

**Ten Basic Office Technologies for Every Urgent Care**  
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Once an urgent care center achieves a sufficient daily volume to cover its fixed costs, each additional patient contributes directly to the bottom line. Increasing volume requires efficiency in communication, documentation, and patient flow—all while maintaining a positive patient experience such that patients will return and tell others to do likewise. Efficiency and service gains can be facilitated by incorporating low-cost technology—commonly available at office supply stores and small business outfitters—to the urgent care operating model in new and innovative ways.

*Note: Images do not represent an endorsement of any specific vendor or brand but are illustrative of products available through most office supply stores, Internet and catalog merchants, and warehouse/discount mass retailers.*

**1) Auto-Attendant and Voice Mail**



How much time does your staff spend serving patients at the front desk versus those on the telephone? Prospective patients calling for directions, insurance participation and hours must receive a prompt and pleasant response, lest they choose a “more helpful” competitor instead. Likewise, responding to referral physicians, insurance companies, and employers is a necessary part of getting paid. But patients who are present in the center become annoyed waiting while staff tends to telephone callers.

Simple technology can save staff time and improve service in the center by diverting calls to an automated response system, with prompts for driving directions, operating hours, pricing, and/or insurance plans accepted. “Auto-attendant” capabilities may be built-in to business telephones or purchased as an add-on capability for enterprise phone systems. For a fixed monthly fee, calls may also be routed to third-party telephone answering companies offering automated services. Key to a user-friendly voice response system is an intuitive menu, useful but not excessive information spoken in a clear voice, and giving the caller the option at any time to “zero out” and speak to a live person.

Within the telephone system, a “dial by name” (or department) directory enables callers to bypass the receptionist and go directly to billing, referrals/authorizations, laboratory, or scheduling—avoiding the hold time and dropped calls that occur when calls are transferred. Integrating auto attendant and dial-by-name with voice mail can prevent messages from getting lost and avoid interrupting providers with patient call-backs. When providers set aside time at the beginning or end of their shift to check and return messages, patient flow continues without interruption—resulting in faster turnaround and increased satisfaction.

**2) Digital Camera**



A digital camera—with a removable memory card for editing, emailing, and printing images using a personal computer and color printer—can be useful in an urgent care center for:

- Taking pictures of tray set-ups, to train medical assistants and provide an ongoing reference of each provider’s preferences.

- Taking pictures of injuries or wounds to include in the patient’s chart, to aid referral providers and demonstrate progress to colleagues—particularly if there’s a possibility the patient will be followed up by a provider who didn’t see the injury/wound originally.
- Taking pictures of unusual patient presentations that might be shared at urgent care conferences or submitted to the *Journal of Urgent Care Medicine* and other publications as a case study.
- Taking pictures for bulletin boards, press releases, newsletters, and the Internet to recognize staff achievements, remember special events like birthday and holiday parties, and demonstrate involvement in the community through grassroots efforts.
- Taking pictures of facility problems, accidents, and other reportable incidents to protect from liability or to document legal-related issues.

When taking pictures, it’s important to be respectful of patient privacy—to secure a patient’s consent before taking a photograph, to avoid photographing faces and other identifying features, and to control access and distribution of photos to those with a legitimate, authorized use.

### 3) Document Scanner



The ability to scan paper documents to electronic PDF files—which can be saved on a hard drive for future reference, appended to a patient’s electronic medical record, or emailed to others—can help an urgent care center move towards a “paperless” environment. Available office technologies range from multi-function copiers that scan to email or document archives to small “desktop” scanners that create a PDF directly on the computer screen. A front office operation that scans patient registration forms, signed authorizations, and insurance cards eliminates time spent manually processing and filing paper. Scanning also facilitates electronic communication with billing departments, referral providers, and payers.

Scanning is replacing facsimile machines in many offices because fax requires a costly dedicated phone line and creates paper that must be handled, stored and disposed. More businesses are relying on email instead of fax—there are privacy concerns over faxes sent to incorrect numbers, incoming faxes with sensitive information may sit on the fax machine visible to all, and email is accessible through portable computers and handheld devices.

### 4) Color Laser Printer



For producing large batches of standardized marketing materials—such as the center’s “permanent” brochures—using a professional print shop will most likely result in a higher quality and lower per unit costs than replenishing ink in your own color printer. But an office laser printer can be very useful for producing on-demand signs and promotional announcements, small batches of flyers and brochures for special events, and high-quality client presentations. The availability of such materials provide flexibility in how a center raises awareness of its services to patients, employers and the community. Owning a color printer can save money over copy shops charging as much as \$1 per color page. A color printer can also be used by medical providers to print articles and illustrations with detailed color images. To control utilization, computers used for routine patient processes should default to a black/white printer with access to the color printer limited to managers and others with a business need.

## 5) Label Printer



Although electronic medical records have created a “paperless” environment some centers, many others still rely on paper charts. Desktop label printers, which interface with many desktop computer applications, can expedite preparing new chart folders at registration while clear and consistent labeling can save time in filing and retrieving charts for established patients. The ability to place a label on individual documents within a chart—such as transfer or discharge instructions—can also save time in documentation and reduce the chance of lost or erroneous paperwork.

Beyond the front office, there are many additional uses for a label printer including labels for mailing, inventory in supply cabinets, and expiration dates on pharmaceuticals. Although “sheet” labels are available for ordinary printers and copiers, such take time and effort to align on the computer, replace paper with labels in the printer tray, and result in wasted labels for one-off needs.

## 6) Athletic Stopwatch or Kitchen Timer

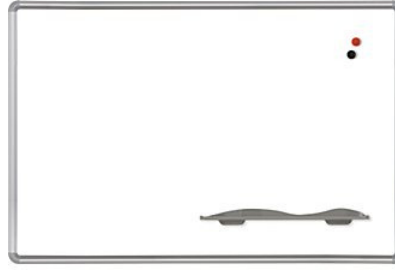


Extended patient waits are the top detractor from a positive patient experience in urgent care. In a busy urgent care center, it’s possible for staff to lose track of how long patients have been waiting and fail to communicate place in queue and remaining wait time to patients. A stopwatch or timer can help staff better organize patients in the flow, remind them to check on patients who have been waiting, and prompt them to communicate an update to patients. Depending on patient flow and operational processes, timers may count upward or downward:

- Count Upward: Shows total time in process or queue.
  - Upside is patient’s total wait is visible.
  - Downsides are staff has to monitor the timer and can easily overlook a patient’s extended wait.
- Count Down to Zero (w/Alarm): Alarm provides a reminder to check-up on patient.
  - Upside is staff is prompted to check on the patient.
  - Downsides are alarm noise and the clock doesn’t show total time waiting.

To increase visibility to staff, timers may be attached to the clipboard holding the patient chart, the exam room door, or the patient status board in the medical station.

### 7) Patient Status White Board



One of the shortcomings of using a “first come, first served” model is that a provider may spend 45 minutes engaged in a moderately complex procedure while three low-acuity patients who could have been treated in 5 to 10 minutes each continue to wait. The net is one satisfied patient and three others who will speak negatively about their experience. Had the provider knocked out the low-touch visits first, not only would average wait time per patient be less, but overall satisfaction would be greater.

A patient status board is a wall-mounted magnetic dry-erase board placed in the medical station to manage patient flow and prioritize provider activities. Sample columns on a patient white board include:

Room #	Patient Last Name	Arrival Time	Time in Room	Medical Provider	Medical Assistant	Services Required	Orders/Notes

When a patient status board is integrated with a room flag system, color-coded clipboards, timers, and effective front-/back- office communication, the result is faster average turnaround times and higher patient satisfaction. Although the white board should be posted in a central location—highly visible to providers and staff—for privacy purposes, care should be taken to keep the white board out of view of other patients.

### 8) Two-Way Radio Transceiver (Walkie-Talkie)



Key to smooth patient flow is ongoing communication between the front and back office. Preferably an urgent care center is designed such that the front desk and medical station are in visible proximity. But when the two are separated by space, there is often not a mechanism for the front office to know wait times in the back and for the back office to know how many patients are sitting in the waiting room.

When exam rooms vacate, patients may remain sitting in the waiting room because the back office staff has not yet retrieved their chart and front office does not know that empty rooms are available. In addition, the back office—not knowing that new patients have arrived—may not appropriately prioritize patients based on services or provider time required.

Two-way radios—which may be handheld or incorporated into a headset—improve communication between the front and back office. The front office can “page” a medical assistant when a new patient arrives for a particular service while the back office notifies when a patient is ready for discharge. When integrated with a patient status white board, two-way radios assist in optimizing flow by prioritizing patients to minimize average wait times.

**9) Cash-Depository Safe**



Urgent care centers—like other “retail” businesses—must maintain and balance a cash drawer and make periodic bank deposits of cash and checks received at the center. For some centers, this involves a daily trip to the bank while other centers rely on courier services. Having cash on hand necessarily creates risk for the urgent care center—cash collected in between bank runs may be lost or stolen prior to deposit. To reduce this risk, a center may install a “drop” safe in which a deposit is prepared and slipped into a vault where it cannot be removed except by a special key (or combination) controlled by a center manager or courier. Risk of theft—by embezzlement or robbery—is reduced by reducing access to cash on hand. In addition to daily deposits, front office employees should place large bills or cash in excess of what’s needed to make change in the safe on a periodic basis. Knowing deposits are safely locked away in the safe, the frequency of bank runs can also be reduced, saving time and courier or mileage expense.

**10) Digital Voice Recorder**



A handheld voice recorder can be a handy tool in a physician’s office. Providers may use the recorder to narrate patient profiles and dictate progress notes as they move from room to room. Digital voice recorders attach to a personal computer using a USB connection. Voice files are saved to the computer’s hard drive, appended to a patient’s electronic medical record, or forwarded to others as an email attachment. Computer software is also available to automatically transcribe spoken words into written text or the voice file may be forwarded electronically to a medical transcription service (including those located overseas). In a business context, the voice recorder may be used in board, operations and staff meetings to assist in documenting meeting minutes.

Although modern voice recorders are easily concealed, it is a courtesy (and sometimes a legal requirement) that all present in a room be told a recording is being made. In addition, providers should avoid dictating directly in front of patients and to protect patient privacy, likewise avoid dictating in public areas like hallways and medical stations within earshot of other patients.

*If your center is using office automation to improve flow and satisfaction in new and interesting ways, UCAOA would like to hear about it. Please email Alan Ayers at [aayers@ucaoa.org](mailto:aayers@ucaoa.org) to describe the technology and how it is applied in your center.*