

Doctors' Appointments Just a Click Away

BY LISA ZAMOSKY

Among the many health care-related challenges people face, the most basic — finding a doctor who can treat you, particularly if you need an appointment quickly — is fairly common.

ZocDoc.com is among a new crop of health care companies aiming to make the complicated task of accessing health care services easier with the use of technology. The New York City-based start-up that bills itself as the Open Table of doctor's appointments is changing the way people schedule a visit to the doctor by allowing patients to find a local physician and book an appointment online instantly for free.

Here's how it works: You log on to the company website and enter information about the type of doctor you're looking for (dermatologist, primary care, OBGYN). If you have insurance coverage, you can indicate that you'd like to see a doctor participating with your health plan.

The site quickly delivers a list of doctors in your geographic area, along with appointment times available within the next few days. You can click on the day and time that works best for you, and viola! You have a doctor's appointment.

Bad Service Breeds Good Ideas

The idea of ZocDoc.com was the brainchild of co-founder and CEO Cyrus Massoumi, who was appalled by the difficulty he had scheduling a doctor's appointment upon landing in New York City after a cross-country flight left him with a burst eardrum.

Logging on to his insurer's website, he searched for and placed phone calls to a number of the doctors listed online, but failed to make headway in landing an appointment.

"The list was not good," he said. Many of the doctors Massoumi called either didn't have available appointments within a reasonable period of time or weren't actually participating with his insurer (those online provider lists are notoriously inaccurate).



"It was amazingly difficult," Massoumi says of his efforts to get an appointment. "I thought there had to be a better way because this was so inefficient," he adds.

Cancellations Put to Good Use

Many of us have had the experience of calling a doctor's office for an appointment, only to be told we'd have to wait several weeks — or in some cases, months — before the doctor can see us.

Yet, despite their packed schedules, according to Massoumi, "Doctors have last minute cancellations 10-20% of the time," usually within a day or two of the appointment.

By tapping into doctors' schedules in real-time, ZocDoc.com is able to display on its website appointment times that usually land patients an office visit within a 24-hour period. "The benefit of technology is we can fluidly collect that information from a doctor's schedule," Massoumi says.

Doctor Reviews

A number of sites have popped up during the past few years that enable consumers to rate doctors, just as we rate restaurants and consumer goods. Angieslist, RateMDs, and HealthGrades are some of the bigger names in this space. What's not clear on these sites, however, is who is leaving the reviews, and therefore, how seriously you can take them (they've also, in some cas-

es, faced legal trouble from doctors angry about bad reviews).

"One of the most unique things about us is that you can confirm reviews are coming from actual patients because they can't leave one unless they've confirmed an appointment," Massoumi says of ZocDoc's system. And doctors have to sign on to the site and agree to its terms in order to participate.

That makes the reviews more valuable, although it should be said that consumers often comment on how much they like a doctor, which doesn't tell you much about whether they comply with best clinical practices or the ultimate quality of their care, data that can be difficult to find.

Other Options?

To date, the company operates in 16 areas across 13 states and reports 1.3 million users visiting the site each month. It's easy to navigate and if you need to get to the doctor ASAP, this site will get the job done.

Massoumi says ZocDoc.com currently has no competitors. Although there are other sites that allow patients to search for doctors in their area (aside from those provided by insurance companies), including Vitals.com and Findadoc.com, as well as those listed above that display consumer ratings, I haven't been able to prove him wrong in finding another site that so effectively combines the two.