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Short Communication

# COVID-19 Era Healthcare Facilities are Using Chatbots to Connect with Patients

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## INTRODUCTION

There's no doubt that recent circumstances surrounding COVID-19 have reshaped the way hospitals and healthcare facilities connect with their patients daily [1]. Shelter-in-place ordinances and stay-at-home mandates have forced many to rely on technologies like chatbots and knowledge management utilizing Artificial Intelligence (AI) with Machine Learning (ML) to manage much of the workload required for servicing their patients' needs. Technology has played an increasingly important role, much of which will continue post-pandemic. Messaging apps, AI and self-service customer support have allowed healthcare companies to scale down contact centers that manage billing, payments and appointments, allowing them to rely more on chatbot technology and give patients the quick and reliable answers they need [2].

## DESCRIPTION

### Patient experience

Today's consumers have expected that brands will go above and beyond to meet their needs and provide them with excellent customer service. The healthcare industry is not immune to these expectations with their patients [3]. When a question needs to be answered, patients are used to calling customer care representatives to pay their bills, inquire about insurance needs or book appointments. However, in the wake of recent events surrounding COVID-19, call center operations are limited, creating longer than usual wait times. Further, patients still expect the same level of service, creating an overload and backlog of calls and inquiries with fewer representatives available. In some instances, such as bill payment or medical appointments, access to customer service and answers to questions are even more critical [4].

It's been difficult for contact centers to handle all these calls, with thousands of patients on hold at any given time looking for billing or booking appointments. Working together with leading technology companies, contact center and healthcare organizations have started to create a solution that can help agents with their workload while delivering the customer service patients have come to expect [5].

### Tech-Savvy solutions

During this time, tools that allow self-service customer response techniques are more important than ever. Most popular for call centers are AI and self-discovery methodology. AI, in the form of chatbots and other tools, is helping to bridge the gap in patient communications for hospitals and healthcare facilities. Many healthcare organizations are giving their patients access to branded chatbots *via* SMS messaging and live chat options. This allows patients to get their questions answered in a quick and efficient way, without the complications of sending emails or waiting on hold for a customer care agent for lengthy periods of time [6].

### Self-service options

Self-service is a rapidly growing patient care trend among healthcare organizations. Self-discovery tools such as interactive tutorials, adaptive FAQ's, interactive guides and videos contain the simple, DIY answers that patients are looking for. Joining these resources in a connected journey with a chatbot can take the ability to self-serve by the patients to the next level. These tools allow the patient to solve many of their problems themselves. Instead of depending on a customer agent for help, a patient can use these self-support materials for productive learning. These learning aids guide patients in their customer care journey by interactively showing them how to resolve a problem such as booking an online appointment or paying their bill electronically while conversationally chatting with a bot [7].

As medical offices and facilities open back up, there will be a demand for scheduling routine appointments. With the phased-opening plans, many healthcare organizations will still have approximately twenty-five to thirty percent less in their labor

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force. This only increases the need for efficiency and automation to handle basic call volumes and appointments [8].

### Real-world applications

The easiest way to implement chatbots to help alleviate call center agents is to understand the resources being used by agents for both tooling and knowledge articles matched with the most common patient problems and questions included, allowing the patient to find answers themselves more quickly. These tools can help patients by providing answers to questions that others have previously asked and showing them step-by-step how they can reach resolution all on their own. With less call volume coming into offices and call centers, healthcare organizations can contribute more vitality with the patients who need highly technical assistance for specific issues in a more capable manner. What's more, with open enrollment season approaching, healthcare organizations need a digital continuity plan to handle large volumes with fewer agents.

## CONCLUSION

Not only are patients relying on self-service from knowledge management and chatbots, but agents can also retrieve agent-assisted information from these support materials, creating a quicker and more personal experience for the patient rather than agents relying on scripts. And in some instances, patients are quickly redirected from a chatbot to a live agent on more technical questions where a higher skillset level of expertise is required to field questions.

In a time where temporary remote work has not allowed for many customer servicing centers to be fully operational, AI-driven technology and self-discoverable information can fill in the gaps and augment the work of call center agents.

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