

21st Century Private Practice

Michael Rudman looks at the benefits of investing in 21st Century systems and technology.

For some dental practices, changing your proven and time-tested methods of communication in favour of new technology and online systems may seem like an unnecessary expense. In fact, up to 30% of dental practices in the UK still have no computerisation at all.

However, while there is more to running a successful practice than flashy gadgets, you should recognise that, in the modern age, keeping up to date with 21st Century technology can not only help you attract new patients, but help your business thrive long into the future. The tips below are designed to give you an idea of where you can start.

Websites

Having a website is one of today's most important, yet inexpensive advertising tools. Your practice may appear on an online listing for a local dentist, but many prospective patients will instantly disregard any practices that don't have a website they can then click through to for further information.

Most dental practice websites are outsourced to a specialist provider for design and support and this can be an easy and efficient way to achieve an internet presence. The best websites are visually appealing, informative, inviting and regularly updated, so invest in a good basic design and the rest can be done in-house. However, it's incredibly important that you are aware of the regulations involved, so make sure you do your homework first.

Mobile phones

Around 40 million people in Britain alone own a mobile phone and for the forward-thinking dental practice, its simplest application can be its greatest asset. By reminding patients of their forthcoming appointments via text message, you can save thousands of pounds in lost revenue. These can even be sent automatically on a daily basis, as part of a practice management software system.

Some dentists are now progressing to enable patients to interact with the practice by text, updating the appointment book automatically should they be unable to make their appointment.

Computerised records

I really do believe that it makes good business sense for every practice to have a networked computer system capable of offering patient records, charts, appointment books and practice accounts. Storing computerised patient records not only eliminates the need for hundreds of patient folders, it also opens up a whole new world of marketing opportunities and time saving measures for the whole practice team to access.

A couple of clicks is all it takes to make, cancel or amend your patients' appointments and, with patient information at your fingertips, you can develop even better relationships by noting birthdays, applauding special milestones for children or recognising nervous patients. The time saved by having a computerised system can also be put to much more lucrative and indeed more satisfying use.

For example, if you were interested in offering a new service to your patients, you could easily run a search through your patient records to create a targeted mailing list of those most likely to be interested. You could also look at increasing your patient numbers by sending out a 'recommend a friend' offer to your existing database, all processed within minutes.

Speculate to accumulate

All these ideas are all very well and good, but in the current financial climate some of you may be wary of making expensive changes to your practice. However, Practiceworks (sole suppliers of the Kodak R4 system) indicate that a two-surgery practice could have a basic networking system installed from under £10,000, while with digital imaging and other innovations you could be looking at closer to £25,000. With a little effort to make the best use of the new technology, Practiceworks estimates that most practices will cover the cost of such an investment within 12 months.

As for the disruption, installation and training can usually be done in three days with the practice being closed for a maximum of just one day. Additional training can be delivered at any time and some payment plan providers offer a range of verifiable CPD courses to help integrate your team into new systems or ways of working. Some also offer a wealth of services, including

the ability to share patient information to ensure your records are always up to date and a wide range of professional and personal discounts.

Social media

If your practice already has the basics you're probably a convert already, so what else is out there that could make your dental practice stand out from the crowd? Social networking can not only allow you to share all your latest news and information with colleagues and patients, but the real-time nature of online updates can cause a real buzz and interest in what you have to say.

In fact, a recent survey by the British Dental Trade Association (BDTA) found that 59% of the dental professionals surveyed said that they use social networking sites as a means of connecting with friends and colleagues and sharing information¹. Furthermore, users can interact and comment on your messages, giving you a sense of what people really think. And the best thing is – most social networking sites are completely free!

Probably the most established social media outlet is blogging. A blog is a type of website which features regular entries and commentary from you and your practice team! You can set up a blog in minutes and it's a great way of updating your patients and colleagues on your latest practice news, events, services and products.

Twitter needs to be constantly updated, so can be time consuming, but can also be great for patient feedback and updating your followers on practice news and latest special offers.

Facebook is a great way of passing on information about your practice. Just start a patient group and invite your patients to join - then you can send newsletters, practice updates, practice promotions and so on using one single email to the group. Given that the best recommendations come through 'word of mouth', your own internet-savvy patients could just prove to be your greatest promoters.

Added extras

If you really wanted to go the extra mile and truly become a 21st Century practice, an intra-oral camera could be the next step for you. These are linked to your computer system and enable

¹ [BDTA Research: Attitudes Towards Social Networking – May 2010](#)



you to capture an image and save it to a patient's file for future comparison, or email to a specialist where necessary. That same image can be blown up on a screen to demonstrate more clearly to the patient what treatments might be needed and gain a better level of trust and understanding between patient and dentist.

So if it's time for an injection of technology, my advice to you would be to consult the experts and take that leap to bring your practice into the 21st Century.

-Ends-

1133 words

About the Author:

Michael Rudman is Dental Strategy Manager at Denplan. With more than 11 years experience providing marketing advice and solutions to small businesses, Michael has been focussing on Denplan products for 4 years, to not only develop its offering for practices, but expand its online communications strategy.