

# CHATTING ABOUT CHATBOTS: ARE THEY A NECESSITY?

Do chatbots make sense for your website?

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Call them what you like, chatbots, virtual agents, or virtual assistants, but these messenger apps are almost ubiquitous on e-commerce platforms. And they are appearing more frequently on aesthetic websites. In essence, a chatbot is a computer program designed to communicate with prospective customers or patients and help them take the next step, whether booking an appointment, purchasing skincare, or getting more information about a product or procedure. Do chatbots make sense for your website? Our marketing pros share their thoughts.



## KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

In an age when patients prefer to communicate using their favorite method of communication, we've found that utilizing

an online chat in your practice can be incredibly helpful. Millennials, more than any other age group, are going against the conventional methods of communication, showing that if it can be done online without speaking with another human being, that's how it should be done.

Although this software is proving to be a game changer, strongly consider if your demographic is a fit. For example, if your patients are primarily in their seventies, they aren't going to be as gung ho about the technology as their children and grandchildren. If your patients are Millennials and Generation Xers, this may be for you.

You do want to be sure to take a few things into consideration before diving into this technology. For instance, who's manning the online chat? If you're a smaller practice, it's more than likely that a member of your in-house team doesn't have the time or bandwidth to do this along with other duties. This is why we recommend outsourcing it to a third party. However, first make sure that they're knowledgeable about the aesthetic industry, have access to whatever internal software they need, are fluent in all of the languages required by your practice (English and Spanish, for example), and are manned by a human being, not just a robot.

Decide what roles you want the online chat to play in your practice. For example, if you want to be able to set appointments, the company you hire will need access to your practice's scheduling system. If you want them to be able to connect the prospect to a live person within your office, make sure there is someone who is able to take the call. If you want them to be able to answer basic questions about procedures to convert the prospect into an appointment, make sure your team has taken the time to give them all of the information that they need. Better yet, keep it on your practice's website as well.

Finally, determine what your practice's budget is per lead or per month for this service. Most companies will charge either a monthly fee or a fee per qualified lead. Do your research and compare different companies until you find one that you're comfortable with.

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## DON'T BE LEFT OUT

I wouldn't say that chatbots are mandatory for every doctor or practice today, but they certainly serve a purpose and have some distinct advantages. In the very near future, chatbots will emerge as standard practice. Undoubtedly, chatbots

are an integral part of the artificial intelligence (AI) movement that is gaining steam at the moment. The main drivers for this uptick are consumer demands for real-time customer service and enhanced, round-the-clock communication.

Chatbots can be categorized into three sectors: basic, advanced, and custom. Most practices can start with a basic chatbot that is cost effective and programmed to answer basic customer service questions. The advanced chatbot model offers more enhanced features, including AI-powered conversational assistance that potentially can decrease staff time and wear and tear on the front desk. For example, these can be programmed with multiple choice responses to common questions, like do you take insurance, do you offer XYZ treatment, or what is the closest subway stop to your office?

Finally, more advanced programs can be customized to help automate routine workflow; such as scheduling appointments, fee quotes, and answering more specific questions about procedures, services, and products. So, if you're not quite ready to take the plunge into adding a chatbot today, I would urge you to consider it the next time you do a website upgrade.

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#### NOT THE BE ALL AND END ALL

Chatbots can be an asset for some practice websites. High-end boutique practices that focus on procedures performed less frequently may not benefit as much because the questions these practices receive are all unique. Practices that do a lot of injectables or other common procedures could benefit because the questions they receive are all pretty standard. But remember, leads come through many different channels, not just chatbots.

Chatbots tend to take credit for all the leads that flow through them, even though these leads (prospective patients) were already on your site. And the fact that these people were already on your site begs the question, is paying per lead cost efficient?

Chatbots can help turn a lead into a viable prospect by answering pertinent questions and scheduling consults. Still all of these bells and whistles are just that. What you really need is the bread and butter—strong, unique content and a viable linking and SEO strategy. If you have these, a chatbot may be helpful ... but it will never be the Holy Grail for lead accrual and retrieval. ■

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