



VIRTUAL REALITY

According to **Klaus Bartosch**, healthcare practitioners can no longer deny that the change to online appointment booking is inevitable.

My experience of working with a range of online businesses has taught me numerous things that are transferable to the healthcare industry. With the growth of online trading and the expectation of online convenience, many service industries have had to adapt their practice to meet consumer demands for accessibility. Healthcare is no different.

Over the past decade I have worked with major leading online brands and businesses, including wotif.com, seek.com, carsales.com.au, ninemsn.com.au, graysonline.com and realestate.com.au. What these businesses all have in common is their position as major one-stop portals for online customers seeking information or services in their respective industries.



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The hotel and real-estate industries provide possibly the best examples of this growing trend, with wotif.com and realestate.com.au serving as both pioneers and benchmarks in their provision of exceptional customer service. It's a successful formula that the healthcare industry should not ignore.

CONSUMER CONVENIENCE

An online startup, wotif.com initially began with the objective of integrating with existing hotel-management systems, which operate similarly to practice-management systems, but seized the opportunity to meet a market need – to streamline and simplify the booking process for customers.

Hotel-management systems that have ignored this trend and have chosen to develop their own online-booking systems are floundering and failing to deliver value to their clients, as customers want the convenience of being able to find and book all of their accommodation needs in one place.

Online accommodation-booking portals recognise this and add value by making the booking process easier and more convenient for consumers, who now derive benefits from using these sites, saving time, often saving money and always gaining convenience. Consequently, those hotel-management systems that chose to go it alone have lost a battle they could never have won. Freely obtainable data suggests that around 80-90% of the bookings for these hotels are not done through their own websites but via aggregate sites such as wotif.com, expedia.com and the like.

Similarly, this trend can be seen in online real-estate portals such as realestate.com.au. As recently as 10 years ago consumers visited the local real-estate window or that agent's company website to view properties they were interested in buying or renting. In less than three years, however, realestate.com.au has changed the landscape of online property searching and is now one of the top go-to websites for property buyers and sellers alike.

Who would have thought local business websites could so quickly become redundant and irrelevant to their customers? Even major chains such as LJ Hooker and Ray White struggle to get consumers to visit their sites, despite having millions of marketing dollars at their disposal.

It's clear that local businesses have little hope of competing and the

reason is simple – as consumers, we want the convenience of being able to find all of our accommodation or real-estate needs in one place (this obviously applies to other industries as well). That is the value portal sites deliver to us all.

MEETING DEMAND

How does this apply to the healthcare industry? The first step is to accept that convenience is a consumer demand that healthcare practitioners cannot deny or ignore.

The reality is that we all appreciate the convenience online aggregator sites offer – i.e. a consistent single place where we can go to find, book, and/or buy all of the services and products we want. Why shouldn't booking a healthcare appointment also be this easy and convenient?

By being mindful of service-industry trends, you should expect that your patients will want to find and book healthcare appointments conveniently online. But do you believe your own medical website will be able to offer – and manage – such a process in the medium to long term? If the major real-estate and hotel chains, with their access to significant resources, cannot compete with their equivalent online portals, then what hope have you got?

This change is coming, whether we like it or not and it is therefore essential that the insight gained from the experience of other industries helps healthcare practitioners to stay ahead of this trend.

By putting yourself in the position of a patient – as healthcare professionals themselves sometimes are – wouldn't you want the convenience of being able to book your healthcare appointments online 24/7?

FULL CAPABILITY

When considering your practice's capacity to offer online appointment booking there are some key capabilities you will want to question:

- Does the system integrate seamlessly with, and does your chosen practice-management software support it? Your front desk staff will be very unhappy with you if it doesn't integrate or is not supported.
- Can both new and existing patients book online and through the same system? This will drive maximum value for the practice and, in particular, drive strong referral business if this is desired.
- Does the service aid in patient acquisition/marketing, and should you divert marketing investment to this more measurable approach?
- Can the patient book with their preferred practitioner? We all know this is what patients will mostly want.
- Is your full week's appointment availability protected from viewing by competitors and patients? It can present real threats if it isn't.
- Can the patient book via your website, a mobile app and an online portal to maximise efficiency and convenience? And can they see just your appointments or will they see your competitors' too? As this would be your new practice front door, albeit digital and accessible 24/7, it should be taken very seriously.

APPOINTMENT SCHEDULING



A solution to this trending situation in Australia started with the arrival 12 months ago of 1stAvailable.com.au – a dedicated healthcare portal that has rapidly become Australia's premiere healthcare appointment booking site.

There are three ways new and existing patients can book their appointments through 1stAvailable.com.au: via the 1stAvailable.com.au website; through your practice website where the 1stAvailable.com.au 'Book Now' button is displayed; and via 1stAvailable.com.au mobile apps for Apple and Android platforms. This makes booking your services more accessible to patients, who are already online looking for health information.

As in the other industries discussed, the tendency towards mass consumer adoption of online services means that, over a short amount of time, 1stAvailable.com.au will continue to shift the way Australians book healthcare appointments. This will be for the benefit of both patients and practitioners – and, more importantly, patient health and the healthcare industry overall.

WELL PLACED

We know it is important to allow both existing and new patients to easily access your services through online appointments. Once patients have found you online, they will want to continue to book their appointments this way, so it's crucial to avoid

putting up roadblocks that either change the convenience factor or process they are now familiar with, or make it hard for new patients to easily book with you online.

It's now accepted that businesses adopting the shift to online early will reap the greatest rewards and, sadly, there are numerous examples of major and minor businesses that have failed to adapt quickly enough. The consideration here is where you and your practice are currently placed in this regard.

Implementing an online booking system isn't something you should rush into, however. For a system to work successfully it must be fully integrated into your business, and your front-desk staff and practice managers must become the champions of this change. Once the system is up and running, you can be assured that your staff and patients will love you for it! ☺

Note: *If you want to know more about 1stAvailable, you can register your practice at 1stAvailable.com.au for free, which will allow you to evaluate the service. Registering will also trigger a response from a 1stAvailable team member, who will contact you to assist with any questions you may have. Once you are ready to start taking bookings, you will be required to pay a subscription fee before utilising the system.*
