

Using technology to maintain a personal touch with dental patients

By Susan M. Hutson, with Vikas Vij

With the ever-growing competition in the field of dentistry, people have many more dentists from which to choose. The online information explosion ensures that every potential patient is fairly well informed. Despite technology, many patients find it very important whether or not their dentist is able to maintain a personal touch with them despite a busy schedule, and provide them with personalized care and attention.

The challenge of personalized care to patients becomes greater for large groups of health-care providers that offer services under a common umbrella, and not as single-provider practices. Such a consolidated approach to health care delivery is an effective way to manage costs, but from a patient's perspective it can be off-putting due to reduced familiarity and personalization. A large dental practice can be daunting for many patients, and this is an area that dentists need to address seriously.

Personal interactions

While Internet-based tools are well accepted by patients who use them to manage their dental care, they do not want to do it at the cost of sacrificing their time with the dentist. The global management consulting firm Accenture conducted a survey of 1,100 patients in the U.S. It revealed that 90% of patients prefer to use online tools for functions such as accessing medical records, scheduling appointments, and self managing their health care. However, about the same percentage of people said that they would like to preserve personal interaction with their doctor or dentist.

The survey results indicate that patients want technology to increase their choices and not limit them. Patients appreciate the convenience, efficiency, and lower costs achieved with the use of technology, but they do not want it at the cost of compromising their personal interactions with the dentist. Some experts believe that technology should be employed to augment the services provided by a dental professional, rather than becoming a substitute for personal care. Patients can supplement their visit to the dentist's office with various online activities. A lot depends on the dentist, who should have the necessary technological support of experts to ensure that dentist-patient engagement is enhanced.



Empowering patients

Dentists can not only achieve a competitive edge by using online technologies, they can deliver greater value and empowerment to patients at a lower cost. To be empowered, patients must be educated about the availability and use of such tools.

For instance, the dentist can advise patients about how to access their dental records online, and to review them prior to their appointment. This can help address the concerns of patients more effectively during the visits. Similarly, patients can look at their laboratory test results, and thus have a more informed discussion with the dentist during an office visit. Dentists need to view online technology and tools as something more substantive for patients than just a means to schedule an appointment.

Mobile technology has led to a host of new possibilities to transform the patient care experience. Personal health care and monitoring devices, in combination with online technologies, can improve engagement levels between dentist and patient. This leads to superior and more efficient care at a lower cost. Various technology companies are creating innovative medical applications that will enhance the value and effectiveness of personal health devices.

Benefits of online appointment scheduling

Competitive practitioners are keen to embrace Internet-based technologies that can improve the patient experience without adding to the patient's cost. One of the most important areas that can add to patient convenience is automated appointment scheduling, which is useful for both patient and dentist.

However, some dental practitioners still believe that online appointment scheduling compromises the necessary "personal touch." Therefore, they persist with the traditional system of scheduling, irrespective of the convenience and efficiency of the online system. However, recent studies suggest that more patients prefer to make appointments online.

Since the patient wields control with an online system, it becomes more personalized in that sense as compared to the traditional system. The online system allows patients to schedule an appointment 24/7, which is a key differentiator in favor of this system. Callers do not have to wait for their call to be answered. Also, online patient appointment systems empower hearing-impaired patients. Automated schedulers are also capable of generating patient reminders for the appointment, which helps reduce no-shows.

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Online marketing and personal touch

A dental practice with effective online systems will enjoy an enhanced overall image. Patient-dentist communication becomes more efficient, and everyday protocols become more streamlined. Having a professional website is the most basic standard of technology today. A website not only serves as a powerful gateway to attract new patients, but it can also reinforce the high-tech perception about the practice. New patients who are evaluating more than one dental practice are more likely to choose one with a powerful website.

With creative use of the latest SEO techniques, the website can receive a flow of targeted local patients. It becomes the first visual introduction to the practice, and it presents an image of the practice standards. Patients will form an opinion about the quality, branding, precision, experience, service, and reputation by viewing the website.

Digital images and videos of various dental procedures and before and after pictures can serve as highly effective promotional tools. An educational and interactive website experience is a virtual personal touch that dentists should provide to patients.

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