



# Integrative Practitioner

## How integrative health practices benefit from digital front doors

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Online appointment scheduling is linked to a variety of benefits for medical practices such as reduced no-show rates, decreased staff labor, and improved patient satisfaction, according to a review article published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*.

It's not surprising, then, that many healthcare organizations have been looking to achieve these results through the proverbial digital front door – a term used to describe online technologies that make it possible to schedule appointments, pay bills, find services, order prescriptions, and complete other practice management tasks.

What might be a bit unforeseen, however, is that the use of the digital front door appears to be especially well suited for integrative healthcare practices.

Ronald Holder, Jr., MHA, FACMPE, FACHE, CAE, chief operating officer of the Medical Group Management Association in Englewood, Colorado, said that integrative healthcare practitioners might have an even greater need than conventional providers to leverage online technologies to educate consumers. While patients typically know what to expect during a primary care visit and understand common conventional medical treatments, consumers “who are not familiar with or never have been to a health coach, massage therapist, or the like may be walking in the door completely clueless and are there because a friend, colleague, or health provider suggested they try it,” Holder pointed out.

A digital front door also can help integrative professionals nurture relationships with clients between sessions through features such as private messaging. “This is especially helpful for integrative practitioners who give extra time and care to their clients between sessions,” said Anastasia Prech, RN, BSN, NC-BC, co-owner of Well and Whole, a holistic health coaching practice in Cleveland, Ohio.

Integrative care providers also have a greater need to collect payments online, according to Mary Pat Whaley, FACMPE, CPC, practice director at Integrative Medical Clinic of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. “Because many integrative practices are all cash or hybrid insurance/cash, a virtual front door can be helpful in collecting for direct primary care, subscriptions, co-insurance, and co-pays,” Whaley said.

## **Finding beauty in the digital front door**

Prech, along with her twin sister and business partner, Sarah Prech, RN, BSN, NC-BC, realized just how important these digital front door benefits would be when they opened their practice.

“There are just two of us in our business and we needed a way to offer a great client experience, as well as being able to stay organized and run our business ourselves,” Sarah Prech said.

To accomplish this, they implemented digital front door technology that supports capabilities such as online appointment scheduling, email automation, calendar syncing, payment processing, document signing, intake form submission, access to a personal client portal, health education, provider documentation, health behaviors tracking, journaling for food and water intake, and secure messaging.

“We can’t imagine running our business without it,” Anastasia Prech said. “It would require a lot more time to do everything manually, such as scheduling appointments ourselves. Communicating back and forth via email with clients to schedule would be time consuming and potentially frustrating on both ends. The benefits to the user experience can’t be overstated. In today’s world, people expect to be able to schedule and reschedule appointments online and look at calendars that are updated in real time so that they can choose what works for them.”

Similarly, the digital front door at Integrative Medical Clinic of North Carolina is helping to meet the expectations of patients, many of whom became accustomed to using online tools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The pandemic has shown everyone that healthcare can be delivered virtually, and virtual healthcare requires virtual operational management such as appointment scheduling, registration, bill pay, and communication,” Whaley said.

## Keys to digital front door success

Implementing a digital front door comes with challenges, though. To create and sustain a successful digital front door experience, integrative health professionals should consider the following best practices:

**Focus on your guests.** “Make sure that the software you choose has all the features you need, not just for yourself, but for your clients to ensure they have a beautiful user experience,” Sarah Prech said.

More specifically, check to make sure that users will not be required to fill out paper forms when they arrive at the health provider’s office when they have already submitted the same information electronically. Consumers are apt to become frustrated if they “did all of that work in advance, then they [show] up to your practice and get asked to fill out duplicate paperwork or basically go through the whole process again,” Holder said.

If this is occurring, care providers should examine how they are leveraging technology. “That’s not a digital front door problem, that’s a utilization of the tool problem,” Holder advised.

**Decorate the door.** Well and Whole is leveraging its digital front door to positively promote the business. More specifically, they have been able to “customize the look so it reflects our personal brand,” Sarah Prech said.

**Get an up-close look.** “As with any technology, I recommend a visit to one or more practices using the exact same configuration and interface/integration of the digital front door that is being considered with the electronic health record and billing system. All software works well in the demo,” Whaley said.

**Prepare – and then prepare some more.** “Create an implementation plan for introducing the digital front door to your patients. A patient advisory board could be very helpful in understanding the patient-facing concerns and issues that will need to be addressed,” Whaley advised.

In addition, remember that practice makes perfect. “Make sure you do plenty of test runs with mock patients before the digital front door goes live to ensure that you have a smooth launch and are not losing important information that causes a bad or repetitive experience for your patients,” Holder added.

**Accommodate digitally adverse clients.** “Certainly, there is a demographic that resists technology and has a comfort-level with manual processes such as filling out paperwork and writing a check to pay for services. Practices need to find ways to accommodate the population that is not completely ready to adopt the virtual world,” Whaley said.

**Make sure the technology plays nice with others.** Digital front door tools should seamlessly integrate with existing technologies such as electronic medical records and billing systems. “The vendor will know what ‘off the shelf’ systems their digital front door technology will seamlessly integrate with, but what they may not know is what amount of customization your practice did to the billing system or medical record, which could make the integration not quite go as smoothly,” Holder said.

*John McCormack is a Riverside, Illinois–based freelance writer who routinely covers healthcare information technology, policy and clinical care issues. While he often writes about complex topics, he always looks to find the human stories that everyone – from healthcare executives to providers to patients – can easily relate to. McCormack’s work has appeared in a variety of healthcare consumer and business-to-business publications.*