

# Is ER text messaging service just a marketing ploy?

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## Editor's Corner:

I have to admit that MetroWest Medical Center's text messaging [service](#) [1] is pretty slick. I texted them last night at 11:48 p.m. and within seconds received a text message with average emergency room wait times at its two hospitals. Framingham Union was 12 minutes and Leonard Morse Natick was five minutes.

Kudos to MetroWest for being the first in the Massachusetts to institute such a text messaging system to keep potential patients informed of wait times.

The two-hospital system, which sees about 62,000 ER patients a year, has used the text messaging system for just two-and-a-half weeks. And the initial wave of curiosity has worn off.

But now, as people register, they tell hospital staff that they came because the wait time was short, says MetroWest CEO Andrei Soran. "They knew the quality of our system and made a choice to come to us."

The folks at MetroWest know they're onto something that gives them an edge over rivals. "We've created a competitive advantage and in our market we fully intend to take advantage of it," Soran says.

In a marketplace where no one else is offering some sort of ER wait-time update, the system comes off as more user-friendly, keeping potential patients informed and saving them from languishing long in the ER waiting room.

If the local market changed and other area hospitals offered a similar system of wait-time updates, patients could use the information to compare wait times at nearby hospitals.

It's also possible that patients who see the wait time is longer than anticipated may put off a visit to the ER. And that postponement can be beneficial to hospitals that are trying to optimize patient flow through the ER.

With more than half of emergency physicians reporting crowding in their ERs at least five days a week, and the majority projecting that specialists will be less likely to respond to ER calls, fewer peak traffic times in the ER could be a good thing.

People who choose to come in at different times, rather than piling in all at peak periods, can help modulate volume, Soran notes, helping spread the volume of patients the hospital receives.

Still, not everyone is sold on the text messaging service.

One person who questions the need for the wait-time text-back service is Dr. David Seaberg, a member of the board of American College of Emergency Physicians and an emergency physician at Erlanger Hospital in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Options exist to quickly move along patients with lower acuity issues, he says, so there's no need to delay an ER visit. With team triage, some patients get their needs looked after without ever making it back to a room. Most large EDs have fast track areas where low-acuity patients can be channeled and seen quickly. Or a physician assistant might take care of low acuity patients right at triage.

And high acuity patients, whether experiencing chest pains, severe stomach problems or other serious conditions, can count on being seen, he says. "Even though our wait time may be 40 minutes for an average patient, we'll get you right back no matter how backed up we are," Seaberg says.

"In my opinion, it's a true marketing ploy," Seaberg says. "They don't put these messages in lower socio-economic areas. It's usually in the communities where there's competition for pain patients."

Lou Ellen Horowitz, executive director of the Urgent Care Association of America has a different bias and take on the texting service. "If you can text and wait," she says, "odds are very good you should go somewhere else." - [Sandra](#) [2]

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