WAYS TO USE ONLINE PATIENT COMMUNICATION TOOLS TO IMPROVE PRACTICE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

A Sesame Guide to Practice Success
To effectively manage a dental practice for profitability it is imperative that you retain relationships with existing patients, reduce no shows, keep schedules full, collect treatment fees, and attract new patients.

In order to achieve these operational objectives your practice has likely developed a comprehensive, and perhaps complicated, set of systems to manage your daily activities. This most likely includes systems that address scheduling, appointment reminders and confirmations, education, retention, collections, patient feedback and more. As a busy dental practice with many patients to see each day, it can be easy to focus on patient flow and daily operations and allow the consistent implementation of these important systems to slide. This may have a significant negative impact on your productivity and profitability.

Sesame Guides to Practice Success

As a leader in education and research in the dental industry, Sesame Communications has created the Guides to Practice Success (GPS), a series of educational resources with bite-sized, actionable tips you can start using to grow your practice today!

Topics Include:

- Social Media Marketing
- Search Engine Optimization
- Website Design
- Patient Engagement
- And Many More
Implementing operational systems requires a considerable time investment by your team and can be costly. Traditionally dental professionals have maintained that personal communication is the key to delivering a great experience for patients. The need for personal contact from a patient’s perspective has been rendered less important with the advent of digital communications, as patients increasingly state they prefer the convenience of online, on-demand information. Interestingly, 93% of patients find it more convenient to find answers online compared to calling the office.¹ Patients have embraced the digital age, and practices must adjust to their preferences and be where their patients are—online.

Beyond simply being preferred by patients, these automated and online communications are often far more efficient for your practice than traditional means, and can save time for your team and money for your practice. In this guide, we’ll explore several ways you can effectively utilize online tools to help run your practice more efficiently and improve your bottom line.
Appointment no show rates are sky high for many dental practices, and a huge contributor to loss of revenue and profitability for the practice, especially in the last few years of economic challenge. How much time and effort is spent in your practice making routine appointment confirmation calls, manually sending emails, or mailing postcards? Not only are these methods time consuming, they are also inefficient and often are not implemented correctly or consistently.

By automating the appointment confirmation process through online communication tools, you can significantly cut down on the administrative work required to complete this routine task, and drastically reduce no show rates. In fact, 76% of dentists stated that automated reminders reduced administrative teamwork.² This also reduces practice stress as the team knows confirmations will be executed in a timely, complete and consistent manner.
It is important that you select an online system that allows you to offer reminders in a variety of formats, including email, text, and automated voice. Furthermore, implementing a system that allows the patient to choose how they wish to receive reminders ensures your automated reminders are always sent at the perfect time and in the perfect format. A significant 98% of dentists surveyed stated that letting patients choose their preferred method of communications supports their commitment to individualized treatment. Plus, by using an automated system to manage your reminders, you’re not tying up office phone lines to make routine calls, and can keep your team focused on providing best of class patient care.

87.6% of surveyed dental professionals agreed that automated patient reminders gives them the peace of mind to know all patients are consistently contacted prior to their appointment.
Collection Calls

Calling patients about past due payments is both time consuming and can be awkward for you and the patient. As a practice that strives every day to build a strong, positive relationship with each patient, a call about a past-due payment can put stress on this relationship, and may not always be effective in soliciting payment quickly.

As with appointment reminders, automating this process represents not only a time savings, but also an efficiency enhancer. A past due financial reminder email discretely nudges the patient and is much less confrontational or embarrassing than a collections letter or a personal phone call. More significantly this is less expensive and has been shown to be a much more effective collection system.

In fact, research shows that within 24 hours of sending an automated past due balance email reminder, 32% of patients make an online payment. Within 48 hours, a significant 50% will make an online payment. Sending an automated reminder about a past due payment is more effective, reduces accounts receivable, and promotes a positive practice-patient relationship. Not only that, 66% of members surveyed stated that on average, patients pay online faster than those who pay via check. 33% say they pay a week faster or more.
Payment Processing

In addition to simply reminding patients of their past due payments, automating the process of payment collection and processing with online tools renders the process significantly more efficient.

Taking time out of your day to process payments in person or over the phone can be drastically reduced by offering the ability for patients to directly pay their bills online.

The convenience of being able to pay online not only means a quicker turnaround for payments, but the ability to collect payment outside of office hours. Sesame Members receive over 46% of their payments outside of normal business hours—meaning the money is in their account and waiting for them by the following morning.
Health History Forms

For new patients entering your practice, the many forms and documents they need to read and complete can take a major time commitment, and can be a confusing process. Avoid extra paperwork by allowing patients to complete these forms online, before their appointment, and from the convenience of their own home.

By providing online health history forms, you allow your patients to complete the information more accurately, and helps make their initial visit to be more comfortable and less stressful. Reviewing patient health history information ahead of time also enables you to focus more completely on your patient during their visit. It’s also more efficient—an online health history form keeps the data digital, where it can then be used by your practice management system, and patient communication and reminder systems. It’s a high tech timesaver that is fast becoming an expectation from patients.
Patient Feedback

Practices can be a busy and hectic environment, and many practices often fail to ask their most valued patients for feedback and guidance on how to better serve them. Whether you’re asking it in the office or contacting patients afterwards, feedback from patients is a huge part of understanding where your practice does great, and identifying opportunities for improvement. Timely feedback is critical for keeping tabs on your patients’ level of satisfaction and promptly taking corrective action as needed.

This important objective can be accomplished through automated post-appointment feedback surveys that can easily be filled out online after every appointment while the patient’s visit is still fresh in their mind. In addition, a comprehensive digital patient portal should include a survey form that any visitor may complete to provide feedback to the practice.

By automating the feedback process with post-appointment survey emails, you ensure a steady stream of constructive feedback from patients without spending time trying to administer the surveys yourself. You can then use this valuable information to continually improve the experience of patients in your practice and keep them returning.

More importantly, you can leverage great reviews and feedback provided by your patients to enhance your online presence, social media channels and SEO.
Newsletters and Greetings

Patients want to know what’s new in your practice, and it’s up to you to keep them up to date. The average dentist has hundreds, even thousands of active patients and a significant number more inactive patients. This magnitude of patient base makes it difficult to have a personal connection with each one of them on a regular basis. By reaching them electronically through email newsletters, holiday greetings and special event notifications, you can keep in touch with patients and facilitate their engagement in your practice on an ongoing basis.

In addition to formulating informative educational newsletters, choose a patient communication tool that allows you to use email to automatically manage your holiday and birthday greetings. If you’re mailing postcards for these occasions, you can save both time and money by using an automated system. No need to worry about remembering a patient’s birthday—these reminders will go out automatically. They’re another great way to keep your practice visible and top of mind for patients.

Lastly, you can use these email communications to draw patients back into active treatment through promotional events and special offers.
Daily Schedule

One of the most critical management tools you use during your day is the daily schedule. It not only informs the entire team of their schedule, but it is the single most critical element determining your practice’s production and ultimate profitability. In a fast-paced practice environment, it is imperative to have a functional schedule that provides you and your team with critical patient profile information so you can best and most efficiently serve them.

A digital solution can help solve this by bringing your daily schedule and your practice management software together. Use a sophisticated patient portal schedule management tool that lets you view your daily schedule at a glance from any computer, access all your patient data, control reminder settings, and more. Ensure the system you choose integrates with your dental practice management software, so you’re always working off of the latest information for new and existing patients.
Online patient referrals

Patient referrals are, for many practices, one of the most important new patient drivers. In a recent Sesame survey, an astounding 41.4% of patient referrals from surveyed practices came from friends and family members. The continued success of your practice requires happy patients who refer their friends and family. While the first step is to encourage patients to tell their friends and family, one of the best ways to drive more referrals is to make the process easier and more consistent for your patients through their online portal.

Make the hand off simple for your patient and welcoming for their referral by allowing your patients to conveniently input this information online. With the click of a button, patients can easily access an email template to “Refer a Friend.” Your practice details are then sent directly to their referral, allowing you to make a positive first connection with the prospective patient. More importantly, a state-of-the-art system will keep track of patient referrals so you always can personally thank patients when they return to your practice.
Final Thoughts:

The benefits of implementing an online automated patient communications system includes improved practice efficiency, effectiveness, quality of patient experience, and ultimately practice production, collections and profitability. Automation delivers more consistent patient compliance, and a more predictable schedule and production for the practice. And patients prefer it. 74% of patients said having anytime online access to information makes them more likely to stay with their doctor.9

Use this guide as a starting point to identifying where greater efficiency and effectiveness can be created in your practice. Then, when it's time to select a provider for these patient portal and automated services, it is important to focus on a provider that is focused exclusively on the dental market, and understands the unique challenges and opportunities your practice faces daily.

References

4. See reference 3
7. TransFirst, 2010
8. See reference 7
9. See reference 5