

READY TO GO, UNSURE WHERE TO START

Prioritizing technology enhancements in your practice.

by MARY LYNN WHEATON, PRIDE INSTITUTE CONSULTANT

With so much technology out there, which practice systems get first dibs? I recommend approaching your technology integration efforts as a puzzle, with each system acting as a piece that needs to fit into an overall strategy so that, when the puzzle is complete—and individual products selected—it reflects the right picture for your practice.

The systems to evaluate are:

- Scheduling and financial
- Diagnostic and clinical
- Marketing and communication

Under each category you'll find several bullet points to serve as a preliminary checklist for emerging technologies to enhance your practice. Discussing these systems with your team members will alert them to new possibilities and provide an evaluation process to determine what pieces come first in putting your puzzle together.

Scheduling and financial

More than 90% of dental practices use scheduling software. Thank heavens appointment coordinators have thrown out

the "book" and are no longer using duplicate systems. Today, there are color-coded appointment blocks, procedure codes and times, the ability to search for appointment times, automated recall systems, etc. For the most part, teams also are using the software for insurance information and processing to great success. Beyond that, what are the new innovations you should look at to enhance these important systems?

- Ability to schedule and/or see appointments online via your website
- Confirmation of appointments via automated phone message, text or e-mail
- Ability to check families' financial accounts and insurance updates
- Ability to make payments online
- Generation of reports using software to provide analysis of practice statistics

Diagnostic and clinical

Many practices are in the chasm between digital and paper charts. Oftentimes, information from charting and treatment plans goes into the digital record while other valuable information can't seem to find a place anywhere but in paper charts. This is often the result of lack of training and knowledge of the customization potential of the software.

First, find the right software. Then, spend the time in training to fully use and customize it to your needs.

Beyond practice management software there is, of course, a vast arena of clinical and diagnostic technology evident to anyone who reads journals or attends dental meetings. Knowing this, here are key categories to consider and discuss in your updating/upgrading quest.

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- Digital records (aka: paperless chart)
- Magnification (for dentists and dental hygienists)
- Digital radiographs
- Intraoral camera
- CAD/CAM for fabrication of fixed prosthetics
- Voice activated periodontal charting
- Caries detection enhancement and caries risk assessment
- Oral cancer screening technology
- Joint vibration analysis and occlusal analysis aids

Marketing and communication

The area changing most rapidly in our lives and in our dental practices is how we communicate with each other. Seemingly gone are the days of “let your fingers do the walking” and snail mail flyers. Now, it is absolutely necessary for patients to be able to find and communicate with us online.

You must first establish your own brand identity and your target market so your efforts are not “spray and pray.” Rather, seek a rich new flow of patients who are already connected with you, even prior to a new patient experience.

Once they are in your practice, how do you continue to effectively communicate with a combination of high tech and high touch? You’ve taken those digital radiographs and have great pictures to show them, but are you able to communicate that information in an environment that is conducive to the delivery?

What should be on your list?

- Website supported by Search Engine Optimization: SEO is a science unto itself and is constantly changing, requiring professional assistance on a regular basis
- Social media links such as Facebook and Twitter
- Ability to connect with patients via e-blasts, e-newsletters, virtual birthday cards and holiday cards

- Operatories equipped with two computer screens: One for clinical data and the other for patient education
- Patient education software
- Use of iPads or computer check-in stations for patient registration

Where do you start?

Every one of these bullet points represents a technology that requires an investment of time, energy and money. Each should be broken down into component parts of a systems analysis that includes:

Philosophy—Why you want it.

Mechanics—How to obtain it (including cost analysis, physical facility needs, etc.).

Training—What training and verbal skills are needed.

Support—Who on the team will need to be involved.

Follow-up—How and when to evaluate and determine efficacy.

These major systems represent puzzle pieces that are, of course, composed of

many smaller pieces. After thorough analysis, they will enable you to start to put your practice technology puzzle together. Just as a jigsaw puzzle brings friends and family together, this activity brings a team together, ensuring that everyone is contributing to the overall picture of your practice. ●

Mary Lynn Wheaton, RDH, MA, has 25 years of experience in all aspects of dental practice management and serves as consultant team leader at Pride Institute. She specializes in practice development, team building, group interaction and customer service and is known for providing interactive in-office training and dynamic workshops. To ask Mary Lynn about technology in your practice or to request a complimentary Technology Integration Checklist, go to prideinstitute.com/subpages/ask/ask.asp or call Pride Institute at 800-925-2600.