



The Online Journal for Emerging Physician Leaders

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October 8, 2015



ZocDoc's Patient-First Philosophy Clicks with Users and Their Physicians

By Michael Stone

When Randye Karmin, MD, opened a new ob-gyn office in Miami in 2010, the patient load wasn't exactly a problem, but she did want to find a way to invite in at least a little more business.

She and her husband had moved to the city with their two children from nearby Boca Raton, where Karmin opened another ob-gyn practice, Boca Women's Health, four years earlier. With two open offices, patients in Miami hadn't climbed to a point that would prevent her from working at both.



Karmin took out print ads for the new office, Miami Women Care, and tried Web-based publicity, too. But the business didn't see any substantial upticks until she tried one particular method for exposure, a doctor-patient connection website and phone app called ZocDoc.

Patient totals grew so much, in fact, that she brought on another doctor for the Boca Raton office so she could concentrate on Miami.

"ZocDoc was, and continues to be, a very effective way for me to reach out and be seen on the Internet," said Karmin, who signed up for the service in December 2011.

"Women of all ages today are using the Internet to look for doctors — any services, really, but doctors in particular. They want the ability to see who other patients recommend, (and) they want the ability to quickly identify whose office is close to them, what their educational background is."

Founded in 2007, ZocDoc bills itself as a technology company "at the beginning of the health care experience."

Its aim is to aid patients in their search for physicians by showing the doctors' full availability online, providing instant booking of open slots, and backing up physician quality with verified reviews and ratings from existing patients.

For patients, the process starts by going to ZocDoc.com or using the ZocDoc app on their smart phones. From there, they enter their location, insurance and the type of doctor — optometrist, dentist, etc. — they'd like to see. The patients are then presented with local physicians and their availability, qualifications, photos and reviews.

The inspiration for quickly booking quality physicians came earlier in 2007, when co-founder and CEO Cyrus Massoumi's eardrum burst and traditional booking had him waiting four days to see a doctor.

"Technology has changed the way we access everything, from late-night delivery to airfare," said another cofounder, ZocDoc president Oliver Kharraz, MD. "Why not health care?"

ZocDoc was founded, he said, "with one singular mission: Give power to the patient."

Other services from ZocDoc include providing patients with paperwork to fill out online instead of in the waiting room, attaching medical documents to patients as they travel from doctor to doctor, letting patients check in online when they've arrived at the office and sending automated reminders to patients about appointments.

While these services can be framed as patient-oriented, ZocDoc also promotes them as ways to help physicians: access to patients who favor the convenience of online booking, reminders that cut down on no-shows, streamlined check-ins from patients online, last-minute cancellations being filled because the booking schedules are always on the Web and reviews from current patients that attract new ones.

To ensure itself as an objective source, ZocDoc allows both positive and negative reviews.

"We want to create a useful, representative and reliable resource that patients can depend on," said Casey Roberts, a company spokeswoman. "We post positive reviews, negative reviews and everything in between."

While the Internet has no shortage of opportunities for customers and patients to review just about everything, ZocDoc employs features to increase review quality and quantity.

First, ZocDoc has a closed-loop review system, which allows comments only from patients who have actually seen the doctor. This is opposed to an open-loop system, which allows comments from anyone, even the doctors themselves.

Second, it tries to form representative feedback by proactively reaching out to patients for a review after every appointment, generating more comments than just those from patients who were really pleased or really dissatisfied.

“Typically, on other doctor review sites and other Web-based review sites, patients only go on and post reviews when they’ve had a bad experience,” Karmin said in describing how ZocDoc’s review system has helped her Miami practice. “But because ZocDoc actually goes to the patient and requests feedback, it’s a very easy way for patients who had a good experience to take a few minutes to post their good experience online.”

ZocDoc is also plowing ahead financially, attracting \$95 million from investors such as Bezos Expeditions, Founders Fund, Goldman Sachs, Khosla Ventures and Marc Benioff.

So too is the company’s employee count growing, Kharraz said, with more than 600 split between its New York City headquarters and offices in Phoenix, Arizona, and Pune, India.

ZocDoc is offered in all 50 states and to 60 percent of U.S. citizens — a percentage that Roberts said is “constantly expanding.” The service is free for patients; revenues come from the providers paying roughly \$3,000 annually to be listed.

Though ZocDoc is a Web- and phone-based service, Kharraz said it’s used by “patients of all ages,” not just younger ones or those who are technologically savvy.

“Accessing the doctor can be a struggle for anyone, regardless of age,” he said. “As patients take more active roles in their health, ZocDoc is delivering the care, convenience and immediacy that they experience in so many other areas of their lives.”

With family roots in health care dating back 300 years, Kharraz started as a doctor in Germany. He practiced there through the 1990s before switching to consulting with the international consulting firm McKinsey & Co., where he worked from 2001 to 2007 to increase efficiencies between government agencies and health organizations.

Now, in his administrative role at ZocDoc, Kharraz doesn’t maintain a practice, but he said his medical background continues to serve as an influence.

“Doctors deeply care for patients,” he said, “and that’s something that we carry with us, even after we move on from practicing medicine. ... At the helm of ZocDoc, I am creating systemic change and improving the experience for the millions of patients who use our service each month — far more than I could have hoped to impact in the operating room.”

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