

Technology in Practice

Sarah Bradbury discusses how selecting the best in-practice technology can help attract and retain patients.

With finances under attack during these difficult times, patients are taking extra care over selecting services that represent good value for money. A well-run, attractive practice can win over new patients no longer prepared to spend their precious funds on somewhere they perceive as less deserving of their custom.

So, could it be that investing in technological improvements is the way to target and secure new patients? The following information includes just a few ideas on where to start to make your practice technologically irresistible.

Speculate to accumulate

With what seems to be an ever increasing level of fees, regulations, recommendations and standards increasing your overheads, the only option apparently available to balance the books is an increase in patient fees or efficiency savings. While the former is inevitable to some extent, and something most patients expect on an annual basis, the latter is also worth consideration. A little investment can reduce costs overall

So what investments can really make that vital difference both to your efficiency as a practice and your appeal to potential patients? Spending more at a time when your instincts tell you to batten down the hatches is a difficult concept, and for those practices that have yet to convert to a computerised system it might well feel like the last step you'd want to take.

Text

Texting is no longer the preserve of the young; many practices are making significant savings by the use of an SMS service to remind patients of their forthcoming appointment. Not only does it take little effort, it means patients turn up for their appointment at the allotted time, avoiding gaps in the appointment book and time and effort in rescheduling. This can be an invaluable service for many practices and also gives you access to these patients for any services you wish to promote. Patients also tend to prefer the text reminders as they are less intrusive than a phone call.

Web

I think it's fair to say that most dental practices with a website have outsourced the design and support of it to specialist providers. This can be an easy and efficient way to achieve an internet presence. But websites can often be more complicated than they need to be and come with expensive maintenance contracts that tie you in. I always recommend keeping it simple and user-friendly with easy navigation and appropriate imagery so that later modification can be carried out by the practice. Your main goal is to provide existing and prospective patients with as much helpful information about your practice as possible, so it really doesn't have to cost a fortune.

You need to ensure your 'brand' is visible to people searching on the web. The beauty of website marketing is that through Search Engine Optimisation and monitoring you can see exactly what investment has been made per visitor to the site and how many of these go on to take actions. These actions could include sending an online appointment enquiry, or you could even monitor success through simply asking new patients how they heard about you and noting how many came via the website.

Practice management systems

A computerised practice management system such as Kodak R4 or Software of Excellence (SOE) can instantly improve your record-keeping while also opening up marketing opportunities through good use of your patient database for targeted mailing. It also enables you to take advantage of the Patient Data Exchange (PDE) system which instantly updates patient information such as payment status, name and address changes and fee code status.

Visual aids

The intra-oral camera is no longer new, however some dentists are still immune to its charms whereas those who have taken the plunge never look back. As a visual aid there can have been no greater stride forward and those patients who might previously have been sceptical about a treatment recommendation are able to see and understand the issues at a glance. Being able to transfer the images into the patient's computerised record, email it to a specialist, or send it to your indemnity organisation as proof that treatment is necessary saves a huge amount of paperwork and of course protects patient and staff from needless x-rays.

One of the products proving to offer a surprisingly swift return on investment is the in-practice television screen. Suppliers such as Intentor can install one in your reception area with the minimum of disruption in less than 90 minutes, allowing you to promote dental-related services and products offered by your practice, provide educational advice and keep patients entertained while they await their appointment. In 2009, for example, tooth whitening sales were monitored across 150 practices in the UK for six months; they reported an average of 43% increase in sales. By targeting an already captive audience, this simple piece of technology can have a significant effect on revenue and its effectiveness is easy to monitor. For just over £750 a year over a four-year term, this particular gizmo would seem hard to resist.

Don't worry

There are a significant number of principals who have had no formal computer studies and, as a result have not implemented any computer systems or technology in their practices. These are the people who are likely to find life difficult in the current technological climate. However, I have always thought that if you don't try you won't succeed and it's impossible to realise the incredible benefits of practice technology without investing. The successful e-enabled dental practice team of the future will need to be computer savvy, enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Conversely, it's difficult to see any kind of successful future for dental practices that refuse to embrace computer technology and electronic communications.

Some payment plan providers can also help with the cost of these technological advancements by offering significant discounts to their members. Some can also offer a range of tailor-made training on topics such as Planning Your Practice Website and Marketing Matters to help you get started.

A brighter future for your practice may well entail making a judgement on whether to invest in the latest in-practice technology; the wisest choices will have both a positive impact on the patient experience and produce an identifiable return for your money...it's up to you to get started!

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Sarah has worked in service marketing for more than 16 years and in the dental industry for more than ten. She started at the BDA, recruiting students and young dentists becoming Marketing Manager at Dental Protection Ltd. Sarah has been with Denplan for over five years.