

Ten Tips to Smooth the Reopening Process

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No one was ready for the sudden economic shutdown sparked by coronavirus. For weeks, dentists and patients alike have eagerly awaited the day when practices could resume non-emergency treatment. Now, that day has arrived in some locations, it is fast approaching in others, and we are faced with a new dilemma – no one is quite ready for reopening.

Across North America, dentists are confronted with unprecedented health risks, employee fears, supply shortages, social distancing requirements, and a daunting backlog of patients needing care. They are asking the same question, “How can we make this work?” There are no easy answers, but there are steps you can take to smooth the process. Here are a few of the most important.

- **Be flexible**

A COVID-19 vaccine may be just around the corner. It could become a seasonal epidemic. In truth, no one yet knows how long the crisis will last, or what precautions might be necessary in the coming weeks, months, and years. The best way to prepare for the unknown is to make flexibility and adaptability essential elements of your workflow.

- **Go paperless**

While you cannot avoid face-to-face interaction during clinical treatment, you can eliminate or minimize it in the front office. Patient forms, statements, aftercare instructions, appointment reminders, and even product brochures can be converted to digital format and transferred electronically.

- **Stay up to date**

Legal regulations and official recommendations are changing quickly as the situation evolves. Additionally, the availability of PPE, rate of COVID-19 infection in your immediate area, and other factors continue to fluctuate. Monitor the situation closely and be ready to adjust your plans as needed.

- **Ramp up your practice gradually**

Social distancing, extreme sanitation between patients, and other precautions are not compatible with your previously normal jam-packed schedule. Since all of this is new, you and your team probably do not have a good estimate of how many patients you can see per day. When first re-opening, error on the side of caution. See just a few people daily, with ample time between appointments. Your patient load can increase slowly and carefully as you see what is possible and efficient in this environment.

- **Listen to your team**

Your office staff, clinical assistants, and other employees are on the front lines in more ways than one. Not only are they at risk of exposure, but they are also the ones coping with glitches in new protocols and telehealth services. That means they are likely to have some good ideas about problems that need to be addressed and ways to streamline operations. Be sure to invite their feedback and consider their suggestions seriously.

- **Put safety first**

With ever-advancing scientific research, we are learning more each day about coronavirus transmission and best practices in prevention. Dentists in some regions have noted a concerning lack of official guidance, you may find yourself shouldering much of the burden of determining the best way to protect your team, patients, and self. Try to stay in the loop on the latest research and rely on your own sound judgement as a clinician. It can also help to connect with other dentists to exchange ideas, learn about what has worked well for others and what problems they have faced.

- **Keep communication open**

From direct phone calls or emails with patients to regular updates on social media, you want to keep the conversation going. Do not leave people wondering if or when you will be available, how safe your practice is, or what changes you've made. Update your public information frequently and emphasize your commitment to safety. Make sure patients are aware of pre-screening and social distancing policies at the time they schedule, so that they can be prepared.

- **Prioritize your caseload**

You have a backlog of appointment requests and a limited capacity to see patients. There is no perfect solution. However, it is helpful to establish criteria, such as urgency of care, how long the person has already waited, level of dissatisfaction, and risk level of the proposed procedure. Decide the importance and threshold for each point and use this as a guide when scheduling. For example, a cavity filling for an otherwise healthy patient who is not experiencing pain might be inadvertently postponed indefinitely. However, it will not be overlooked if you set a target timeframe to see patients and keep a list of those who have waited longer.

- **Be prepared for anything**

Plan for “what if” scenarios. What if an employee or patient tests positive? What if a scientific breakthrough ends the crisis, and you need to quickly resume a full workload? What if a spike in cases triggers new lockdowns, and you need to close your practice again?

(10) Embrace teledentistry

Virtual consultations are not just a stopgap measure during the pandemic. They are the future of healthcare, including dentistry. As you implement this technology, plan for long term use in treatment planning discussions, screening dental emergencies, follow-ups, and more.

Conclusion

The single best piece of advice for moving forward is this: Do not try to return to normal. Everything will be quite different in the short-term. Some aspects of dental practice and consumer behavior will never return to the way it was. You are not going back; you are going forward. Work towards establishing and refining a new, gradually evolving normal.

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.

