The Virtual Waiting Room:
What It Is, Why You Need It,
& How to Create It

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Introduction

Virtual waiting rooms and virtual waiting room software, also referred to as curbside check-in, mobile waiting rooms, and zero-contact waiting rooms, offer medical groups, hospitals, and health systems a sustainable strategy to replace the waiting room experience for in-office appointments and support a queue of patients utilizing telehealth.

The waiting room experience hasn't changed much over the years and yet is a significant component of the patient experience; it's affected by the atmosphere of the waiting room, how long a patient waits there, and what other delighters or disturbances are present while a patient waits. But the waiting room also poses risks as patients touch shared surfaces or devices and are exposed to other patients. While this risk has always existed, the COVID-19 pandemic shed new light on these risks and heightened awareness for both medical office staff and patients. Similarly, COVID-19 spurred a rapid increase in the use and adoption of telehealth and though it is likely to lose momentum in the recovery of the crisis it will certainly remain a significant part of patient appointment volume long term.

Digital patient engagement solutions have been streamlining the patient journey for years, engaging patients and expanding access to scheduling, payments, and communication. In the wake of COVID-19, these same tools have become instrumental in powering zero-contact processes like virtual waiting rooms, digital intake, and contactless payments. As medical groups, hospitals, and health systems begin eliminating the traditional waiting

room experience, whether it be temporary or long-term, to reduce the risk of patient and staff exposure, tools like appointment reminders, self-scheduling, and mobile payments that have eased scheduling, reduced no-shows, and shortened the revenue cycle are also foundational to making a virtual waiting room a sustainable strategy.

What is a Virtual Waiting Room?

A virtual waiting room can have two meanings. In the context of a patient arriving for an in-office medical appointment, a virtual waiting room is the process in which a patient can check-in from their mobile device and remain in their vehicle until an exam room is available. This allows the patient to bypass the traditional waiting room, reducing their risk of exposure to both other patients and germs and viruses present on surfaces, shared devices like kiosks, and materials like magazines, books, papers, clipboards, and pens.

In the context of a telehealth appointment, a virtual waiting room is a process used by patients to indicate they are ready for their televisit, staff who are viewing and managing a patients televisit experience, and/or a provider who is indicating they are ready to initiate the telemedicine appointment with the patient or caregiver.

3 Reasons You Need a Virtual Waiting Room Solution for Your Medical Office(s)

Virtual waiting rooms offer multiple benefits to medical practices, hospitals, and health systems looking to power sustainable Telehealth processes and/or replace a traditional waiting room experience for in-office visits with a safer, more efficient patient experience. Here are three reasons every medical practice should have a virtual waiting room.

1   Virtual Waiting Rooms Drive Better Infection Control

The risk of spreading infection in an outpatient setting used to be considered relatively low, in part because patients seen and treated in outpatient settings were of low-acuity and therefore presented lower risk themselves. However, as healthcare has continued to push more treatments and procedures to the outpatient setting while also decreasing the length of stay for patients in an acute care setting, outpatient acuity is rising. In other words, the patients seeking care in outpatient settings have become more medically complex and at the same time, as more patients seek outpatient care, waiting rooms and clinics have become more crowded.

Infection control in the waiting room isn't limited to surfaces or shared devices, though they pose significant risk if not managed appropriately. The spread of airborne illnesses and diseases aren't reduced by hand hygiene stations or even social distancing as it's commonly thought that HVAC systems can spread viruses in a shared area easily.

Allowing patients to wait in their vehicles until a private exam room is available reduces the risk of infection for patients and staff alike. And because processes that once took place in the waiting room, like collecting patient payments, payer information, and updated medical, can be completed with digital tools, face-to-face interaction in the waiting room is no longer required to power these essential processes.

2 Virtual Waiting Rooms Power Better & More Complete Patient Information, Regardless of Visit Type

Telehealth is here to stay, though we expect it to decline in volume as medical offices recover from the early days of the pandemic and establish a new normalcy for delivering care in the midst of disruption. Still, this new normal means delivery care in a hybrid model of both in-office and telehealth visits—which means patients won't always be appearing in the flesh for their medical appointments. Rather than operating varying processes based on appointment type, virtual waiting rooms powered in part by digital registration mean medical groups can operate one sustainable way to collect patient medical histories, medication reconciliation, and payer information regardless of how a patient accesses care. If the right system integrations in place, this information is also more quickly available to clinicians when it's delivered directly in the practice management system or EHR.

3 Virtual Waiting Rooms are More Patient Friendly

Even the most accommodating medical waiting rooms aren't ideal for all patients: immunocompromised patients are at higher risk of getting sick from shared surfaces and spaces, those with small children often find it stressful to entertain small children in a physician's waiting room and keep them from touching surfaces that could be covered in germs, and patients who are feeling very ill often need a quiet place to wait undisturbed.

Traditional patient waiting rooms come with variables that can't be controlled and can be inconvenient, disturbing, or simply annoying to patients. Allowing patients the ability to wait in their vehicles gives each of the patients described above (and countless other examples) a better alternative to waiting for their appointment times and minimizes the risk that medical appointments are initiated with a negative experience, impacting overall patient satisfaction.

For patients that prefer a traditional waiting room experience for any number of reasons, virtual waiting rooms give medical offices the flexibility to use both so there are fewer overall patients in one shared space.

How To Create a Virtual Waiting Room

It isn't difficult to create a virtual waiting room, the same tools that power electronic pre-registration and ensure patients remember the appointments they have scheduled also power the virtual waiting room for both in-office visits and televisits. Here a few strategies medical practices, hospitals, and health systems are using.

Automated Appointment Reminders

Your virtual waiting room is initiated with the first appointment reminder, specifying whether an appointment is in the office or to take place via telehealth. The appointment reminder can also contain specific language for in-clinic appointments to inform patients that they'll wait for their appointments from their vehicles, so it isn't a surprise the day of the appointment. An automated reminder message can also be delivered within close proximity to the appointment with more specific instructions and links as appropriate. If a patient has yet to complete their digital registration forms, the reminder can also include the link to verify their identities and complete their patient forms.

Digital Patient Registration & Check-in

Digital patient registration should be initiated with the first appointment reminder, moving the patient registration process, including the collection of payer information, to a pre-appointment activity. Digital check-in allows patients to notify staff they are ready for their appointments and allows staff to view and manage a queue of patients for medical providers. Digital check-in
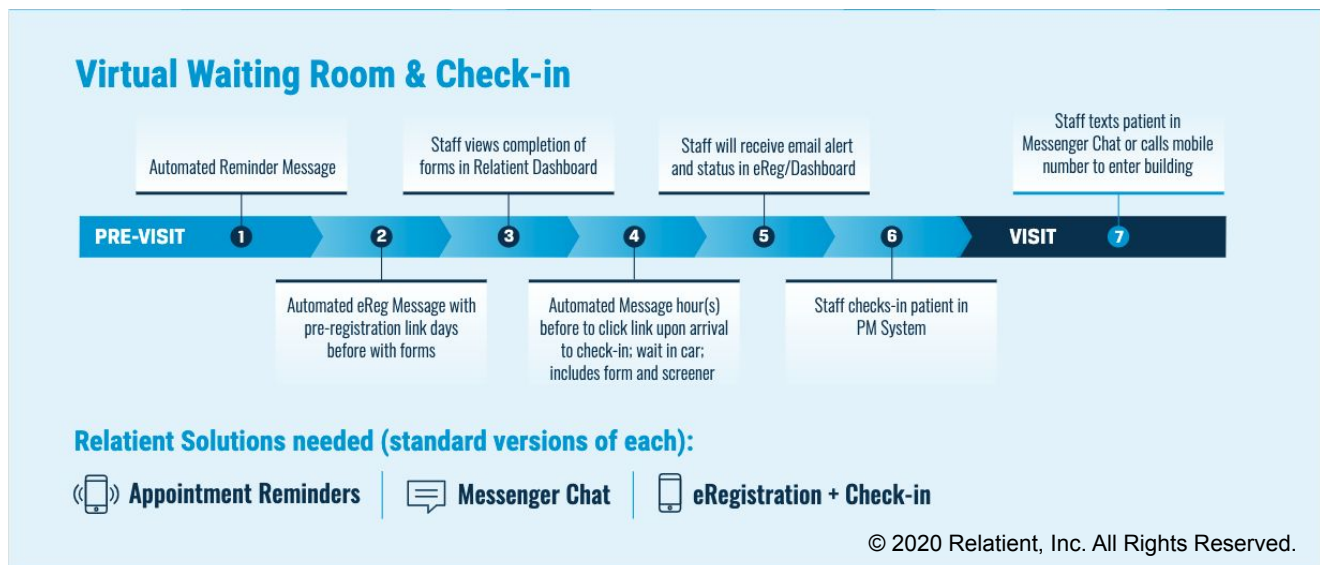
makes it easier for staff to see which patients have checked in, which patients have not, and how long it's been since these tasks have been completed (in other words, how long they've been waiting). Best practice solutions also make it easy for medical office staff to view whether or not a patient has completed their registration forms so they can assist patients who have not completed them.

Digital check-in is also a great place to include a digital screening tool to ensure patients with highly contagious illnesses are identified before they enter the medical office. Digital screening tools make it easy for medical office staff to maintain protocols for these situations, ensuring the safety of other patients and staff.

2-Way Patient Chat/Messaging

After a patient checks in for an appointment, 2-way patient messaging powers simple text communication between patient and medical office staff so they can answer basic questions, update patients, and notify patients when they can enter the medical office. If the solution also offers a secure messaging channel, medical office staff can switch to the secure channel if a text conversation contains clinical information or PHI.

2-way messaging also powers real time communication with patients who are waiting to initiate a telehealth visit. If a provider is running behind or the patient is having technical issues with the telehealth platform, 2-way patient messaging makes it easy for medical office staff to provide help, updates, and guidance.

Virtual Waiting Room & Check-in

		Staff views completion of forms in Relatient Dashboard		Staff will receive email alert and status in eReg/Dashboard			Staff texts patient in Messenger Chat or calls mobile number to enter building
Automated Reminder Message							

PRE-VISIT ❶ ❷ ❸ ❹ ❺ ❻ **VISIT** ❼

| | Automated eReg Message with pre-registration link days before with forms | | Automated Message hour(s) before to click link upon arrival to check-in; wait in car; includes form and screener | | Staff checks-in patient in PM System | | |

Relatient Solutions needed (standard versions of each):

(◉) **Appointment Reminders** | 🖵 **Messenger Chat** | 📱 **eRegistration + Check-in**

2 Ways to Power a Virtual Waiting Room

Use	"Parking Lot Check-in and Automated Text Message"	"eRegistration and Contactless Check-in"
Value Prop	Useful solution during COVID and the ongoing adoption of virtual waiting room and telehealth as a basic digital tool.	Part of a long-term strategy to move away from paper and to digitize the office for contactless in-office and virtual care. Useful solution during COVID and to improve operations and efficiency.
Description	For offices using Relatient Appointment Reminders, patients are sent an automated text message (hour before) and directed to text a phone number when they arrive (no check-in link). Staff will be alerted in Relatient Messenger Chat inbox. Staff can reply or call the patient when time to come inside.	Patient receives an automated message with eReg link days before to fill out registration/consent forms prior to arrival. Staff can view completion in dashboard. An hour before patients receive a message to click link to check-in when they arrive and wait in their car—this link can include additional forms like a screener. Staff will be alerted by email or in the eReg dashboard when patients receive a message. Staff can text or call the patient when it's time to come inside.
Advantages	• Automated patient instructions to wait in car via text message just before their appointment • No patient authorization process	• Check-In + Preregistration via a personal device • Standard forms use can speed implementation • Displays in the Relatient dashboard
Details	• No check-in dashboard or forms for check-in • Must wait for appointment data integration	• Patient will have to authorize their self first • Must wait for appointment data integration • Customer or standard forms for pre-registration
Products	Appointment Reminders, Messenger Chat + eReg and Check-in solutions (automated message only)	Appointment Reminders, eRegistration and Check-in solutions (eRegistration & Check-in may be available as standalone with access to appointment data)

Best Practices to Support Your Virtual Waiting Room

Your virtual waiting room will be most sustainable and offer the greatest payoff when supported by other patient engagement solutions, like appointment reminders, mobile payments, and surveys. You may not need to add an entire platform but can use what you currently have in place to communicate with your patients, set their expectations, and help them navigate the patient journey—whether it be telehealth or an in-office appointment. You likely already have pieces of a virtual waiting room implemented and may only need an additional component. Here a few ways you can leverage your existing patient engagement strategies to begin powering a virtual waiting room:

- Include language in your appointment reminders to let patients know how to check-in digitally, complete registration forms, and that they'll be asked to wait in their vehicles (if not a televisit). You should be able to include a link to digital registration forms and a separate link to digital check-in.
- Text or email your patients a post-visit survey to get real time feedback and stay alert of service recovery needs and opportunities to improve both in-office and telehealth waiting experiences.
- Use mobile payments and patient balance messaging to both collect copays from patients at the time of service and patient balances/deductible post-visit.

If you have a 2-way patient messaging solution, a text response from a patient to any of the SMS-based solutions above should populate a dashboard and notify medical office staff that they have a message awaiting reply.

Lastly, find a technology partner you can count on, meaning:

- They offer you dedicated implementation resources so you have someone to help walk you through the process beginning to end.
- They offer live support during your most critical hours of operations and a robust way to submit support requests and communicate digitally when answers or training are needed.
- They check in from time to time to brainstorm, offer solutions to your most common issues, and take product feedback back to their development teams
- They specialize in healthcare so their expertise isn't diluted among other industries and their solutions are designed with HIPAA compliance and security built-in.

Conclusion

Virtual waiting rooms gained instant adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic when concerns over risk and infection peaked and telehealth became non-negotiable for providing care during a time when Americans were told to stay home whenever possible. While the virtual waiting room makes sense for the long term, the early methods for powering a virtual waiting room aren't likely sustainable. Now that the initial shock and crisis of the pandemic has subsided, healthcare leaders can power their virtual waiting rooms with strategies that offer flexibility, safety, and security. Whether facing subsequent waves of COVID-19 or facing other types of disruptions, virtual waiting rooms mitigate patient and staff exposure to illness and disease, optimizes patient flow, and makes it more sustainable for medical offices to sustain telehealth as a new staple in delivering outpatient care.

Virtual waiting rooms don't have to be complicated, simple patient-centered engagement solutions like 2-way patient messaging and digital patient registration and check-in can power a virtual waiting room that serves in-office visits and telemedicine visits. When used strategically with the other patient engagement solutions already in place, you can establish and support a digital patient experience that delights patients, drives better outcomes, and helps maintain financial stability for the practice, hospital, or health system.

Virtual waiting room strategies also offer third-party health tech companies an expanded proposition to offer the medical offices they partner with and serve. Find a technology partner who specializes in healthcare, is highly recommended by their customers and third parties, and can offer you a flexible platform to meet your needs without having to seek out multiple vendors.

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