

Top Tips for Designing Effective Messages

Once the pathway for Flo's integration has been agreed along with its purpose of use, it becomes time to develop a message schedule that will document the frequency and content of Flo's interactions with the patient to achieve the desired outcomes. The interactions that Flo has with patients are of utmost importance, the framing of messages goes some way to predict effectiveness in relation to the characteristics of the target cohort and associated clinical and behaviour change requirements. Below are some key points to consider when developing message schedules to achieve the desired purpose of use.

FOCUS THE CONTENT OF MESSAGES

- **Keep messages concise and to the point**

Patients need to be able to easily understand and interpret the messages received from Flo. Flo's messages are most effective when focused upon the specific desired action, or information, clearly communicating the actions required; for this reason Flo's message character limit has been kept to a minimum. Where messages exceed the character limit and some editing is required, the end result often conveys the key points of the message more clearly, which will be easier for the patient to absorb.

- **Design messages to suit your target cohort**

Awareness of the characteristics of the target cohort for a protocol is also important when thinking about the language, tone and content of messages. As an example, an elderly cohort may benefit from a different style of message compared to a younger adolescent cohort, who may find a different style of message more engaging, motivating or easier to understand. Think about what language your cohort would find most engaging, and tailor the messages to suit. Flo's interactions should be as appealing as possible for patients, whilst clearly communicating the actions required or educational content of the message.

Local dialect and nuances can be useful to include into Flo's interactions, for example an application in the North East included the following local reference:

"Are you wondering why your baby needs you more at night? You could meet other breastfeeding mams at Bosom Buddies and ask them..."

The language used in Flo's message should also mirror the competencies of the cohort. Interactions with patient with learning disabilities are often kept simple, short and clear for example.

MAXIMISING ENGAGEMENT WITH FLO

- **Ensuring all messages add value**

Every message that Flo sends must add value and feel useful to the patient. Over messaging could result in disengagement, as the patient cannot identify the importance in undertaking the desired action or internalising Flo's information, as the value of the content of Flo's messages is not identified. It is important therefore to target messages around key areas of the pathway where increased adherence will make the most impact. Patients are more likely to read and internalise messages that feel useful and pertinent to them, motivating them to take Flo's information or advice on board.

- **Timely message schedules**

The timing, frequency, content and number of interactions between Flo and the patient is very important to ensure that there is value in each and every interaction. Interactions should be behaviourally and time specific. Message schedules are key to ensuring that Flo's messages are timely and targeted to be most effective; think about how often and when Flo interacting with the patient will realise the most benefit. Clinically, if you need to send a number of messages to a patient for readings and advice in the same day, where possible try to vary the content of the messages slightly and space them out to key times in the day. Message timings can often be amended to suit the patient, so it can often be useful to discuss with the patient what time of day suits their lifestyle, or where this is not possible clearly explaining to the patient why readings are important be received at particular times and why this is important to them and their health.

When developing a message schedule that is short or medium term, it can be often useful to mark the end of the protocol with a final message from Flo to let the patient know that the protocol has ended. A simple message explaining that Flo's service has ended and if appropriate who to contact with any questions or to discuss the service continuing. For example:

"Your initial Flo service is now complete, don't forget to book a blood test with your GP in 2 months. In the meantime if you have any concerns call 01234 567890"

- **Protocol Complexity**

It can be quite easy to overcomplicate interactions via Flo in designing message schedules. Try to keep your protocols simple and targeted. Flo should compliment your existing pathways and be easy for both patients and clinicians to use. Depending on the context of use, think carefully before creating messages that require a lot of sequential responses to Flo. There are often different strategies to use such as self-assessment trees that can be paper based with Flo reminding the patient to complete their assessment and the patient sending their cumulative score to Flo.

- **Maintaining Interest**

For patients using Flo on a medium to long terms basis, where perhaps the same readings are prompted for on twice daily basis, it is often useful to think about adding variety into some of Flo's messages where possible.

If, for example, Flo is prompting the patient to take the same reading in both the mornings and evenings, it is often more personal for non-protected services to create two templates within the protocol, one with a morning greeting and the other with an evening greeting to help vary the messages a little and add a more personal touch. (protected services such as standard Blood Pressure, prevent the use of multiple templates to ensure clinical safety)

You may also wish to send the same advice to a patient over a number of weeks and again it's a good idea in this situation to create a couple of templates containing the same information but delivered in a slightly different way to provide some variation and maintain interest.

- **Avoiding jargon and abbreviations**

There is a lot of jargon used in the NHS, so much so we often don't realise we're using it. The use of jargon can be alienating, creating a barrier to patients feeling more involved and identifying themselves and their actions as key components towards improving their health. Therefore try to keep your messages jargon free to ensure that patients clearly understand the content and are best enabled to take on board Flo's interactions.

Abbreviations where commonly understood and used by patients are acceptable and will feel more familiar. Apply caution to new abbreviations to ensure the message remains as clear as possible.

- **Using the tone of Flo's messages to engage patients**

Flo is an additional tool to increase quality and patient safety to services supporting patients to increase their capability and interest in self-managing their condition in-between clinical contacts. Therefore typically the content of Flo's messages mirrors the advice and guidance offered to patients employed via other methods such as verbal face-to-face advice, or information provided in leaflets or self-management plans. Flo acts to deliver this information in an effective manner that patients can internalise and retain in real time scheduled at a time when will have most impact. Flo is often also used to extend the breadth of education and advice that clinicians offer that time does not allow in face-to-face contacts.

However the design of messages is vital in ensuring that communication via Flo is most effective whilst maintaining clinical accuracy and relevance. In face-to-face communication both parties communicate with each other, even if in very subtle ways such as through eye contact (or lack of) and general body language. There are many other subtle ways that we typically communicate (perhaps even unintentionally) with others, for example the tone of our voice can give clues, whilst hand signals or gestures can add to a spoken message. Therefore when designing the content of Flo's messages, it is important to exploit language and tone to convey softer signals that would typically come into play via the spoken word to maximise the impact that they have on patients.

Therefore some tweaking of existing written content may be required when developing Flo's messages whilst maintaining the essence of the advice, information or prompt.

Flo is a tool to support patients and therefore interactions with Flo should feel helpful, motivating and supportive. The use of language and tone is a critical element in communicating this feeling to patients to maximise engagement and develop the relationship with Flo that patients report they value.

The examples below demonstrates how the tone of messages can vary in impact:

1. *"How much exercise did you actually do yesterday? Be honest if you could have done more. □"*

Vs.

2. *"Reflect on your activity levels yesterday and if there were opportunities to integrate more activity that you could take advantage of today, Flo"*

Sometimes more directional messages such as the first example can be helpful, so it is important to use different tone and language to appeal to your particular patient cohort. Alternatively, the second example may feel more supportive and friendlier to patients, so this approach may suit better?

- **Using Rhetorical questions**

Rhetorical questions should be used with care to ensure that the purpose of Flo's message is clear and to motivate patients. For example when encouraging patients to take some action, an effective way to do this is perhaps to make a pragmatic suggestion of an action to take. The comparisons below are from a physiotherapy service's protocol designed to motivate patients to take simple steps to improve their muscle strength and prevent falls. Both messages have the same intended purpose but are delivered in a different way:

1. *"Try to minimise the amount of time spent sitting down. Is it time to do your exercises?"*

Vs.

2. *"Try to minimise your time spent sitting down to maintain your muscle strength, or when you are sitting down, try toe and heel taps 5 times on each foot. Flo."*

The second example provides clear direction reinforced with the rationale behind *why* improving muscle strength matters to the patient and *how* to do it. Subtleties such as this are significant in

motivating patients. The message also feels less authoritative and friendlier by offering a practical alternative that should be achievable by the patient.

Caution around rhetorical questions also extends to schedules where sometimes the patient is required to reply to Flo with a reading or response and others Flo is sending a one-way educational message. In this instance, rhetorical questions should be kept to a minimum to make it clear where Flo requires a response and where she does not.

- **The use of “you” and “your”**

In maximising the personal feel of Flo’s messages, the use of “you” and “your” are key elements to easily cement Flo’s connection with patients, reinforcing the impact that patients can have on their own health and subtly increasing motivation. In the following example, it is clear to see this distinction

1. *“It is day 3 of the balance program. Continuing the exercises will strengthen the visual message to the balance centre. Keep going, Flo”*

Vs.

2. *“Hi, it’s now day 3 of your balance program. Continuing with your exercises will be strengthening the visual messages to your balance centre. Keep going, Flo”*

The use of “you” and “your” (and other words with a personal connection) easily highlights the impact that the advice will have directly to the patient, increasing motivation.

USE FLO’S PERSONA TO THE BEST ADVANTAGE

- **Incorporate “Flo” into messages**

Flo’s unique persona helps patients to engage with, and adhere better to shared management plans in between clinician contacts. Patients report that Flo feels like “a nurse in my pocket” or “a friend” demonstrating the connection with Flo that patients develop, further fueling their engagement and motivation with their healthcare. When you ask someone about their experience of using Flo, nearly all will refer to Flo as ‘she’ or ‘her’ never ‘it’.

To take best advantage of this relationship patients develop with Flo’s persona, it is recommended to start or sign off most messages with a reference to Flo, i.e. “Hi, it’s Flo” or “Take care, Flo”. People identify with Flo’s personality despite the messages being predefined and patient awareness that Flo is not a monitored service. Incorporating “Flo” into messages also clearly identifies where the message is being sent from, prioritising it to patients from other messages received; perhaps consider how you would use your name when messaging your own friends and apply this to message design?

Often patients will save Flo as a contact in their phone, again increasing the personal feel when messages are sent and received.

- **Maximising the personal feel of Flo’s messages**

It’s important to design Flo’s messages to feel personal to differentiate her messages from other less important communication, patients really respond to this and Flo has even received a number of thank you cards from her patients and their relatives!

Where a particular need has been identified to develop a bespoke protocol for an individual patient, this is the ideal opportunity to take the personal nature of Flo’s messages to another level and perhaps include the patient’s name or other key elements that are pertinent to them, imagine receiving a message that felt this unique to you? Even where patients are using a more generic protocol being used at scale, the clinician always has the opportunity to tailor Flo’s messages for

individual patients. When targeted at patients who would most benefit from this, it is a quick method maximising engagement and making Flo feel even more personal.

INCREASING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FLO'S MESSAGES

The advice and guidance offered via Flo can vary in clinical importance as designed by the clinical team according to their pathway; therefore some protocols will include both advice and action messages, mirroring the patient's self-management plan. Flo is a self-management tool with infrequent monitoring so it's important to ensure that any 'alert' messages clearly instruct the patient to take the desired action.

Sometimes Flo's advice is advisory, for example if a patient's blood glucose reading is slightly high and can be managed with some simple guidance as in their management plan. Other instances, where a patient's feedback has met the alert criteria set (critical alert), Flo will include information around a specific action the patient should take. An example of this is if the patient's blood glucose has been consistently high over a set period, Flo may ask the patient to take a key action, such as making an appointment with their GP, or calling their Diabetes Specialist Nurse to facilitate early intervention as agreed in their shared management plan.

It is therefore important to differentiate the content of messages to clearly signal the importance surrounding the action being taken to motivate the patient to do so. This can be communicated by the use of careful language and tone of the message. The examples below demonstrate the distinction:

1. Advisory message

"Your blood glucose is slightly high today, please refer to your self management plan and take your reading again at your normal time, take care Flo"

Vs.

2. Action message

"Your blood glucose has been outside your normal range 3 times in 3 days. Please CALL your nurse to discuss further on 01234 567890, take care Flo"

In the second example, the clarity and significance of language is of utmost importance whilst being mindful not to cause alarm to the patient. Including the number to call makes this easier, and perhaps more likely, and also feels more personal again increasing the value of the message.