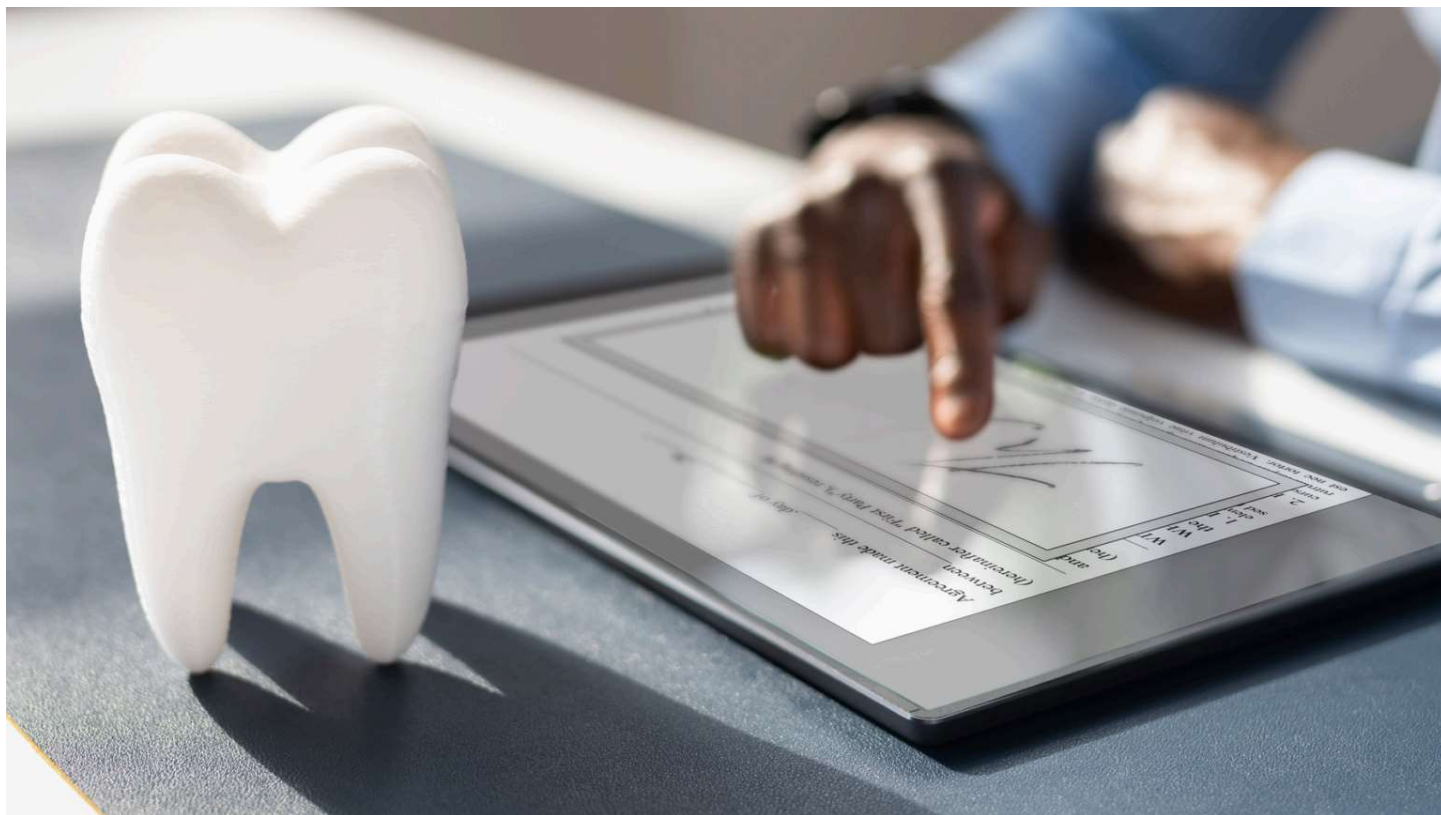


# Boost Your Practice's “Health” Through Digital Health Strategies

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In the *Canadian Digital Health Survey* released by Canada's largest market research firm, Leger, nearly 12,500 citizens were asked about their experience with and needs for health care information and services in the “digital space.” These respondents were surveyed on everything from the availability of health information to [virtual care services](#).

Among the [key findings](#):

- 80% want electronic access to their personal health information, be it reminders, test results, or consultation notes.
- Of those who have access to such personal e-health info, 89% felt that they were more informed about their health, 84% felt that they could “better manage their health,” and 41% said they were even able to avoid a trip to the emergency room as a result of having their personal health information at their fingertips.
- Nearly half (48%) of Canadians surveyed said that, in the past 12 months, they completed a virtual health visit with their doctor, clinic, or urgent care or obtained a prescription virtually.

- Canadians surveyed report high interest in virtual visits, with the specific “modes” of conducting these visits ranging from telephone and video to email and messaging.
- Virtual care continues to be preferred over in-person for some circumstances, such as prescriptions (renewal), “minor” health concerns, and follow-up care and guidance.
- Disparities in digital health literacy are persistent and hard to ignore, with nearly a quarter of respondents saying that they “don’t have the skills that they need” to properly evaluate online resources for their accuracy, quality, and credibility.
- As it relates to the literacy piece, respondents expressed concern and confusion over where to find helpful resources, how to use the Internet to get their queries answered, and how to distinguish between low- and high-quality online resources. They also expressed a lack of self-confidence in using these resources to make intelligent decisions about their care, providers, and treatments.

**As a dentist, there are numerous opportunities to leverage digital health to grow one’s practice, reputation, and trust.**

All of the above metrics can help to drive strategies on this front, as they underscore unmet needs and the personal preferences and demands of a diverse snapshot of healthcare consumers. Your practice’s digital “home” is likely its main website. Strategies and goal-setting to enhance one’s digital health status can be facilitated from your website.

We have primarily divided these efforts into three categories:

- **External communications and information** about your practice, team, and services that support favourable health literacy
- **Services that are delivered via virtual or digital platforms**
- **Internal management of accessible and secure health information** that is specific to the patient

## External Communications

*Forbes Advisor* [reports](#) that there are a staggering 1.13 billion websites. Yet, an even more staggering 82% of those websites are classified as “inactive,” meaning they are no longer actively maintained. Not surprisingly, those inactive sites are also not being visited.

A lack of “maintenance” on this front as a business, let alone a business in the dynamic healthcare space, signals a death knell for one’s operations. Think of it this way: You

wouldn't dare be lax about dusting or cleaning your lobby or waiting room. That would send a particularly bad message to anyone who entrusts their health and safety to you. So, as your digital "home," it is essential for your website not to collect dust either.

Notably, we must pay special attention to the content that feeds into providing credible information about your services, treatments, capabilities, and qualifications. The foundation for this form of communication is the articles on your home page and your services pages. Be sure to reflect on the following when evaluating these pages regularly:

- *Is the content **meaningful and helpful** to my patients?*
- *Is the content in any way **misleading or overstating** the results that can be expected from a specific procedure or technology?*
- *Is the content **engaging without being sensational**?*
- *Does the content **support and amplify your credibility and integrity**?*
- *Does the content **highlight current service offerings, team members, and technologies**?*

Action is required if you answered "no" to any of these questions and bullet points. It doesn't have to be a time-consuming process. Depending on the nature of the shortfalls in providing the quality information that your patients and community deserve, changes could be simple edits or updates to reflect current staff and their respective capabilities or to acknowledge and showcase an updated system, product, or therapy.

## Virtual- And Digital-Assisted Services

If you are not taking advantage of the variety of platforms and technologies available to you to actually deliver your services and expertise, what are you waiting for? These platforms are likely at your fingertips and are simply being underutilized. It is a smart move and could give you a competitive edge over others in your market to inventory where you stand in the world of "virtual" services.

And we are not simply talking about "teledentistry" via video conferencing tools here. While teledentistry and virtual meetings are certainly a part of this veritable gumbo of services in the digital space, they are not the sole ingredients – and may not even be the *key ingredient* to successful virtual care depending on your demographics and their personal preferences for engaging with your team.

Consider, revisit, and enhance the offerings referenced in the above report:

- Telephone consults
- Email consults
- Messaging/text/chat consults

Now, more than ever before, patients are comfortable with the technology. It is not as “impersonal” as you may think. As noted by the Leger researchers, virtual care in its varied forms continues to be preferred over in-person visits. With so many commitments competing for individuals’ attention, it is nice to have a convenient option that fits into one’s active and busy life – and that does not involve the logistical hassles of finding parking and paying for transportation to and from the office.

If you are hesitant or uncertain about what services could be extended via video, telephone, email, or messenger-style apps and chatbots, be inspired once again by the respondents surveyed above. The vast majority of those surveyed (84%) said they would opt for the virtual option for prescription-related services, such as renewals. In comparison, nearly a quarter of respondents (71%) noted they would choose the virtual route to aid in “minor health problems.” And 57% of those who responded would choose virtual if it was available instead of in-person follow-up visits.

All of these services are relevant to your “bread and butter” and your patient base. So, conducting consults and related services on prescription medications and products may be appropriate to help manage toothaches or to aid in fighting an active infection.

As to “minor health problems,” many questions or concerns may be appropriate for a video, phone, email, or text consult – from guidance on cleaning dentures to queries about a worn or damaged restoration. Of course, many of these topics will also necessitate an in-person visit. They may actually serve as the motivation for a new patient to select your practice as their family’s dental home, especially if they are impressed by your savvy and responsiveness with their virtual visit. You also convey that you are flexible, are not afraid to innovate, and stay on top of the “leading edge.”

Naturally, follow-ups are also well-suited to virtual care, especially when the follow-up does not necessarily require an in-person evaluation or check. You may already be doing some of this via phone anyway when one of your staff members calls a patient to see how they are feeling after an extraction or other procedure. Depending on what your patient tells you, you can always get them on the books for a face-to-face appointment as needed.

## Internal Management of Personal Health Info

As noted in the above survey findings, most (89%) of those who had access to e-information about their test results, consultation notes, and other records felt more informed about their health – with 84% and 41% saying they felt like they were better able to manage their health and were able to avoid a trip to the ER, respectively, due to their access to information regarding their personal health history. Yet, a comparative fraction of those respondents as a whole (36%) had access to this type of information. This latter finding suggests both a disconnect in the infrastructure and platforms to coordinate and communicate this information securely and a potential disconnect in messaging and communicating about these services and capabilities available to patients.

*What good is a service if it does not get utilized?* As you did with the aforementioned virtual care category, assess where you stand on collecting, storing, and retrieving personal health information. Consider how you can strengthen the availability of transparent, clear, and complete information that empowers the patient. An empowered patient is often a healthier, happier patient.

Also, consider the avenues you can provide your patients when they ask for specific information. Is there an online “hub” for their personal data, which may also interface with other convenient features such as online bill-pay? As these features come online and are improved upon, ensure they are promoted to your patients when they visit and, as appropriate, via newsletters, email blasts, social channels, and other networks and media.

**Dentistry is rife with opportunities to improve digital health literacy and the overall digital health landscape.**

Your practice can lead on this front and set the standard for best practices that ultimately benefit and contribute to more engaged and healthier populations.

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### **About the Author:**



Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of [Ekwa Marketing](#), has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dentists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you're looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call 855-598-3320 for a free strategy session with

Naren. You may also schedule a session at your convenience with the Senior Director of Marketing – Lila, by clicking <https://www.ekwa.com/msm/> or simply send a text to 313-777-8494.