

The Monkey on Your Back

Kimberly Thompson, LAc

Many practitioners run their clinic without any extra help—at least initially. I've always been pretty good at multi-tasking. Having nine kids taught me how to wear multiple hats and juggle a lot of responsibilities. Running a clinic is similar. Most of the time I wear my acupuncturist hat, but I wouldn't be successful if I didn't learn to also wear hats for accounting, bookkeeping, marketing, social networking, shipping and receiving, and janitorial.

Treating patients is the fun part, right? I'd just as soon let someone else wear the rest of the hats. Sometimes I get so busy treating patients that I don't have the time or desire to take care of my other responsibilities. Sometimes my to-do list grows to the point that I feel like there is a monkey on my back. My kids are nearly grown now, but I remember always having multiple systems in place to help keep things organized and running smoothly. I've learned that I have to look for the same types of opportunities in my clinic as well.

Recently, I felt like I needed to either hire someone to help me organize my patient email communication process, or find a system that would simplify my life. My goals were simple. I wanted a newsletter, an email response system to educate new patients, and the ability to send birthday emails with a discount coupon. I thought about paying someone, but realized most of the work would fall back on my shoulders anyway. I'd still have to organize my patient data list, write the monthly newsletter, and write the script for the patient education emails. The person I hired would only be in charge of putting the system in place and organizing it.

I did a little research and found that someone had already created a system that fit my needs. You are probably already somewhat aware of this system because you see it come across your inbox on daily basis. If you Google "email marketing" the top two companies that show up are Constant Contact and MailChimp.

I was introduced to Constant Contact several years ago and had a good experience with it. This time around, a marketing specialist in my community suggested MailChimp, so I decided to give it a try. Both programs are similar, but MailChimp offers FREE email service as long as your list is 2,000 recipients or less, allowing up to 12,000 emails per month. Constant Contact, on the other hand, has a minimal fee of \$15 per month. If you are just starting out and trying to grow your contact list, you could save considerable money by starting with MailChimp.

I'm not ultra sophisticated when it comes to email marketing systems, but I have to admit that MailChimp did an excellent job of bringing me up to speed with about a half-day of time invested. They offer a simple solution with easy-to-follow step-by-step instructions.

Getting Organized

First, I spent a little time making sure my patient data files were up to date and organized. If I was missing any patient data, I made a quick phone call to say hello and gather the missing information. This was actually a pleasant experience for both my patients and myself. I even booked a few appointments during the process. I'd say, time well spent.

Next, I compiled a spreadsheet containing patient data. I'm not an Excel spreadsheet expert, but it was pretty simple to do. At this point, it's a good idea to scroll through to make sure your data is all in the correct places and that you aren't missing any important information. Make sure that first names and last names are in separate columns, that first names are capitalized and spelled correctly, and that you have everyone's email addresses.

Depending on your marketing strategies, you might want to consider including various information categories in your spreadsheet. I chose to gather basic information for my email-marketing system, because my goals were pretty simple: first name, last name, email address, and birth date. This allowed me to send newsletters, birthday discounts, and new patient education. I realize this is only a beginning of the useful patient data that could be gathered.

I also ran my plans by my friend Alan Gifford, a practice coaching and marketing specialist for acupuncturists. He suggested a few extra categories that some practitioners may want to include in their clinic database, such as mailing address, ailment, referral source, gender, date of first visit, and date of last visit. This makes it easier to send emails to patient-specific categories in the future.

Getting Ready to Launch

Now you're ready to export the data to your email program. The main thing you really need to know is which format to save it in. Both MailChimp and Constant Contact require a .txt file, which is easily produced from your spreadsheet.

My next step was to upload my data into MailChimp, which was really easy. Adding new patient data is really easy too. I estimate a few clicks of the mouse every couple of weeks to keep my .txt file up to date.

Newsletters

Creating a newsletter is really easy, and it doesn't matter how "techy" you are. If you want to send a plain and simple email to your patients, template options are sitting there waiting for you. You can click on a beautiful, complete ready-made template, you can customize a template with multiple options and themes, or you can create your own template from scratch. The only real work involved is creating the personal message you want to add.

Newsletters are a great way to keep current and former patients up to date with clinic news and educational information. Many practitioners send out a seasonal newsletter reminding patients to look for changes in their body at the change of seasons.

Birthdays

Everyone wants to feel special and birthdays are the perfect opportunity to remember your patients. A simple note that says, "Hey, we know it's your special day and we wanted to say that we hope it's great!" fills the bill nicely. You might even include a discount coupon. The important thing is to make

sure your patients know you're thinking of them.

Many of my nine children are married with children of their own. Can you imagine how many birthdays I have to remember each year? Before MailChimp, trying to remember my patients' birthdays on top of the family birthdays was out of the question. Now I just make one card at the beginning of the year and MailChimp sends out a beautiful birthday message two days before each patient's birthday. Easy, effective, and fun!

Information Series

Once you get a new patient to come through the door, there is a lot of education that needs to be done on a weekly basis in order to turn this person into a long-term monthly wellness patient. Organized patient education is an important key to converting new patients into long-term wellness patients. I've lost many long-term patient opportunities because once their pain problem has been resolved, they quit coming in until another pain shows up. If I haven't had the opportunity to train this a patient on the benefits of monthly wellness care before they quit coming, I've lost the opportunity. Also, patients are often your my best referral source. If I teach my patients as much as possible about the benefits of acupuncture and how to refer new patients—there is always a steady flow of new patients on my books.

Consequently, I've developed a series of educational emails to send out for new patients. These emails are different than my monthly or quarterly newsletters. This is called an email funnel system. I create the emails and tell MailChimp when to send them out to new patients. Here is an example of how this works:

	Subject	When it will send
Message #1	Welcome Letter	2 days after patient is added to database
Message #2	Changes you may Experience	1 week after patient is added to database
Message #3	Tell your friends about acupuncture!	2 weeks after patient is added to database
Message #4	Did you know that acupuncture also treats...?	3 weeks after patient is added to database
Message #5	What happens after I'm well?	4 weeks after patient is added to database
Message #6	Acupuncture Success Stories	5 weeks after patient is added to database

Keeping your Data Current

Once you have your system in place, it's really easy to keep it going or add to it. Simply export your data once every week or two and add the new patient information to your master .txt file.

The simple steps I've outlined above are a great start, but as time goes on you may want to learn new marketing strategies. MailChimp offers easy-to-follow informational videos to teach more advanced techniques. The possibilities are unlimited!

Conclusion

You know that feeling you get when you are able to check a bunch of things off your to-do list at the end of the day? When I was done setting up my newsletter, birthday letter and information series I felt

like I had checked hundreds of things off of my list. In reality, I did! The only thing I need to do on a consistent basis, is sit down and write an occasional email to my patients. Everything else is DONE! If I go on vacation or decide to take a little time off, the emails to my patients will continue to send without any help from me. Thank you MailChimp for being an awesome personal assistant! My time and money were well spent.

JULY 2013