

Is Teledentistry the Key to Surviving and Thriving in Uncertain Times?

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by Naren Arulrajah, Ekwa Marketing

For the past several years, the dental industry has enjoyed steady growth with no signs of slowing. Of course, all of that changed when COVID-19 struck. Offices across North America are closed or limited, and restrictions are expected to lift slowly. Moreover, many people will be nervous of in-person visits even after it is deemed safe.

Simply stated, teledentistry may be the key to keeping your practice afloat during unprecedented economic challenges. If it is new to you, here is what you need to know.

First steps – getting started in teledentistry

A few months ago, you might have said that teledentistry simply would not work for you. Even if you were considering it, you probably intended to take your time, do some research, and implement it gradually. As with so many areas of life, COVID-19 changed everything.

At the time of this writing, most provinces recommend or require virtual consultations as a prelude to emergency care. Suddenly you need teledentistry, and you need it ASAP. The question is, how? Here are the basic steps to get started quickly:

- Find out what is permitted. Check your provincial dentistry act and any guidelines set forth by applicable regulatory bodies. Be sure you also stay up to date on any coronavirus related recommendations or requirements.
- Review your malpractice insurance policy. If it does not include telemedicine related liability, you will want to add that immediately.
- Decide on your preferred method of communication. Asynchronous (store-and-forward) involves having patients take photos or videos and send them for you to review. Synchronous (real-time) is a live conversation, usually via some form of video chat.
- List your criteria – There are several teledentistry providers. Finding one is not hard. However, finding the right one in a hurry can be overwhelming. Make the process faster and more efficient by starting with a written list of criteria, including legal and

privacy requirements (including HIPAA compliance for USA dentists), available methods of communication, budget, and implementation timeframe.

- Choose a service platform – You can start with a Google search for “teledentistry software.” Take a quick look at the top results and determine which ones meet your criteria. Next, search for each company, and scan the results for reviews, complaints, etc. This should leave you with a very short list of feasible possibilities. Take a little more time reviewing each of their websites and determine which one best fits your needs. Make sure your chosen provider offers adequate customer support and documentation, so that your team can get up and running quickly.
- Meet with your team – Of course, if you are under stay-at-home orders, this meeting will be virtual. You may be working under exceedingly unusual circumstances, but you can still operate with maximum efficiency. To do that, you need everyone on the same page. You need to decide which staff members will be involved, and what your workflow will look like. If necessary, provide training materials and troubleshooting instructions to anyone who will work with the teledentistry

Long term benefits of teledentistry

Do not think of virtual consultations as a temporary measure. The world becomes more digitally oriented every day. Before COVID-19, teledentistry was a budding trend. After experiencing the convenience, many more patients will expect it in the future.

There are several advantages, which are unrelated to the pandemic. These include:

- Increased access to care – Odds are, most of your patients live near your practice and have transportation. However, even in the best of times visiting a dentist is not so easy for everyone. Low income, rural, and disadvantaged populations may not have a dentist nearby, and they often lack the ability to travel. Virtual consultations give these groups the opportunity to seek professional guidance.
- Overcoming anxiety – Many people have the resources to see a dentist, but they are not willing. For those with dental fear, just walking into your office can be terrifying. Virtual visits can take the fear out of the initial consultation. You can begin developing a doctor-patient relationship, earn the person’s trust, and explain details of necessary treatment. This can help ease the individual’s fears, making the next step – an actual physical appointment – easier.
- Improving emergency care – Your practice might have a dentist on call and available 24 hours a day. However, even in more normal times it is much more likely that you see emergencies only as possible during office hours. Many dentists will take phone calls after hours, instructing patients about how to cope with the situation in the interim.

Upgrading this phone call to a video consultation allows you to assess the situation more accurately, provide detailed advice, and determine how urgent the situation is.

- Lead acquisition – Sometimes a patient just needs a little advice. More often, a follow up treatment will be required. People are increasingly seeking convenient, high-tech solutions in daily life. Early adopters to teledentistry are well positioned to attract these patients.

Conclusion

In these unprecedented times, many businesses are faced with the choice of “go digital or go broke.” This conundrum is certainly more challenging for dentists than it is for businesses such as retail shops. However, those who rise to the challenge will see lasting benefits. In truth, the world has been rapidly moving toward the digital space for years, and COVID-19 concerns only accelerated the pace.

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.

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