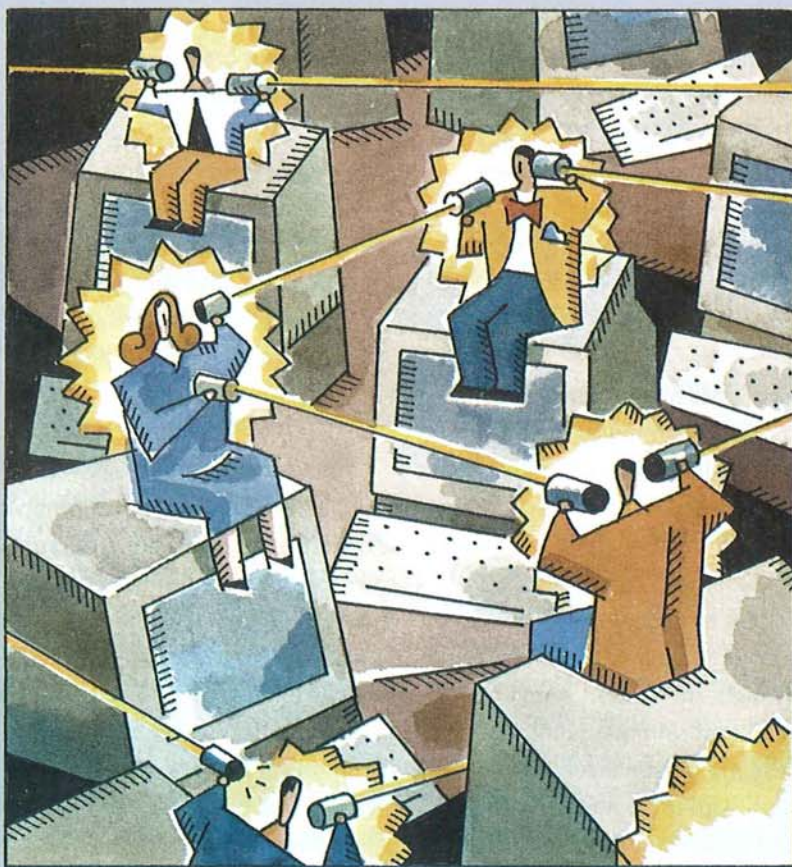


Free-Up Your Phones

USING THE
INTERNET TO
COMMUNICATE
WITH PATIENTS

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ROBIN FABER/RYMULE

Have you ever noticed how much time your staff spends on the telephone answering the same routine questions over and over? In response to a question such as, “When is my next appointment”, or “Has my insurance company paid their portion yet?” You’ll see them pull up the patient’s file on their computer screen and then relay the information to the patient on the phone.

Because my patients *choose* to register their email addresses for the service, they're invested....

Discussions with a software designer led me to create a solution to this problem that gave my patients access to the answers they need 24 hours a day, and freed my staff from these repetitive phone calls. We hired a team of programmers and built the online patient communications system called Ortho Sesame.™ This web based service abstracts data from the practice's existing management databases, and comprehensively manages office-patient communications through the Internet. It works with most of the orthodontic practice management databases, including Orthotrac Classic and Windows, Ortho II Viewpoint and One Touch, OPMS Windows, OAsys, IMS, New Horizons, Orthoware, and Orthosoft.

The system communicates with patients in a variety of ways:

- As patients walk into my office they see a computer screen inviting them to register their email address to receive reminders. They enter their email addresses themselves, including registering as many different addresses as they want for their family. Ortho Sesame™ issues the patient a unique password.
- Patients log onto my web site to view their appointments and detailed account information with the password that lets them into *only* their own family's information. They are not logging into my office network; the ledgers they see are presented on secure servers on the Internet. They cannot see data error corrections or any other internal notes made by my staff. They see only what they need to know.
- Patients who are behind on their account can click through to a form where they can charge their outstanding balance to a credit card.
- New patients fill out initial information forms on my website, and existing patients can request appointments.
- Ortho Sesame™ sends email reminders to patients who are scheduled to see me in two days. Every night the system sends out emails confirming appointments. These are personalized messages with the patient's name and appointment time that come "From" my email address, but in reality neither my staff nor I send any emails.
- The system automatically sends emails to patients on my recall list, reminding them to make an appointment.
- On their birthdays, kids in my practice receive an electronic birthday card from me that has the right number of candles on the birthday cake.
- New patients see customized OrthoMation case presentation movies at home, the evening after their exam, by logging on to my website. This helps my conversion rates and results in generally happier patients because they understand and are more involved in their treatment.
- My Invisalign® patients see their own case animation on my website. It is much easier to communicate about case progress when the patient has seen his/her own case, and patients respond positively to this service.

The Ortho Sesame™ software is installed on its own PC on my network. It operates self-sufficiently, automatically copying data from my practice management database with no additional work for my office staff. Each night Ortho Sesame™ sends this data to a secure web server for Internet communications with patients. The fact that this data is stored outside my office, like an extra backup, gives me peace of mind since the most essential



service, they're invested in utilizing it. We used to have four or five no-shows a day on average. Since installing Ortho Sesame™ there has been a steady decline in no-shows; on many days there are none. Since each no-show is estimated to cost around \$150, the savings realized through having scheduled patients come to their appointments add up quickly to tens of thousands of dollars.

On average, my patients log onto my site to check their appointment and account information over two hundred and fifty times per month. That's about seventeen calls a day my staff doesn't have to answer. Many of these calls used to involve questions about insurance or payment history that would have required my financial coordinator to print out and fax ledgers. Patients see at a glance what takes much longer

and activities. We use the custom mail features to send out periodic news and announcements via email.

Patients appreciate the convenience our interactive web site gives them. Many have told me that they are paying bills or doing financial planning at odd hours of the day or night and it helped them out to be able to get their questions answered online. New patients learn of my practice from current patients talking about our online services. The system's popularity with patients is excellent viral marketing.

In order to get full benefit from the service both the doctor and the office staff must believe in the system and learn how to use it. For those who are not familiar with the Internet this can be a 'learning curve', and as with any new software it takes time and some



Sesame.™ In my case, I figure that one less no-show, or ten fewer routine phone calls pays for our office DSL line, and two less no shows pay for Ortho Sesame™ for a month.

In summary, more and more orthodontists are using the Internet in their offices to obtain information and

The Internet holds tremendous potential to facilitate orthodontic office communication.

to explain in a phone call. Because my patients get their answers online, I estimate we're saving about several hundred hours a year just in front office staff time.

Since I now have at my fingertips powerful custom email tools for reaching hundreds of my patients at once, or specific segments of my patient list, I communicate more frequently with my patients than I did before. My clinical staff uses our Ortho Sesame™ email address database to send emails to patients when they need extra encouragement—or to compliment

effort. Since the core functions of Ortho Sesame™ work without the staff doing anything, its effect on office efficiency is more or less automatic. This means that unless someone has a real interest in using the Internet many of the system's best features may not get used.

Offices that use modems to dial up the Internet have to make sure that the connection is available each evening. I have DSL in my office and this eliminates the modem problem, as well as facilitating Internet use in general. The cost of Internet access

to communicate via email. The Internet based patient communication system we developed produces positive results in staff efficiency, patient satisfaction, and decreased no-shows. The Internet holds tremendous potential to facilitate orthodontic office communication. What we've done is only the beginning, and I'm excited to see what the future holds. ■

Brian Povolny received an MSD in Orthodontics in 1989 and a PhD in Oral Biology in 1991 both from the University of Washington. He received an Individual Dentist Scientist Award from the National Institutes of