona said, "I am just exploring the means to do it more automatically from the current software."

Interestingly enough, personal phone calls are still the most popular way to reach patients outside the office. About half of DCs surveyed said they contact patients for birthdays and holiday, while 40 percent said they send electronic newsletters, the optimal interval being once a month. Electronic health record (EHR) software is currently utilized by a mere 7 percent of doctors to communicate with their patients outside of the office.



Why Bother? *Presence*

There are a number of reasons to communicate with your patients between visits. As Jared Thomas, DC, of California put it, "If you build a strong relationship with your patients outside of the office, they will always be loyal and refer."

Dr. Nick Payne of Kentucky agreed, noting that "engaging patients outside the office is a great way to continue the education process and help to retain patients through their course of treatment and into the maintenance phase."

E-mail newsletters and Web sites can provide information that teaches wellness lifestyles, said Minnesota chiropractor Karl Weimer: "Health and wellness is a 24/7 lifestyle. People have many choices regarding their health care. A sound evidence-based message can help with being competitive

[and provide information to] people to improve their healthy lifestyle."

Janelle Hutti, DC, of Tennessee concurred: "In one word: mothers! (i.e. wives, women) are in charge and they are on the Web looking for info. You want to be the person they go to for a question, and they want access to you!"

George Simmons, DC, of New Mexico, sees his office as a patient resource: "There is tremendous information available to our patients. The information is often confusing, market-driven or politically-driven. We want to keep at the top of their minds that we are a valuable resource for health information and health services and can direct them to reliable health information and healthy choices."

In the end, it is all about maintaining a presence, said Lex Rathbun, DC, of Guam: "In today's busy world, non-aggressive means of maintaining a presence in your patient's mind is integral to a practice, especially on an island with a deep sense of community."

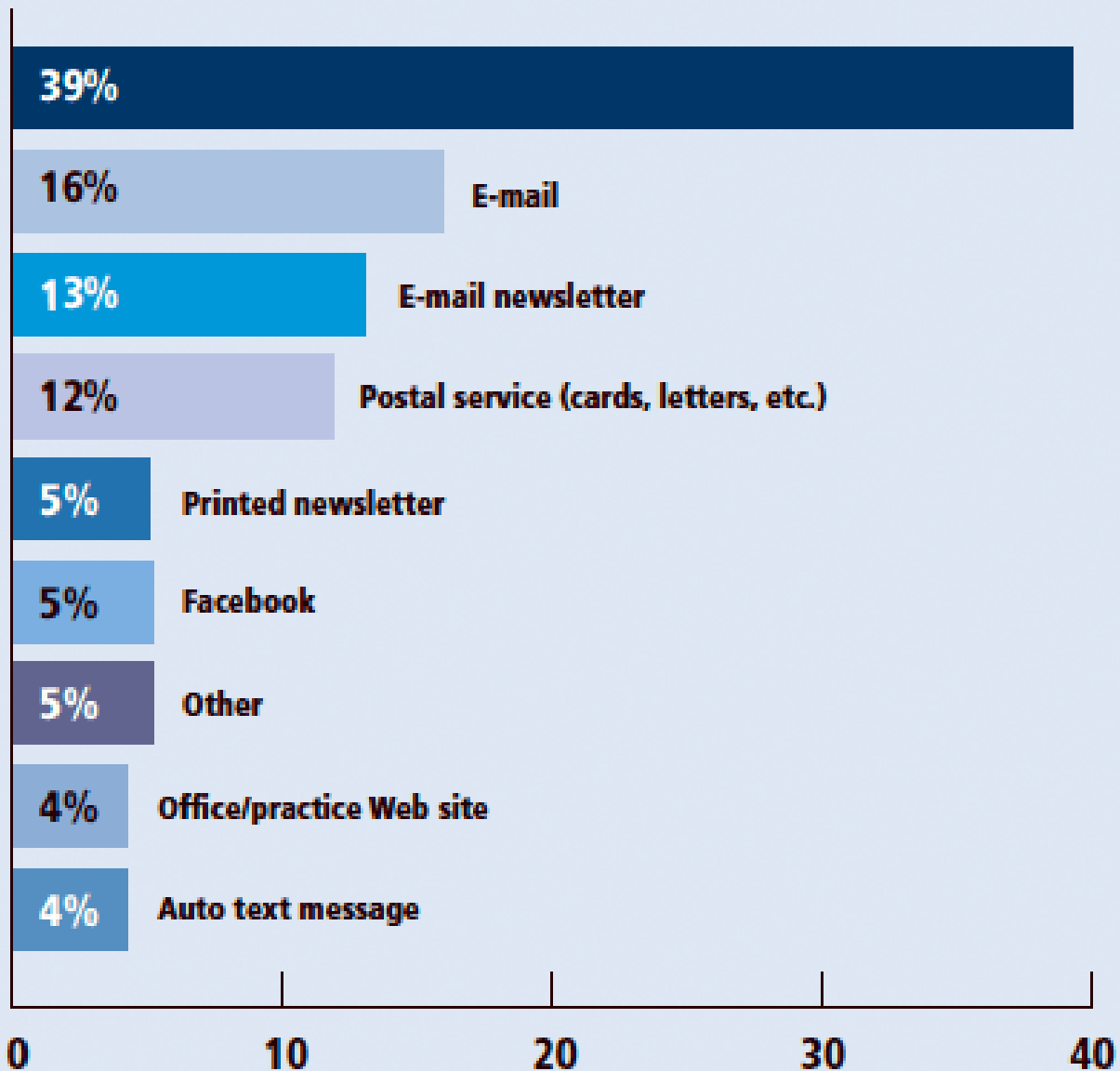
[pb]Jason Schluter, DC, of Oklahoma uses information to extend his relationship right into his patients' workplace: "I think that as much time as you would like to spend with a patient educating them, it is simply not realistic. Being able to communicate and educate your patients outside of the office not only leaves you more time inside your office to treat patients, but also prolongs and solidifies those small tidbits of information you are giving them during their visits. If I want to talk to a patient about the importance of their posture at work and really get them to understand what they need to know, it is nice to be able to mention something to them during their visit, but then also refer them to a post or an article that I've put on Facebook or in a newsletter."

Social Media

So, are social media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter effective when it comes to patient communication? Dr. Salo Stanley of California believes they are: "Social networking is the wave of the future; we can post workshop events that we hold at the office, and health quotes that remind patients of their health care. We receive Facebook likes and messages for appointments."

But not all chiropractors agreed. In fact, surprisingly few believed that electronic tools / social media / the Web are "very effective" for gaining new patients (only 7 percent), reminding patients to come in regularly (only 10 percent) and sparking patient referrals (only 7 percent).

In your opinion, what is the most effective way to communicate with your patients outside of your practice?



Overlooking EHR Tools?

It is abundantly clear from these survey results that DCs in the mainstream prefer older forms of contact with patients, i.e., phone calls and traditional mail. Yet DCs are clearly pretty tech savvy. For example, previous surveys have shown that at least 37 percent of DCs already have EHR software in place; that percentage is absolutely going to increase over the next few years. However, relatively few DCs use EHR software for communicating directly to patients (7 percent), even though most of these products are fully capable of sending out appointment reminders and other digital messaging. This

probably means that the communication tools built into EHR software aren't well-understood by the doctors and/or the makers of these products need to do a better job of explaining their potential to their customers.

The Bottom Line

Outside communication with your patients is no longer an option; it's a requirement. As one doctor put it: "Patients need to feel that they are important, not just when they are in the office and money is exchanged, but also when they are not in the office and there is some communication of a personal nature that transcends the actual visit. That is important."

Reference

1. *DCPI* patient communication survey. Completed by MPA Media on June 8, 2011.