ON ANY GIVEN DAY, REFILLS COMPRISE ABOUT 50% of the prescriptions processed by an outpatient pharmacy. By implementing an interactive voice response (IVR) system, an outpatient pharmacy can streamline refill-related activities and ultimately provide timelier customer service.

How IVR Systems Work
Via a touchtone telephone, patients are able to request prescription refills using their prescription numbers and a piece of screening information, such as the last four digits of their Social Security number. The IVR system prompts the patient to enter the necessary information via pre-established, audible requests. The system then matches the information entered by the patient to a prescription in the pharmacy information system, establishing it as a valid refill and adding it to the pharmacy information system prescription queue. If the refill is invalid—for instance, if another prescription is not available for a specific medication—the system informs the patient on the front end, saving the patient a trip to the pharmacy. If a patient enters an incorrect prescription number, the system informs the patient of the problem and offers him or her the chance to re-enter. After several unsuccessful attempts at entering the prescription number, the patient will be patched through to a live person to resolve the discrepancy.

Once a prescription is added to the processing queue, the pharmacist is responsible for verifying the appropriateness of the refill. He or she should check for potential drug interactions or adverse therapeutic implications and, based on the date of the refill request, determine if the patient is over- or undertreating the prescription. The pharmacist can then adjudicate a claim to a third-party payor, such as BlueCross BlueShield or Aetna, and if the claim is approved, the prescription can be filled before the patient even arrives at the pharmacy to pick it up. If the claim is rejected for some reason, the pharmacist also has time to resolve any problems before the patient arrives.

By streamlining these processes before patients arrive at the pharmacy, the IVR system frees up the pharmacist to spend more time counseling patients and providing more in-depth, prescription-related education to them upon their arrival. As such, an IVR system can make the best use of both the pharmacist’s and the patient’s time.

Infrastructure Requirements
Basically, all you need is a phone line and a computer. The IVR system is typically interfaced with the pharmacy information system to allow for the exchange of information between the systems while a patient is on the phone.

Vendor and System Selection
First, consider your patient population. Does the IVR system vendor offer language options that will suit the needs of your patients? Second, understand your business needs. You may need an IVR system that allows on-the-fly modifications to the system’s outgoing messages if your pharmacy closes on holidays or keeps unusual hours on the weekends. The flexibility of the system and your ability to control it can become very important in such instances.

A call-back feature may also prove valuable to your practice. It is not altogether uncommon for a filled prescription to sit on a pharmacy’s shelf for a prolonged period of time because the patient either forgot or neglected to pick it up. Certain IVR systems can be programmed to call such patients and remind them that their prescriptions are ready and waiting for them after a period of seven days, for example. Taking it one step further, IVR systems can also be programmed to call patients to remind them to refill their prescriptions. For instance, if a patient has a 30-day prescription for a particular medication, the system will call them on the 25th day to remind them to reorder. Non-compliant patients often end up making more frequent trips to their physicians or even the emergency room. So an IVR system’s call-back applications can help increase your patients’ medication compliance, and therefore, improve the quality of their care.

Most IVR systems are relatively similar, so customer service and interface
abilities are important purchase criteria. Make sure your prospective vendors are able to interface their IVR systems with your chosen pharmacy information system and that they have a track record of responsive post-implementation customer service and technical support. Taking the time to talk to some of the prospective vendors’ current customers will provide you with helpful insight during your decision-making process.

Also, give the system a test run to determine if it will be user-friendly for your patients. If the patients become frustrated while using the system, they will opt out of it and ask for a live person. If patients opt out on a frequent basis, you will lose the potential efficiency benefits an IVR system presents. So avoid purchasing a system with confusing prompts. Furthermore, applications continually evolve, so before partnering with a vendor, take time to speak with their research-and-development department to find out how their product will develop in the near and long term.

Implementation Tips
Make sure that you have appropriate dedicated lines for the IVR system and enough lines to meet your customers’ expectations. It can be very frustrating for patients if they are not able to connect with the IVR system on their first attempt. So do some homework to determine how many dedicated lines your call volume will necessitate. First, analyze your telephone lines to determine the total usage. In some cases, call traffic studies can be conducted by the telephone company or your health system’s internal telecom department. These studies will ultimately provide information such as average call time, average number of telephone lines in simultaneous use, total number of outbound calls per day, total number of inbound calls per day, and in some cases, the total number of busy signals heard by callers each day. In addition, assume that refills account for 50% of your average daily prescription volume, and that a majority of those refills will be automatically handled by the IVR system.

With those figures in mind, also consider whether your IVR telephone lines will handle calls between the pharmacy and doctors’ offices. Do you want to allow doctors to leave secure voice messages on the IVR system? If so, account for that additional usage when assessing how many telephone lines your system will require.

There is no simple formula to determine the exact number of telephone lines required for an IVR system; the process requires a good deal of data analysis and interactions between the pharmacy, IT, and telecom departments, as well as the vendor. However, when all is said and done, the return on the time you invest in this process is measurable, and due diligence at the outset can prevent post-implementation headaches.

You should also consider installing a dedicated modem for the IVR system, as that can improve the ease with which the vendor’s technicians can service your system – particularly if your vendor is located in a different state than your pharmacy. A dedicated modem allows the technician to dial into the system remotely for many maintenance and service functions and get the system up and running in an expedient manner.

To ensure a successful implementation, it is also important to encourage your patients to use the IVR system. Consider purchasing refrigerator magnets or calendars, printed with the IVR system’s phone number, for your patients to use as refill reminders.

With an IVR system, your goal is to have prescriptions ready for patients when they arrive at the pharmacy to pick them up. If the prescriptions are not ready, you have not accomplished any process improvements as a result of implementing the system. So prepare for certain workflow changes to facilitate the efficient filling of prescriptions ordered through the IVR system. For instance, consider assigning staff to earlier working hours, so they can fill prescriptions that have been requested overnight, before the pharmacy opens for the day.

When you purchase an IVR system, you are investing in customer satisfaction and, with any luck, a subsequent increase in your number of customers. That improved customer satisfaction will come from the ease with which they request their refills, the time they save when picking them up, and the increased attention you, as the pharmacist, are able to give them through consultation and education. When pharmacists spend more time educating and counseling patients, patients see pharmacists as their health care advocates. Because of the additional face-to-face time it allows the patient and the pharmacist, the effective use of an IVR system can enable such advocacy.

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