Dental Technology

FRONT AND CENTER

How COVID-19 Has Changed the Role of Practice Management Software.

CURVE DENTAL®

E·mer·gen·cy /əˈmərjənsē/

noun — A serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation requiring immediate action.

Emergencies often catch us off guard as they can take on many different forms — flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, theft — and in 2020, a global pandemic. While an emergency is typically unforeseen, there are ways to prepare yourself and your dental practice for the worst, and prevent emergencies from becoming disasters.

The backbone of the modern dental practice is technology. Investing in the best solutions during normal times can pay significant dividends on a daily basis, but especially when an emergency strikes. The ideal infrastructure and technology should be flexible enough to support you as you pivot and react to unexpected circumstances. It must be dependably accessible from anywhere, dynamic, flexible, customizable, and well-supported.

In the days before COVID-19, dentists typically invested in tools and services that directly impacted the patient experience. Practice management software was often an afterthought, viewed as a necessary expense.

In many cases, dentists bought their software from the same company that provided them with dental supplies, believing that purchasing from a single source is simply easier, despite the fact that the supplier is not a master software house. Even if the software was dated, it did an adequate job. Technology to run the practice took a back seat to other priorities.

COVID-19 changed everything, particularly when mandatory shutdowns prevented dentists who use traditional server-based software from accessing patient data remotely. Suddenly, technology took center stage as practices on cloud-based platforms had a demonstrable advantage in their ability to manage appointments, billing, emergencies, and more while the staff was safely away from the office.

Read on to see how technology has evolved and how companies that focus solely on cloud-based practice management software deliver features and support that best meet the new ways practitioners will run their practices in "The New Normal."

Practice Management Software Takes Center Stage

Before COVID-19, practice management software technology took a back seat to investments in tools and methods that directly impacted the patient experience. Because dentistry is constantly evolving, dentists are continually presented with opportunities to invest in technology that enhance patient treatment and grow practice profitability.

COVID-19 Shifted Technology Priorities

Before COVID-19, dental professionals typically viewed technology through a clinical lens. They invested in innovations like ultrasound, 3D printing, onsite fabrication, and more.

As the country began to experience the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, priorities quickly shifted.

While all the aforementioned technical advances in dentistry enhance patient care, an immediate need for capabilities such as remote access and low-touch or no-touch processes became essential for all dentists. Practice management software took center stage.

Low-Touch/No-Touch Features That Make Visits Safer

Easily access patient data remotely

Offer a Patient Portal with online forms, billing statements and more

Have the same software experience whether in the office or remote

Enable remote staffing with user-friendly software

COVID-19 Exposes the Limitations of Server-Based Software

Approximately 85% of dentists currently use practice management software that is hosted on-site at their practice, using computer servers they must purchase and maintain. The software has the look and feel of a traditional Windows user interface ripe with many colorful screens filled with drop down menus and functional buttons to click.

This has been acceptable, because, after all, only the dentists and staff deal with the system itself. But COVID-19 changed everything when mandatory shutdowns prevented practices from accessing patient data remotely. Previously, acceptable yet clunky systems became a liability when dentists found rescheduling appointments, managing accounting, and handling emergencies were extremely difficult away from the office. **By comparison, practices using cloud-based systems worked remotely exactly the same as if they were in the office.**

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COVID-19

Dentistry's Adoption of the Cloud Has Been Slower Than Other Healthcare Verticals

Pre-COVID-19, approximately 15% of dental practices were using practice management software that is in the cloud. This contrasts with 80-90% of all other healthcare verticals that have transitioned to modern cloud-based platforms over the last 20 years. Starting with the electronic health record (EHR) revolution which began in 2004, the medical community has been incentivized to move to the digital world. The incentives were established to facilitate easy sharing of patient data in a secure fashion and to lower health care costs and improve patient outcomes.

While dentistry has not followed as quickly, the COVID-19 emergency has proven to be the catalyst for increased adoption of the cloud. The benefits extend far beyond data accessibility, also allowing flexibility to easily address areas that are critical to following new safety protocols and patients' low-touch/no-touch expectations.

Emergencies

Force Practices to Re-Think Their Businesses

The demands created by COVID-19 have challenged dentists to re-think how they run their business. Clearly a dentist typically cannot practice their craft without being in the physical presence of a patient. However, with the right practice management software, there are front and back office tasks that can be completed away from the office.

As the [American Dental Association (ADA) released advice regarding COVID-19 protocols](), it became obvious that dentists on server-based practice management software would be limited in their ability to respond to patients' needs during the quarantine period. When patients contacted practices requiring emergency care, many dentists had to operate without the benefit of their patient records or images. This slowed response times, sometimes forcing dentists to travel to their offices to view records before they could respond.

As states began to re-open, practices received new regulations from their governors' offices to address staff and patient safety. Amid the new requirements for Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), operatory cleaning and social distancing, practices needed to establish low-touch/no-touch protocols. Server-based practice management software was not equipped to handle these new protocols, so practices running on these legacy systems were often handicapped when attempting to comply with the new requirements.

Cloud-Based Software Takes Center Stage

On average, dentists change software every 9-10 years, which makes moving software platforms an unfamiliar territory, especially if they have no experience with a cloud-based platform. According to industry surveys, dentists give these top 3 reasons for not changing systems:

1 Costs associated with a change and the lack of perceived value

2 The expected pain of data conversion, staff training and leaving the known for the unknown

3 Not believing that the gain is worth the pain

However, COVID-19 changed the mindset of many dental professionals who used time during the mandatory shutdown to take a closer look at cloud-based software. They found what other healthcare verticals have known for some time. **Cloud-based software has enabled them to be flexible, accessible, and resilient during a worldwide pandemic.**

Benefits of the Curve Cloud

Low-touch features including appointment reminders available on the patient's device of choice, the ability to complete forms from home, contactless checkout, and more

Software access **from anywhere** with an internet connection and browser

Cybersecurity protection with data hosted in an Amazon top-tier data center

Access to data **100% of the time**, anytime it is needed

No software download or installation needed

A 100% cloud-based application, which means **no on-site servers** to buy or manage

Questions You Should Be Asking Cloud-Based Software Providers

In a 2018 report, "Cloud Computing: Implications and Recommendations for Dental Practice," the ADA recommended asking these questions when selecting a cloud provider:

1 Can the vendor or Cloud Service Provider (CSP) demonstrate real-world successful implementations in practices similar to mine?

Request examples from practices that are similar in size to yours or share the same specialty (e.g. pediatric, cosmetic, etc.).

2 Does the CSP have references, especially to evaluate service performance?

Every CSP should have a robust list of references. Be sure to speak with practices that have been using the software for at least a year.

3 How does the CSP accomplish conversion of existing systems and clinical business data?

Ask them for the number of conversions and which practice management software they've converted to their system. Have them explain their implementation process including data and image conversion. The best results start with a seamless process and close collaboration between the practice and CSP.

4 Are external independent audits of the solution routinely conducted and available to validate security and business processes?

Ask how often audits are completed and how they handle data backup. The CSP should be able to clearly explain their process for keeping your data safe.

5 If I choose to leave the solution, how do I get the data and effect a transfer to another vendor?

If the CSP doesn't give you complete access to your data, they could potentially hold your data hostage. Be sure that you can easily transfer your data should you choose to change providers in the future.

We've added several more questions that should be considered in the evaluation process:

1. Is the software ISO certified?

ISO certification ensures that a management system, manufacturing process, service, or documentation procedure has all the requirements for standardization and quality assurance.

2. Is it true Software as a Service (SaaS)?

What distinguishes top SaaS companies from the pack is their commitment to service. If a software company does not deliver world-class service, automatic product updates without disruption to your workflow, data security, and backups and effective training, then it is not true SaaS.

3. Is the CSP focused 100% on developing software or are they distracted by selling things like dental products?

In many cases, providers that offer software in addition to dental products are more focused on their most profitable offerings—typically products. They usually are not focused on the software which can limit functionality and software development.

4. Do they offer more than one software product?

If the CSP offers multiple software products, they are limited to how much they can invest in each. This often means minimal product development and improvements.

5. How much is the company investing in the software?

The amount dedicated to software development will tell you how much the CSP is committed to their product. A development-driven CSP will keep better pace with the ever-changing dental industry.

Conclusion

Dentists are researching and selecting modern cloud-based practice management software for their practices like never before. According to a Summer 2020 market survey, almost 75% of dentists who are using server-based software today are considering a move to the cloud in the next 2 years.

COVID-19 made it more imperative than ever to consider changing from server-based software to the cloud.

Choosing correctly is critical to the next phase of your practice. Select a partner that is established, continually innovates, and invests in a single platform. A partner that makes customer care a priority, always there to answer your call when you need them. A company that can evolve with the industry to ensure that your software helps your practice thrive in the new normal. A company that was built to help you find the way forward.

CURVE DENTAL®

A new way. A better way.

To schedule a demo, visit curvedental.com or call 888-910-4376