

Report

THE  
CHANGING ROLE  
OF THE  
DENTAL OFFICE  
MANAGER

2012 ANNUAL REPORT

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report analyzes the results of the online survey titled “The Changing Role of the Dental Office Manager.” The survey and report was sponsored by the American Association of Dental Office Managers and Futuredontics. The report includes the answers from all dental office managers who took the survey between July 7, 2012 and August 10, 2012. A total of 789 completed responses were received to the survey during this time.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This nationwide survey covered a range of dental practice responsibilities, including new patient scheduling, continuing education, patient communications, billing, insurance claims processing and practice marketing, all from the perspective of the dental office manager. As expected, office managers are now being asked to perform more duties than ever. They're still held accountable for more traditional business activities, while also adding in new marketing and technology-driven functions. When asked about the importance of twelve major business activities, almost without exception, office managers viewed all as “very important” to the health of the practice. Similarly, they indicated that time spent on each of these activities has either remained the same, or increased over the past two years. Time spent did not decrease for any of the twelve activities.

Another notable shift is in the importance of online activities, with technology, online reviews and online marketing being identified as more important than in previous years, and social media being a top area where time has increased. Moreover, office managers consistently reported a high level of anxiety about not spending enough time on new online and social media activities. They feel they are not able to keep up with new media that are growing much faster than resources within the practice.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Social media is the #1 ranked business activity where time spent has increased.
- 59.2% of practices spend less than one hour per day on practice marketing.
- 92% of office managers use, or plan to use, patient communication software.
- 20% of respondents do not engage in dormant patient reactivation.
- The top four CE topics that are more important than they were two years ago:
  - Online Marketing
  - Handling Online Reviews
  - Technology for Marketing
  - Marketing
- Only 22.4% of practices see new patients within 48 hours of the initial phone call.
- 19.4% of practices are now accepting state aid patients.
- 35% of practices have not claimed their business listing on Google Places, and do not plan to claim it in the future.
- Respondents rank practice marketing as one of the top business activities where not enough time is being spent.

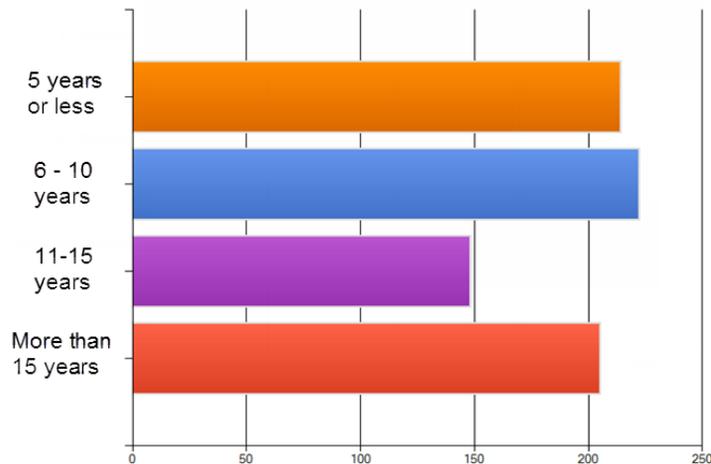
## DEMOGRAPHICS

Respondents to the survey have great loyalty to the dental industry. 56.4% have worked in the industry for 15 years or more. They are primarily female (93.4%) and represent all age groups:

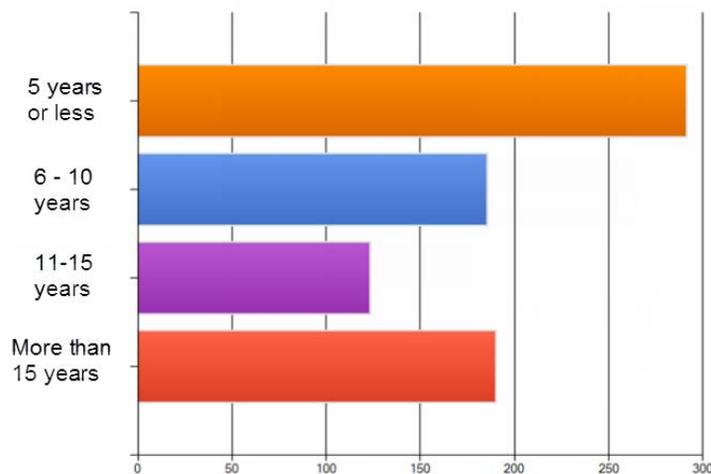
<b>Under 35</b>	17.6%
<b>35 - 44</b>	27.4%
<b>45 - 54</b>	31.2%
<b>55 or older</b>	23.8%

Generally our respondents also cover a broad spectrum of experience, both in years worked as a dental office manager and time at their current practice.

How long have you worked as an office manager?



How long have you worked at this practice?

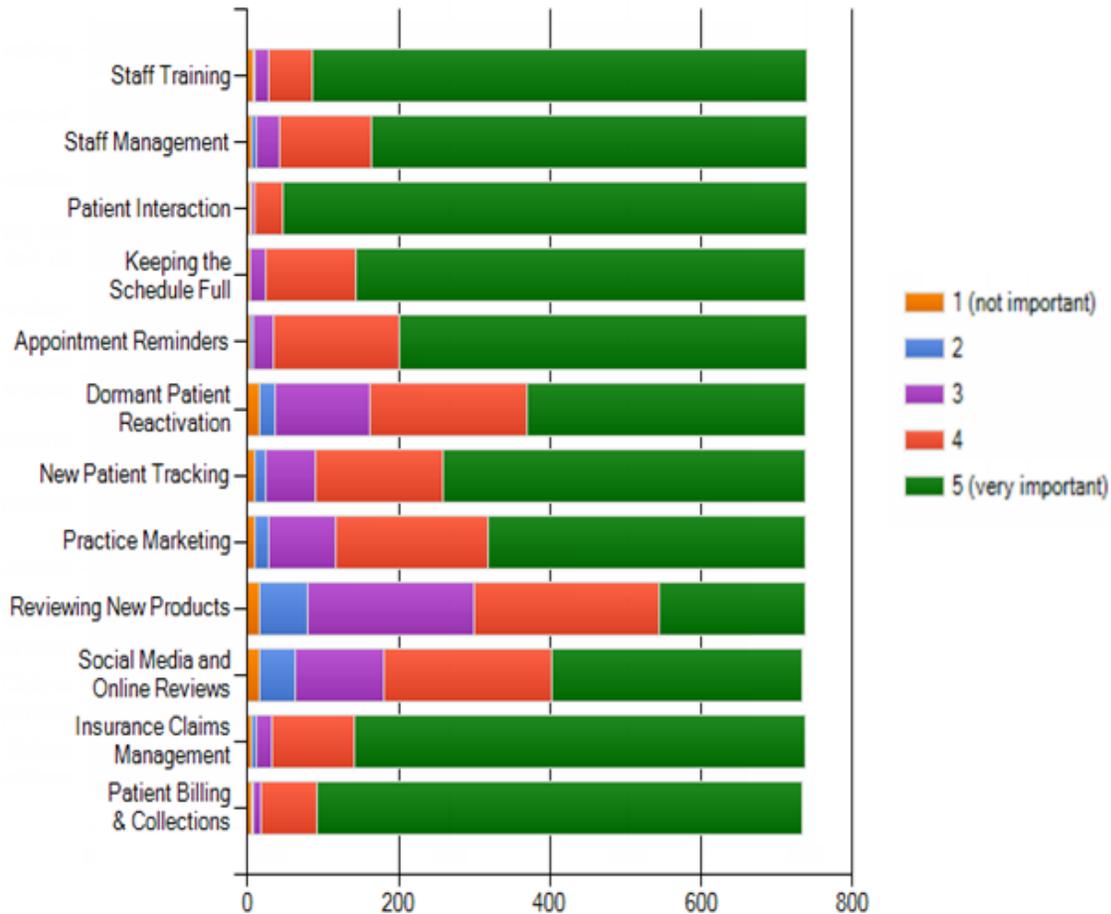


(Interesting to note is that despite this diversity of age and experience, office managers showed a remarkable uniformity in their survey responses. When segmenting data based on various demographic factors, the results did not differ significantly from the overall findings).

## PRACTICE BUSINESS ACTIVITIES

We asked office managers how important the following activities are to their practice. With the exception of “reviewing new products,” all activities were ranked “very important.” Where we saw the most ambivalence was in the areas of Dormant Patient Reactivation, Practice Marketing and Social Media/Online Reviews.

How important do you believe the following activities are to your dental practice on a scale of 1 - 5?

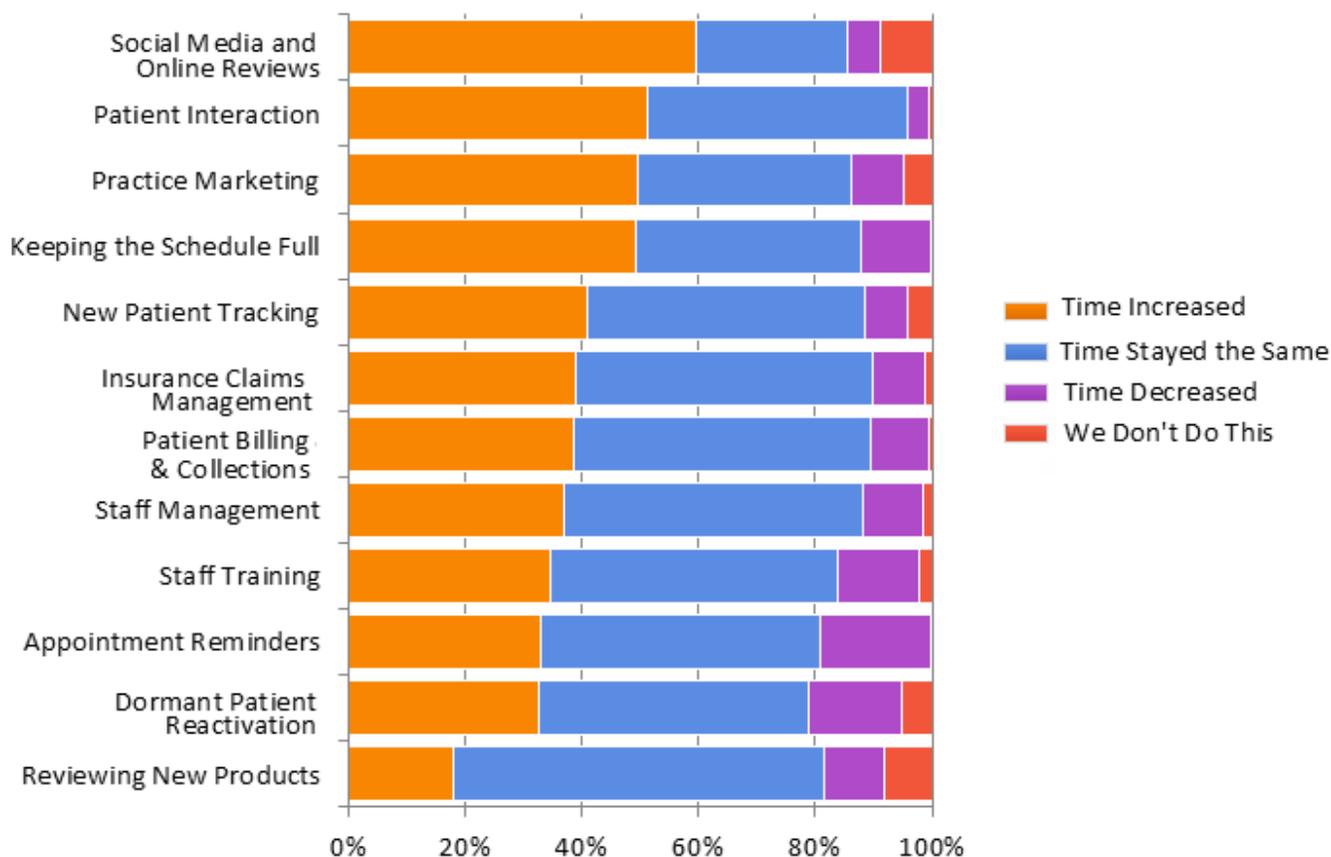


**KEY FINDINGS:** The top three business activities office managers rate as very important are “Patient Interaction,” “Staff Training” and “Patient Billing,” respectively. “Reviewing New Products” was evaluated to have the lowest importance overall.

We also asked whether the time office managers are spending on these same practice activities has increased, decreased or stayed the same compared with two years ago (or whether these activities are not currently done in their office). For most categories, respondents were split between reporting their time has increased, or stayed the same – and no category showed a consistent decrease in time spent.

The one category with a clear increase in time was “Social Media and Online Reviews.” Interestingly, this same area also had the highest number of office managers respond “we don’t do this.”

Compared to two years ago, has the amount of time spent on the following activities increased, decreased or stayed the same?



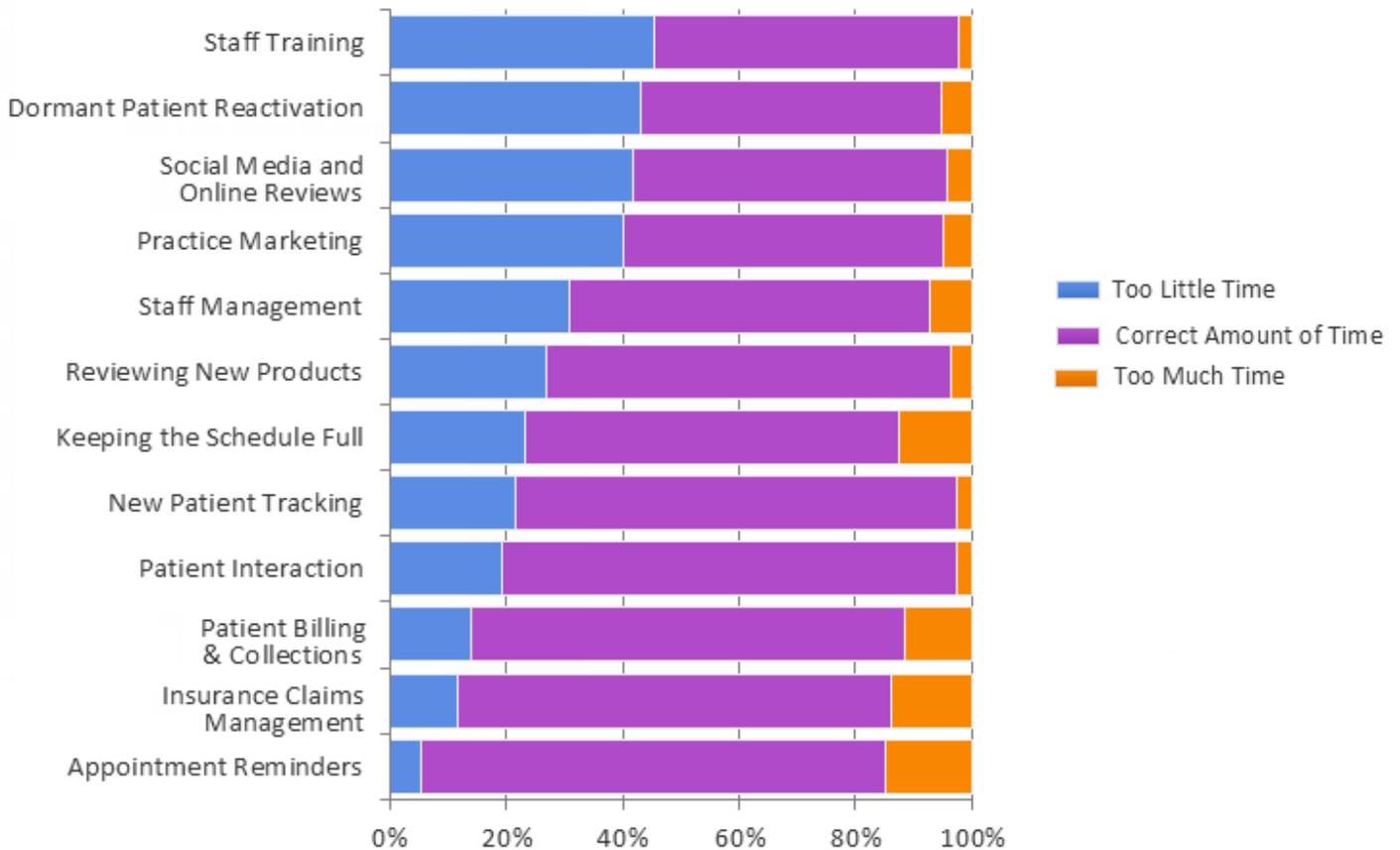
**KEY FINDINGS:** Dental office managers reported a steady or growing demand on their time in all twelve business activities, without a significant decrease of time in any. This raises an important question for future studies: Have additional staff members been added to help compensate for this workload? (As anecdotal evidence, when we asked this follow up question to panel of office managers at the 2012 AADOM conference, they overwhelmingly reported there had been no commensurate increase in staffing.)

Next, we explored how appropriate office managers feel this division of time is – asking whether they believe too much, too little or the correct amount of time is being spent on these activities.

The top four areas where “too little time” is being spent according to our respondents are:

1. Staff Training
2. Dormant Patient Reactivation
3. Social Media and Online Reviews
4. Practice Marketing

Do you believe too much time, too little time or the correct amount of time is being spent on the following activities?



Combined with the data above, this reveals some interesting trends. First, social media was ranked as the #1 area where time has increased – yet it is also one of the top areas where *too little* time is being spent. In other words, office managers report that they are spending more time on social media, but it’s still not enough. This is clearly an area in dentistry poised for growth, and an area where practices may need assistance.

Conversely, appointment reminders ranked as the top activity where time has decreased – yet it’s also the top area where *too much* time is being spent. In this case, the reverse was true. Office managers are spending less time, but it’s still too much. This may help explain why practices are overwhelmingly transitioning to using automated reminder services (a trend revealed later in this report).

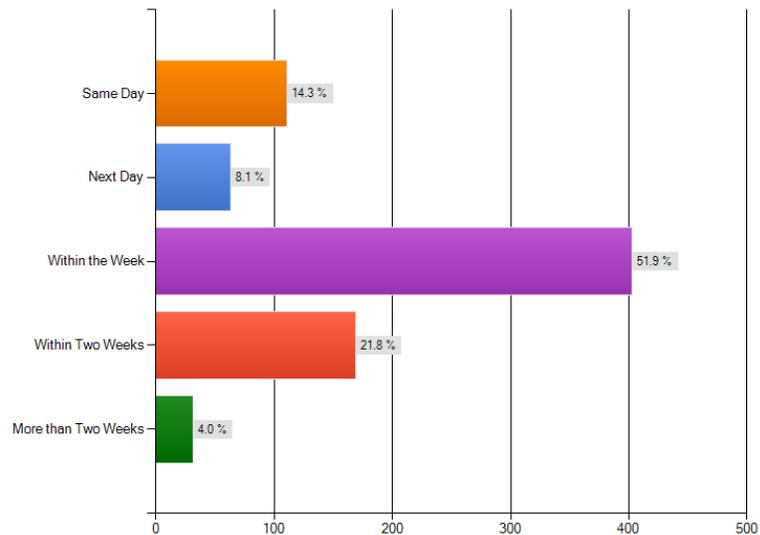
**KEY FINDINGS:** Social media appears to be a pain point for practice. Although office managers report that they are spending more time, they believe that even more is needed.

Appointment reminders are one of the top areas where less time is being spent, and respondents feel the task still takes up too much time.

## NEW PATIENT SCHEDULING

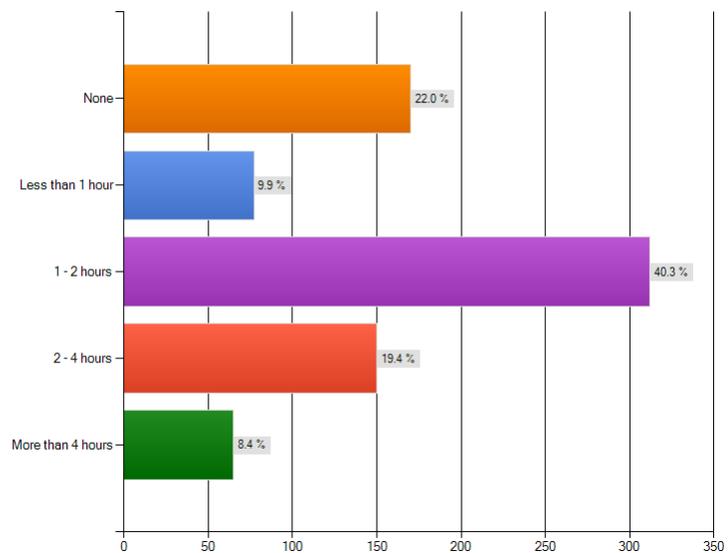
Next, we surveyed office managers about the specifics of many of their daily responsibilities, starting with new patient scheduling. A recent study conducted by Futuredontics found that seeing a new patient within the first 48 hours has a dramatic positive impact on patient show-up rates and ultimately, production. In that spirit, we asked how soon respondents' practices typically schedule a new patient's first appointment.

How soon do you typically see a new patient after the initial phone call?



Almost 25% reported that they generally see a new patient either the same day or the day after the initial phone call. The majority schedule the appointment within the first week. This means there is huge opportunity for the remaining practices to increase conversion by fitting patients in sooner. Fortunately, most of our respondents indicated that they block 1-2 hours per day or more for seeing new patients.

How much time does the practice block each day for new patients?



**KEY FINDINGS:** Less than a quarter of practices schedule new patients within the recommended 48 hours – and 22% do not block out time to fit in new patient appointments. This spells huge opportunity, as making improvements in both areas has been shown to have a dramatic impact on patient show-up rates.

## SCHEDULING & TRACKING TOOLS

We also asked about the tools practices are using to schedule and track appointments. 94.3% of respondents indicated that they use patient management software. But interestingly, of those who use software, 19.6% maintain an appointment book as well. It's not clear whether this is simply a product of old habits, or an intentional hard-copy back up, but either way it appears that nearly a fifth of practices have some level of redundancy in their scheduling that may amount to unnecessary work for the staff (and an opportunity for more efficiency).

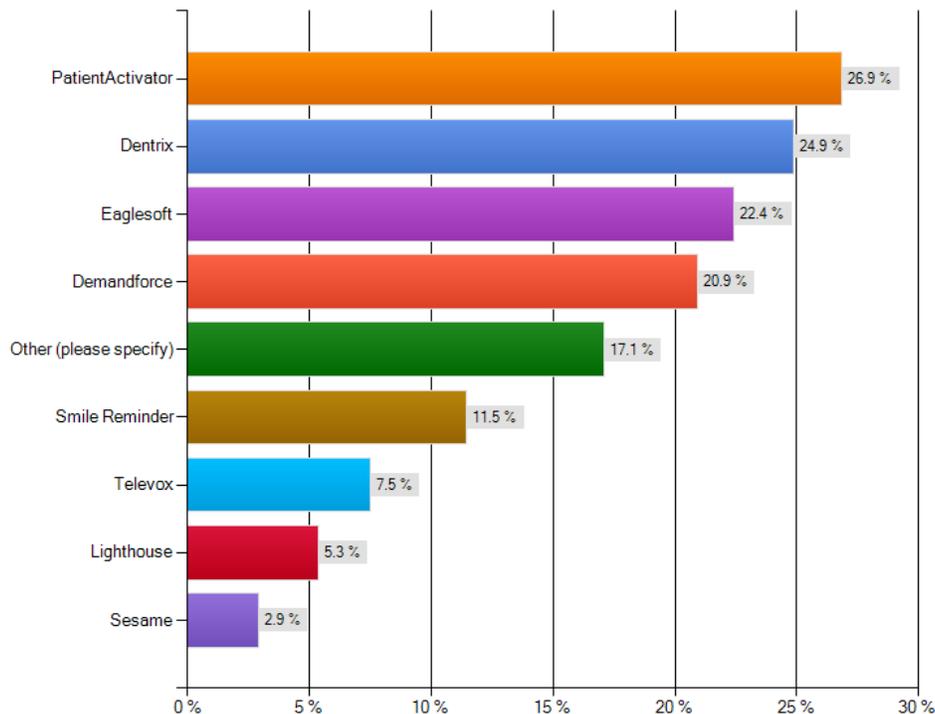
### Tools used to schedule and track appointments

Patient Management Software	94.3%
Appointment Book	26.7%
Microsoft Outlook	3%
Other	5% (Microsoft Excel cited most often)

## PATIENT COMMUNICATIONS

When asked if they use any software tools to handle patient communications, 77.1% of office managers indicated that they currently use patient communications software. 14.9% plan to use patient communications software in the future and 8% of respondents have no plans for software at all. We then asked which software they use, or plan to use in the future.

### Which patient communications software do you use or plan to use?



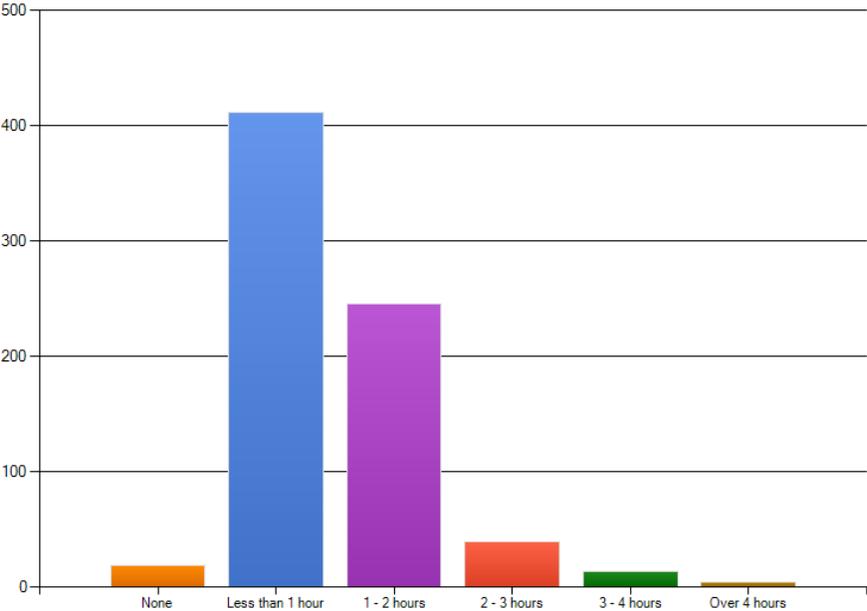
Next, we delved deeper into two specific types of patient communications: patient appointment reminders and dormant patient reactivation. 95.3% of our respondents consider patient appointment reminders “important” or “very Important” to the practice. However, of all of the business categories, this one was the least conclusive about whether the time office managers spent on this activity has increased, decreased or stayed the same when compared to two years ago.

**Changes in time spent on appointment reminders**

Time Increased	32.8%
Time Decreased	19%
Time Stayed the Same	48.2%

We looked at how much of the day is actually spent on patient appointment reminders. And overwhelming 89.8% of our respondents said they spend two hours or less on this activity per day.

**How much of the day does the staff spend on patient appointment reminders?**

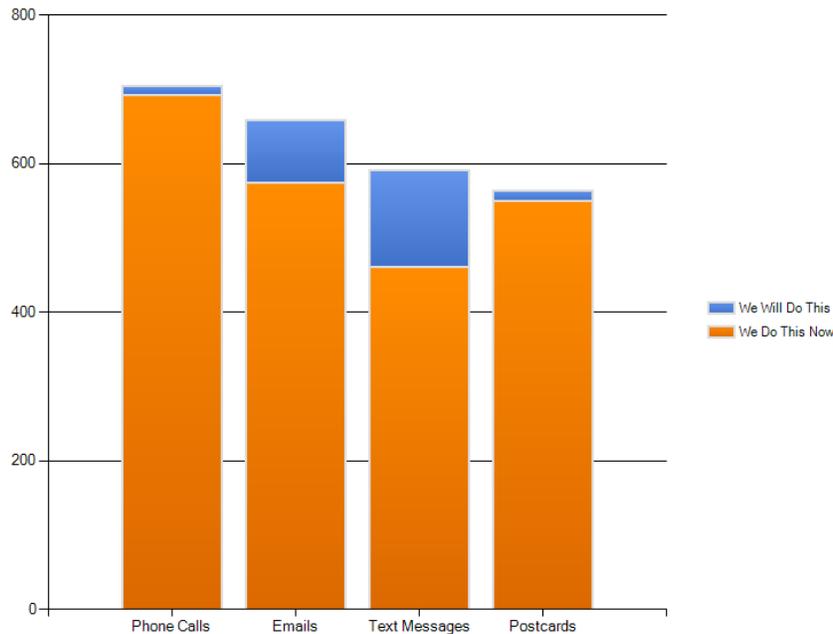


**KEY FINDINGS:** 92% of dental office managers use, or plan to use, a patient communication software for tasks like appointment reminders. This may explain why the majority of respondents report they currently spend less than an hour per day on this important activity.

We then asked which form patient appointment reminders take. Postcards and phone calls are still the predominant format, however email and text messaging are not far behind.

Email and text message also had the highest number of respondents report that they plan to use these formats in the future. This is not surprising given the increasing prevalence of digital communication technology among consumers, as well as studies that suggest as much as 56% of the patient population prefers text or email for health-related reminders.

**Which of the following does the practice use now, or plan to use in the future for appointment reminders?**



When asked about dormant patient reactivation, respondents showed much more varied responses compared with appointment reminders. 16.8% rated this activity as “somewhat important,” 28.3% rated it as “important” and 49.9% rated it as “very important.”

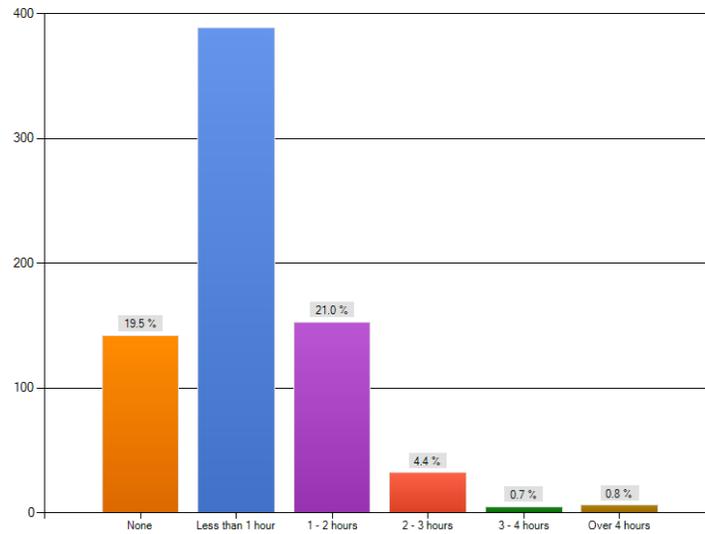
We also looked at whether the time spent on this activity has increased, decreased or stayed the same when compared to two years ago. The numbers are very similar to patient appointment reminders.

**Changes in time spent on dormant patient reactivation**

Time Increased	32.5%
Time Decreased	15.7%
Time Stayed the Same	51.8%

What was perhaps most interesting though, was when asked how much of the day is spent on dormant patient reactivation, almost 20% of the respondents indicated “none.”

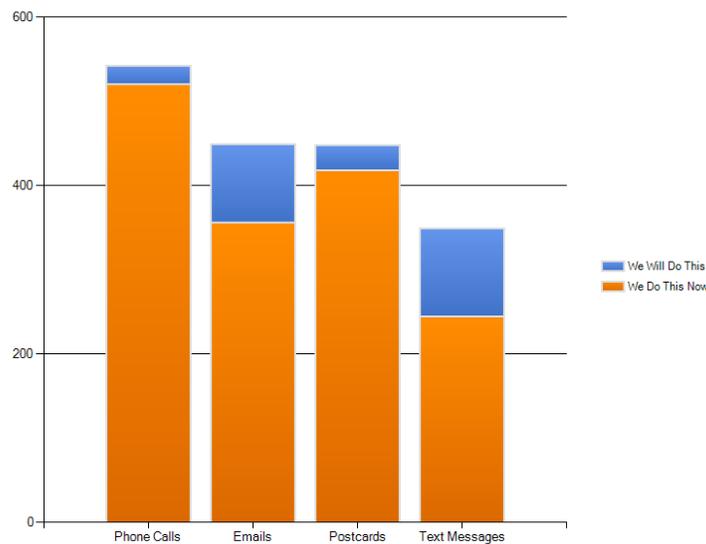
### How much of the day does the staff spend on dormant patient reactivation?



This means a fifth of the practices surveyed are overlooking an important and cost-effective marketing opportunity. Studies have repeatedly shown that acquiring a new patient is much more expensive than retaining an existing one – with some experts placing the number as high as five times the cost. What’s more, almost 80% of practices are already utilizing patient communication software that could send reactivation emails or texts – in many cases automatically based on the last appointment date.

For those practices who do engage in dormant patient reactivation, the formats used are similar to patient appointment reminders with a slightly decreased usage of email and text message.

### Which of the following does the practice use now, or plan to use in the future for dormant patient reactivation?

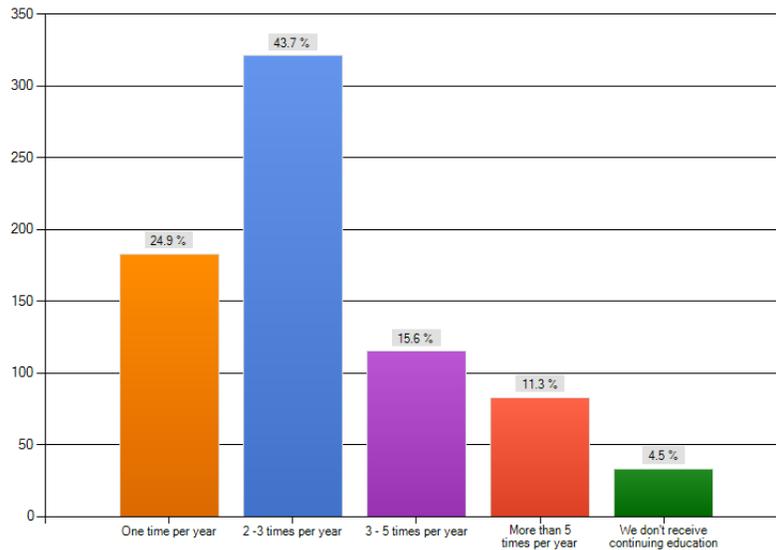


**KEY FINDINGS:** Although office managers overwhelmingly rate dormant patient reactivation as important or very important, almost 20% report that their staff spends zero hours on this task each day. This is one major area with opportunity for impactful improvement.

## CONTINUING EDUCATION

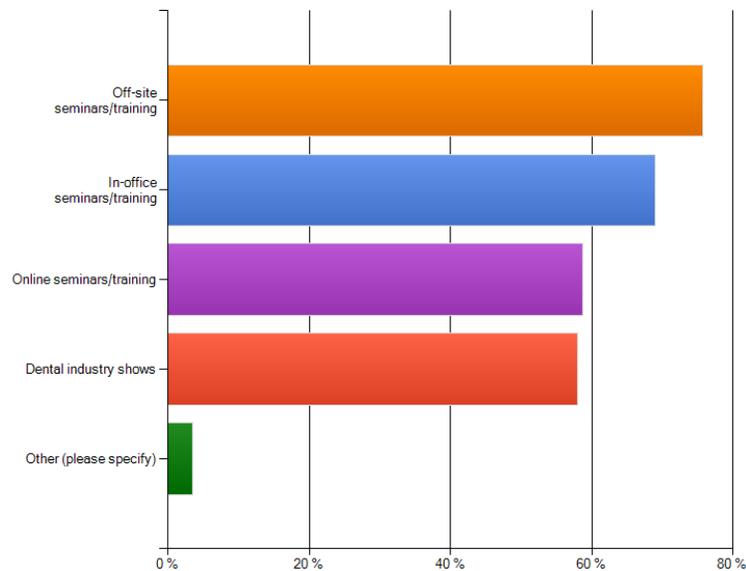
We were interested in understanding how often dental office managers and office staff get continuing education, as well as what sources they use. Generally it appears that in most practices, staff receives CE 2-3 times per year.

How often do you and the staff get continuing education?



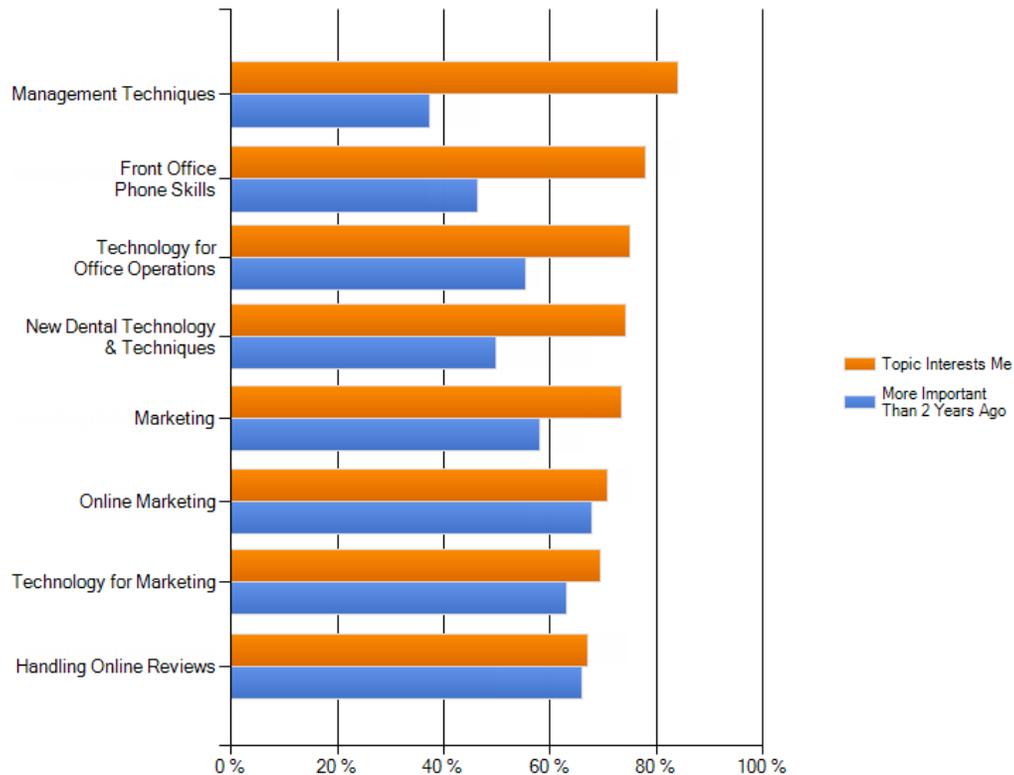
The source of their continuing education was distributed fairly evenly across all categories. The “other” responses included journals and study groups/clubs.

How do you and the staff get continuing education?



We then asked office managers which continuing education topics most interest them – as well as whether these topics are more important than they were two years ago.

**What continuing education topics interest you and the staff, and are these more important than they were two years ago?**



Most notable about this data is that the top four topics of interest are NOT the same topics that are more important than in past years.

**Top four topics that interest office managers:**

1. Management Techniques
2. Front Office Phone Skills
3. Technology for Office Operations
4. New Dental Technology & Techniques

**Top four topics that are more important than two years ago:**

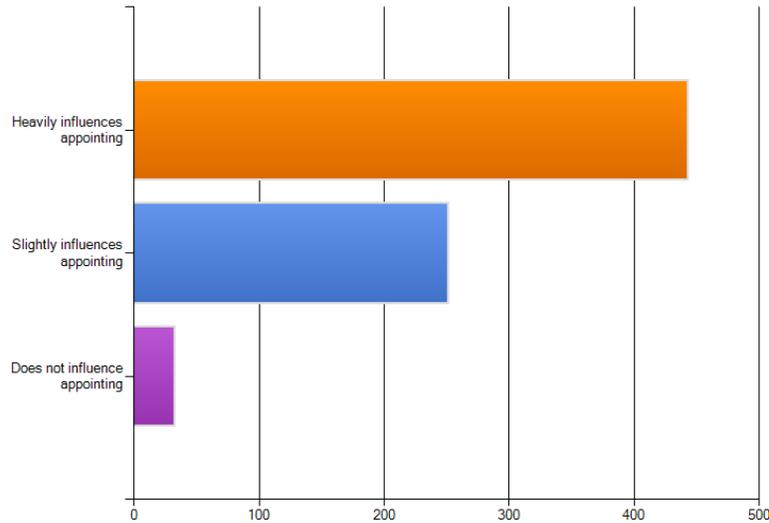
1. Online Marketing
2. Handling Online Reviews
3. Technology for Marketing
4. Marketing

**KEY FINDINGS:** The top four topics that interested office managers are clearly practice management areas, while the topics that have gained in importance over the last two years are marketing related – particularly online marketing. This is consistent with earlier findings that show that marketing, online marketing, staff management and staff training are among the top ranked categories where too little time is being spent.

## PATIENT BILLING & INSURANCE

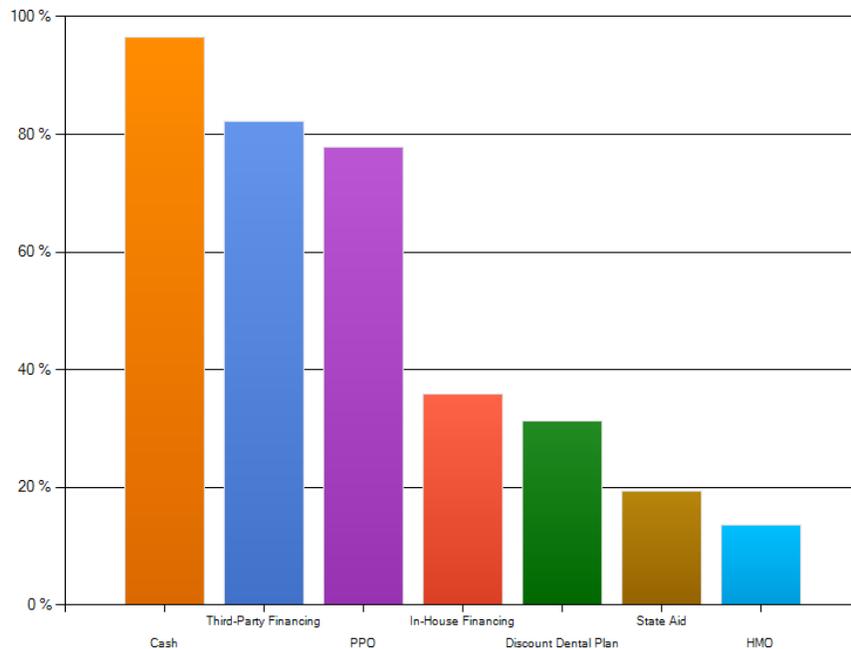
We asked how much participation in an insurance network influences whether a patient will appoint. Two thirds of our respondents indicated that it heavily influences appointing.

**How much do you feel participation in an insurance network influences whether a patient will appoint?**



We then asked which types of billing and insurance arrangements the practice works with. Not surprisingly, cash, third-party financing and PPO were the most commonly accepted forms of payment. What was surprising is that 19.4% of the practices now accept state aid patients – perhaps a result of the current economic climate. Similarly, in-house financing and discount dental plans are each offered in about one third of respondents' practices.

**Which types of billing and insurance arrangements does your practice work with?**



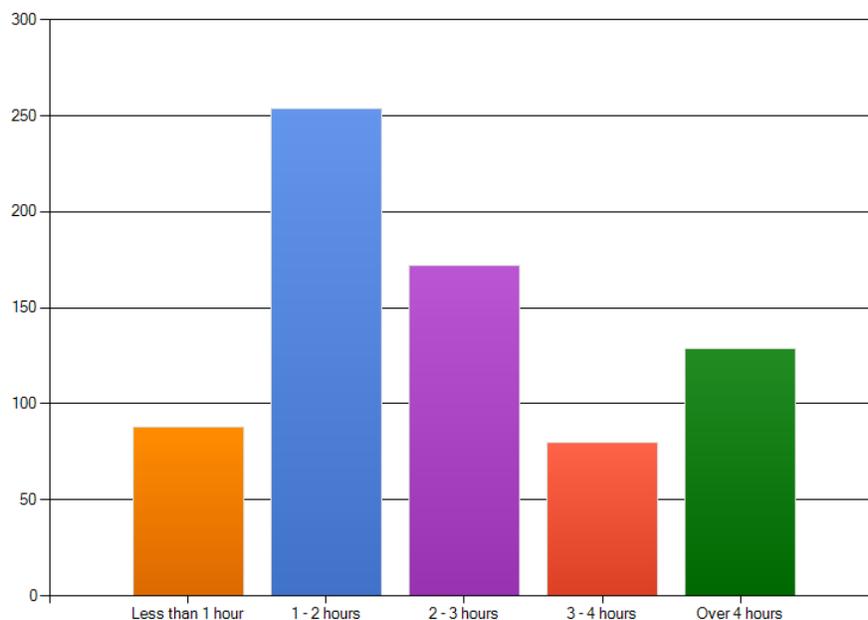
When asked if they verify method of payment and insurance benefits prior to treatment, a resounding 92.4% responded “yes.”

We also looked at whether the time spent on patient billing, collections and insurance claim management has increased, decreased or stayed the same when compared to two years ago. While over half our respondents indicated the time they spend on these activities has stayed the same, over 38% indicated the time they spend has increased.

Changes in time spent on billing and insurance claims		
	Patient Billing	Insurance Claims
Time Increased	38.5%	39.1%
Time Decreased	9.9%	9.0%
Time Stayed the Same	50.9%	50.9%

When we looked at how much of the day is actually spent on patient billing & insurance processing, the responses were widely varied.

**How much of the day is spent on patient billing, collections and insurance processing?**



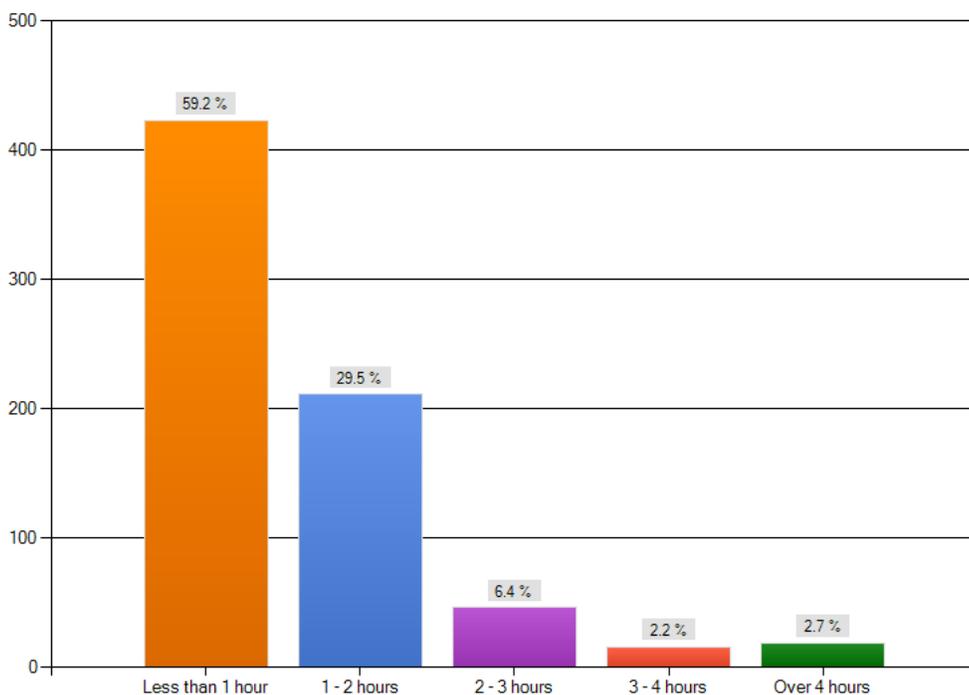
**KEY FINDINGS:** Although cash remains the most commonly accepted payment type (with third-party financing and PPO in the #2 and 3 spots, respectively) over 30% of practices now accept discount dental plans – and nearly 20% are currently accepting state aid patients.

## PRACTICE MARKETING

We next asked dental office managers how much time is spent during the day on practice marketing activities. 59.2% reported they spend less than one hour on marketing activities; 88.7% spend less than two hours.

This is consistent with several earlier findings. While office managers rate marketing as very important (and more important than two years ago), they also identify it as one of the top four areas where not enough time is being spent. Clearly, although there is a discrepancy between the importance they place on marketing and the daily time they devote to it, they are acutely aware of this rift.

How much of the day is spent on practice marketing activities?

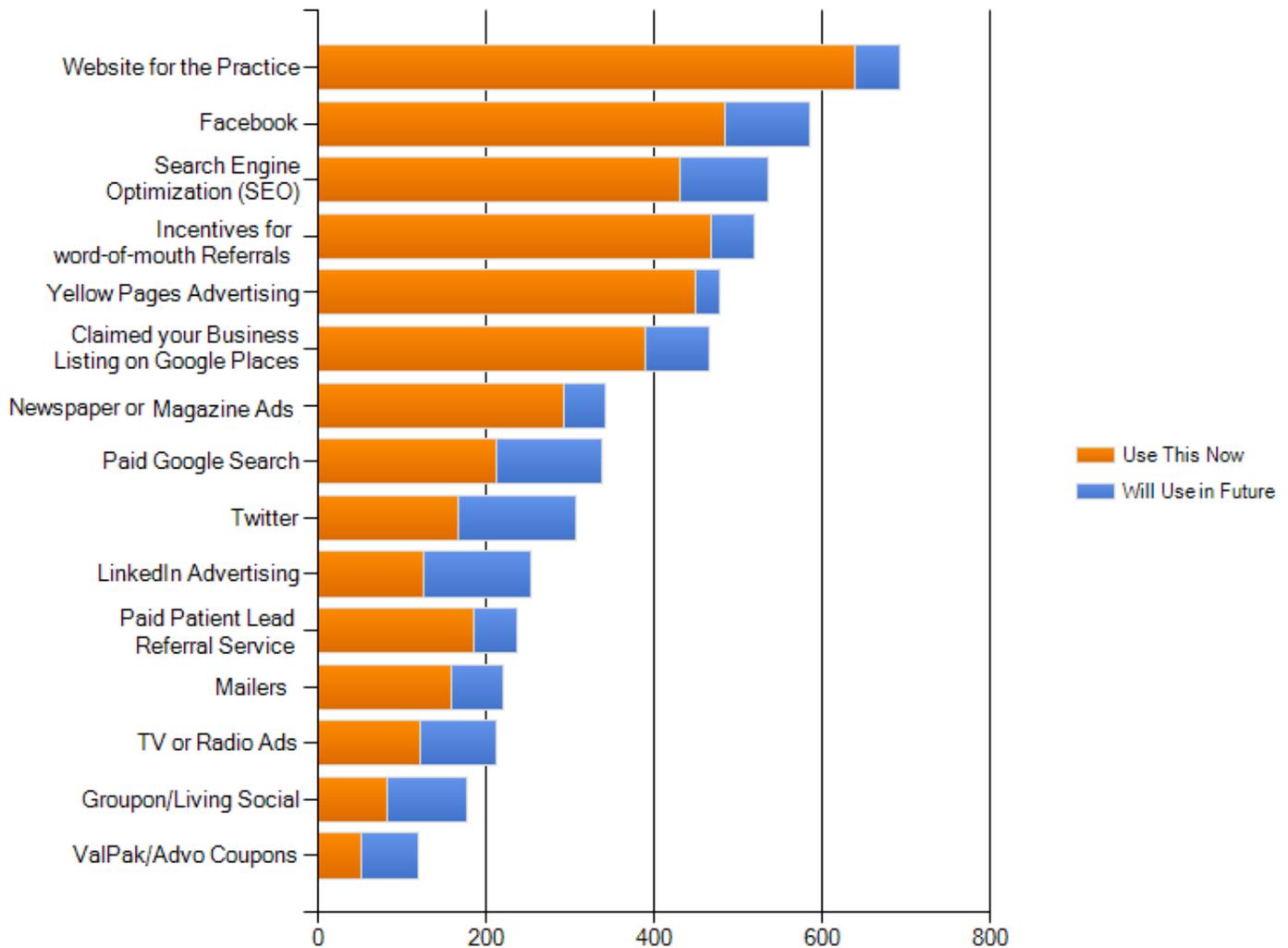


**KEY FINDINGS:** Although office managers view practice marketing as very important, the majority are able to spend less than an hour a day on these activities – and consistently identify this as an area that does not receive enough time.

We then asked which marketing activities the practice is engaged in. Predictably, a practice website was the most widely used – with 96.7% of respondents reporting they currently have a website, or plan to have one in the future.

Furthermore, three of the top five most-used marketing activities were online approaches (Websites, Facebook and Search Engine Optimization).

Which of the following marketing activities does the practice use now, or plan to use in the future for acquiring new patients?



One surprising result was that 34.9% of respondents have not claimed their business listing on Google Places, and have no plans to do so in the future. This may indicate a lack of awareness or understanding of Google Places, because claiming a listing is an easy, free task that can have a big impact on a practice’s online presence. This is perhaps the most obvious missed opportunity revealed.

**KEY FINDINGS:** Of the top five marketing activities currently being used, five are online tactics. The top five activities office managers plan to use in the future are also all online or social media related.

Over one third of office managers reported they have not claimed their business listing on Google Places, and do not plan to claim it in the future. This is a significant missed opportunity

We asked if the time they are spending on these activities has increased, decreased or stayed the same compared to two years ago.

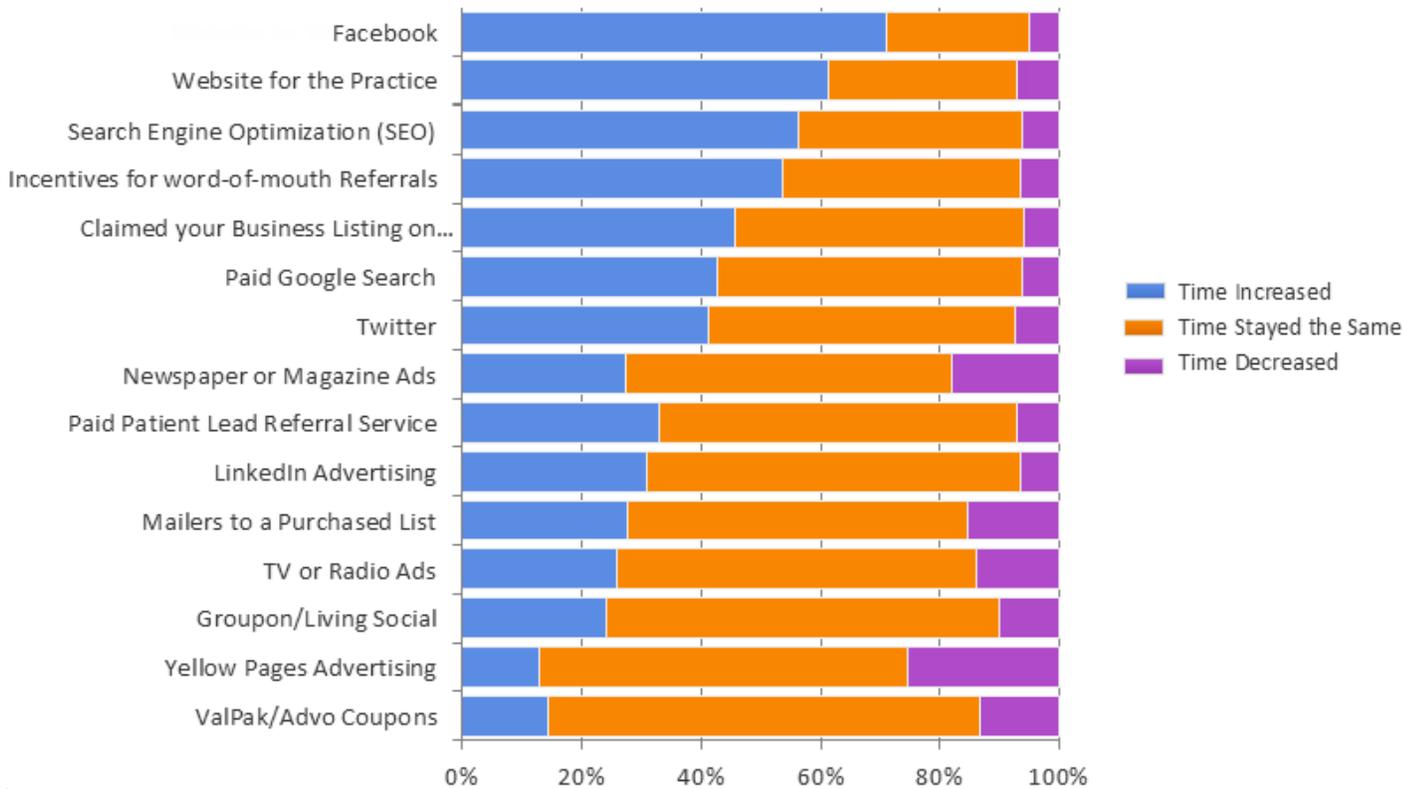
**The marketing activities where time has increased the most:**

1. Facebook
2. Website for the Practice
3. Search Engine Optimization
4. Incentives for Word-of-Mouth Referrals

**The marketing activities where time has decreased the most:**

1. Yellow Pages Advertising
2. Newspaper or Magazine Advertising
3. Mailers to a Purchased List
4. TV or Radio Ads

**Compared to two years ago, has the amount of time spent on the following activities increased, decreased or stayed the same?**



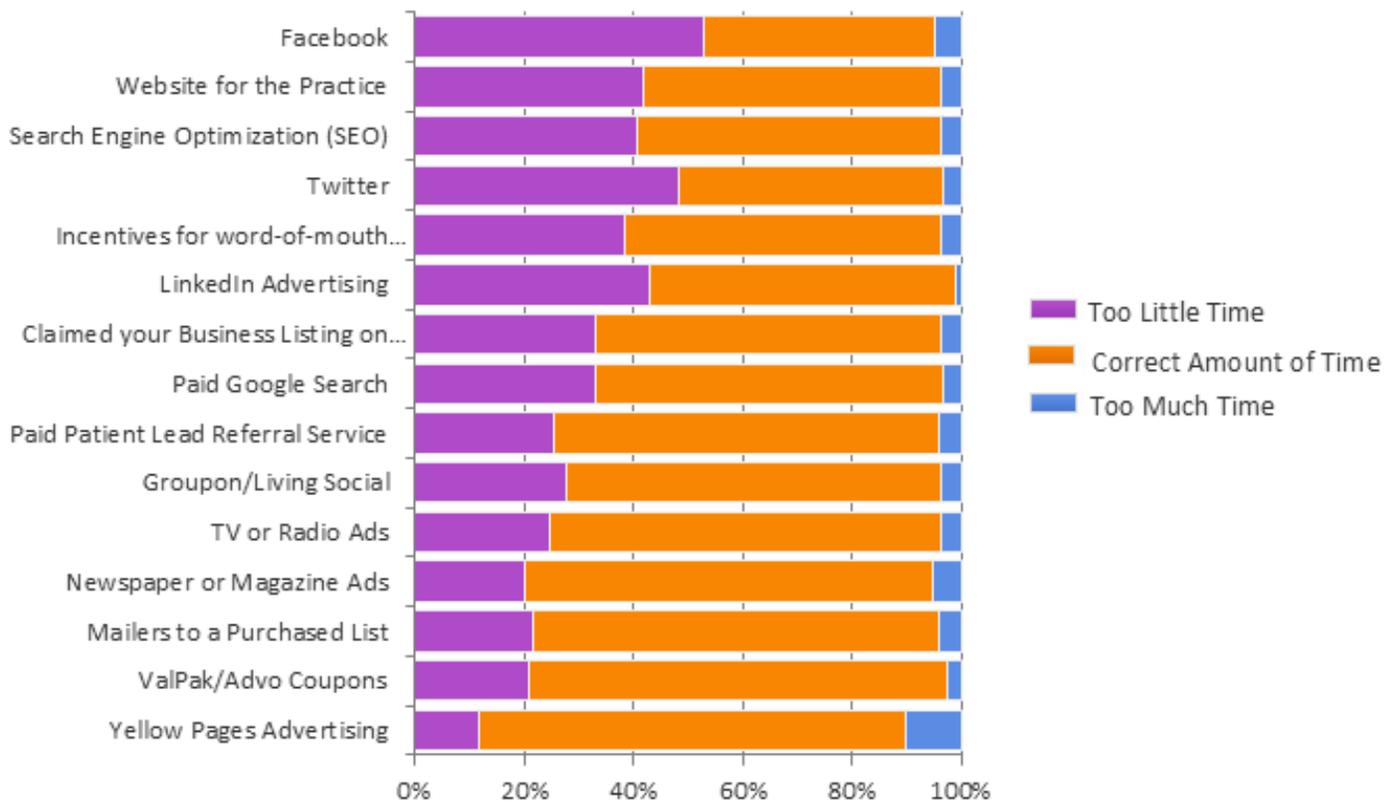
**KEY FINDINGS:** Three of the top four activities where time has increased are related to online marketing, while the areas where time has decreased are primarily more traditional print-based advertising methods.

We then asked if our respondents felt too much time, too little time or the correct amount of time is being spent on these activities. The only marketing activity where “too much time” was significant was the use of Yellow Pages Advertising. This trend is not unexpected, as recent studies have shown a massive consumer migration away from Yellow Pages to Internet Search – particularly with the advent of the smart phone. Unless print ads are carefully tracked and yield measurable results, many experts recommend that practices start moving away from this medium. This data suggests that may already be happening. One useful follow up question that was not asked, and should be explored in future studies, is whether offices who still use “Yellow Pages” are using print books, online listings, or a combination.

**The top five marketing activities where “too little time” is being spent are:**

1. Facebook
2. Twitter
3. LinkedIn Advertising
4. Website for the Practice
5. Search Engine Optimization

**Do you believe too much time, too little time or the correct amount of time is being spent on the following activities?**



It's interesting to note that Facebook, Website and Search Engine Optimization are not only areas where time has increased the most – they're also top areas where office managers feel they're spending too little time. By their own estimation, time has increased but it's still not enough.

It also seems that office managers, in addition to having insufficient time to address these new activities, may also be having difficulty prioritizing them. That so many feel they should devote more time to a medium like LinkedIn, which would have almost no impact on the practice, and at the same time have no plans to claim the practice's Google Place, which would vastly increase their website SEO, indicates they lack a resource which would allow them to properly and proportionately allocate their time based on the relative importance and value of these tasks. This is consistent with earlier findings that the top CE topics that respondents ranked more important than two years ago are related to online marketing and technology – and demonstrates an awareness that more training or guidance would be useful in the practice.

**KEY FINDINGS:** Office managers say that more time is needed on online marketing activities, but seem to view them all relatively equally, whether they are high impact (e.g. Google Places) or typically ineffective for dentists (e.g. LinkedIn). This may indicate a lack of resources and training to help prioritize the rapidly growing list of online and social media marketing activities.

## THE FINAL WORD

It's clear that the role of the Dental Office Manager has broadened from previous years to further encompass both the marketing and reputation of the dental practice. And not surprisingly, social media and online marketing activities are among the biggest pain points. Office managers report that these areas have increased in importance and take up more time, and yet still feel the time being spent is not enough. Also notable, is that although the time demands have generally remained constant or increased across all major business activities, there has been no significant decrease in any area to compensate.

**In short, office managers are being asked to do more in the same time, often with the same resources.**

Accordingly, one of the most prevalent themes among responses is a high level of anxiety about not devoting enough time to newer responsibilities. Office managers feel unable to keep up with the spectrum of rapidly evolving practice duties (particularly online marketing tasks) while still maintaining traditional roles. What's important to note here is that their assessment is accurate – and the discrepancy between the amount of work and amount of time is very real. The reality is, social media and online marketing are expanding at an exponential rate that cannot be matched simply by working harder. In the last five years, Facebook alone added 640 million active users – and the site grew 82% from 2010 to 2011. There's simply no way for a dental practice to match that level of growth by asking the staff to do more, or even adding an additional team member.

Instead, this dramatic growth means dental offices need to find ways to address new online marketing tasks more efficiently, while continuing to cut out redundant work or tasks that take up unnecessary practice time. And fortunately, they've already created the model for how to do it in another area of the practice – patient reminders. Of all business activities,

patient reminders is the one area where office managers seem to have best adapted to the increasing demands on their resources. Almost 80% have turned to a technological solution (automated patient communication services) to become more efficient and do the work in less time. And this likely explains why, although they overwhelmingly rate the task as “very important,” the majority of respondents are now spending less than an hour a day to fulfill it. The same lesson needs to be applied to other areas as the role of the office manager continues to expand. For online marketing/social media, this means two things 1) more education and training, particularly around prioritizing the slew of new channels; 2) utilizing new tools that can make these tasks manageable.

Overall, it’s important to recognize that the role of the Dental Office Manager continues to grow, and understanding these changes will help dental practices prioritize, train, staff and add tools and resources appropriately to weather the transition successfully.

## ABOUT FUTURE DONTICS®

Futuredontics, parent company of 1-800-DENTIST®, is America's leading provider of dental marketing services & software. Since 1986, the company has been dedicated exclusively to dentistry, developing powerful products and resources that help dentists thrive in the evolving digital world.

The company's flagship product, **1-800-DENTIST**, has delivered over 7 million new patient leads to dental practices nationwide. **PatientActivator**®, their patient communications and online marketing solution, increases production and boosts the practice's online presence with automated appointment confirmations and tools for social media, reviews and much more. **ReputationMonitor**® helps dentists protect their online reputation – monitoring hundreds of directories, reviews sites and social media platforms, and displaying them all on a single screen. And **WebDirector**® delivers custom websites, mobile sites and branded social pages all for one low price. In addition, Futuredontics offers an extensive library of dental marketing resources – including in-depth whitepapers, Webinars and front desk training. With unlimited live customer support, dentistry's best marketing products and the largest dental website in North America, Futuredontics is the proven way for dental practices to grow their patient base and increase production year after year.

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## ABOUT AADOM

The American Association of Dental Office Managers (AADOM) is an organization of professional office managers, practice administrators, patient coordinators, insurance and financial coordinators, and treatment coordinators of general and specialized dental practices. The largest association of its kind, it is their mission to provide members with networking, resources and education to help them achieve the highest level of professional development.

For more information about AADOM please call 732-842-9977 or visit [dentalmanagers.com](http://dentalmanagers.com). You can also email: [info@dentalmanagers.com](mailto:info@dentalmanagers.com).

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