Making the Most Out of Drug Representatives

How oncology practices can take advantage of free education opportunities without the hassle

BY CONNIE RENFROE

Medical science representatives possess critical information about new drug regimens, protocols, and indications. However, scheduling them often requires a part-time position that few practices can afford—it's a catch-22. In our oncology practice with two locations, a staff member spent about 20 hours per week managing pharmaceutical appointments.

It can take even longer when practices do not have consistent rules for when reps can visit. Often, reps show up unannounced, disrupting the patient check-in process and taking the focus off other administrative priorities such as insurance verification, pre-certification, and the accurate collection of demographic information.

Most practices value the education that reps provide but struggle to reduce the time spent coordinating the visits. The more reps there are to coordinate, the bigger the burden that is placed on administrative staff to control and manage the scheduling. Combine this with the added pressure of Medicare payment reform, shrinking margins, and increased post-payment audits, and an average practice can easily become overwhelmed. This is the situation my practice faced when I began looking for solutions to make the process of scheduling reps more efficient. I wanted to find a way to automate this process, with an immediate goal of improving staff satisfaction and a long-term goal of gaining more time for patient interaction.

Leveraging Technology

After a quick Google search, I found RxVantage, a free tool that digitizes the physician-rep relationship by allowing reps to self-schedule in custom online calendars. All I needed to do was identify our practice's availability for meeting with reps, grant staff access, and provide minimal internal training. Within an hour, we were up and running with the technology.

Now when reps come to the office seeking meetings, we simply direct them online, where they can log on and book an appointment. My practice can set up specific rules for booking, such as letting our most valued reps book more often than reps that our providers or staff don't find particularly valuable to our practice. Other advantages include the ability to:

- Search for current rep contact information by name, product, or company
- Request product information
- Confirm meetings
- Message reps directly without having to exchange email addresses.

Realizing ROI

Since going live with RxVantage, my practice has seen a significant return on investment, particularly in the realm of reducing the burden on our administrative staff. We are now able to manage reps using only an hour per month of administrative time. This streamlined process has allowed us to increase staffing at our front desk so that we can spend more time answering patient questions and collecting accurate insurance and demographic information, which ultimately improves our revenue cycle.

My practice has also been able to increase efficiency for our clinical staff. For example, our social workers and nurses use the rep scheduling tool to easily research grant and vendor-based patient assistance programs. By typing in the name of a drug, staff can quickly identify all updated patient assistance programs and forms that might be relevant rather than having to research programs individually.

If a practice is looking for ways to increase efficiencies without increasing administrative bandwidth, rep scheduling automation may be one solution. Consider these five steps:

1. ***Commit to rep education.*** Staying current with new oncology medications is no easy task, especially for independent practices that are not owned by or affiliated with a health system. That is why making time for reps is important. The free education that reps provide helps practices stay on top of new advancements, improve outcomes, and perhaps even reduce denials.
2. ***Identify practice availability.*** Reach a consensus on when the practice will see reps. Will it only be on a certain day of the week or certain time slots during each day? In our practice, we only see reps during lunchtime (i.e., 11:00 am-1:00 pm) daily.

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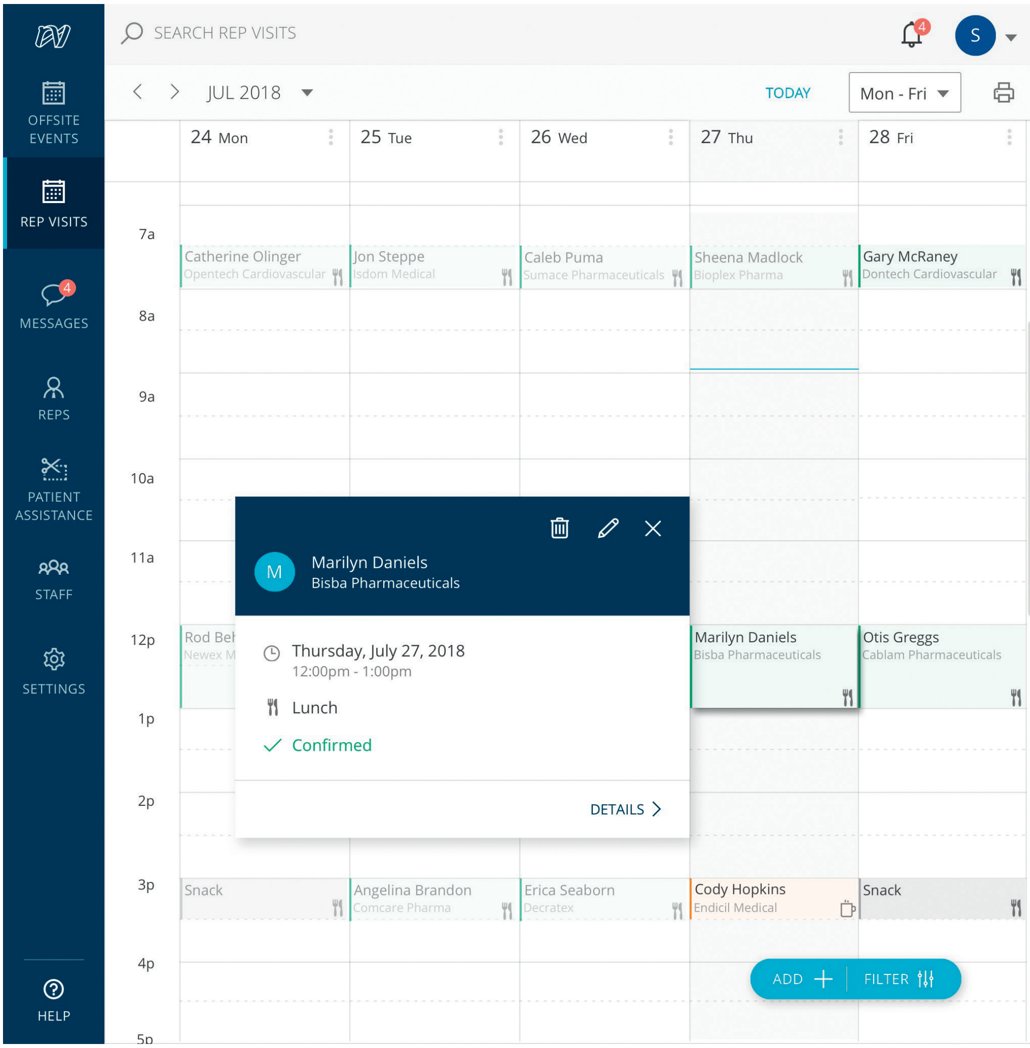

Reps book appointments online so that all appointments are up to date for office staff to see.

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3. ***Automate the scheduling process.*** RxVantage intelligently connects physicians and medical staff members with reps who have the most relevant information, enabling practices to continue receiving in-person education with minimal time and effort.
4. ***Create policies and/or procedures.*** Our practice wrote an internal policy for our reps explaining check-in procedures, parking guidelines, and food and snack policies. Front office staff also have informational cards that are given to the reps and describe how they access the technology and self-schedule.
5. ***Dig into your data.*** How frequently do physicians meet with reps? RxVantage provides this information through distribution reports, helping practices understand how often reps visit individual practice locations and what products, services, and companies they represent. Does this frequency make sense given the cancers that are most prevalent in a specific geographic area, or should the practice bring in reps from additional manufactures to better align with cutting-edge treatments that enhance population health efforts?

Digitizing the process of scheduling reps has allowed my practice to do more with the same number of staff, helping us capitalize on the most limited commodity in today's practices: time. OI

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