THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE DENTAL OFFICE MANAGER

2015 SURVEY RESULTS
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report analyzes the results of the online survey titled “The Changing Role of the Dental Office Manager.” The report includes the answers from all dental office managers who took the survey between September 1, 2014 and October 31, 2014. A total of 1,064 completed responses were submitted to the survey during this time.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This nationwide survey covered a range of topics, including new patient scheduling, patient communications, practice marketing, social media and staffing -- all from the perspective of the dental office manager. Responses were also compared with Futuredontics’ 2013 survey of the same title to identify changes over time.

The findings revealed several interesting trends, including a clear shift away from print activities and towards electronic communication and online spaces. While still being held accountable for a growing list of practice duties, office managers report that the time being spent on each activity is more appropriately balanced than in previous years – due in part to widespread increases in staffing and adoption of various industry tools and services.

Compared with 2013, office managers demonstrated significant improvements in their office’s appointing practices and utilization of digital communication. Conversely, social media and dormant patient reactivation remain significant pain points. And newer marketing activities such as Yelp and online/after-hours appointing were identified as top areas in need of attention.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The area that has grown most in perceived importance since 2013 is online reviews.
- The top four areas where office managers feel “too little time” is spent are:
  1. Staff Training
  2. Practice Marketing
  3. Social Media
  4. Dormant Patient Reactivation
- 49.1% of dental practices neither interact with Yelp, nor plan to in the future.
- Yellow Page ads are in sharp decline, with a 34% decrease in use since 2013.
- Compared with two years ago, the number of dental practices that schedule a new patient within the first 48 hours has increased by 17%.
- Dental offices are generally not engaging in online and after-hours appointing as much as they should be.
- Postcard usage for appointment reminders has fallen by 28% in the last two years, while email and text messaging have increased.
- Approximately 60% of office managers say the practice has recently hired and now has enough staff to support the number of duties they’re being asked to perform.
DEMOGRAPHICS

The online survey was open to all dental office managers nationwide.

Respondents represented various levels of experience within the industry – split fairly evenly between new office managers (5 years or less), experienced managers (6 -15 years), and veterans (15 years or more).

Consistent with previous research, over 90% of office managers surveyed were female. The majority of respondents (58.6%) were over 45 years old. Only 15.4% were 35 years old or younger.
PRACTICE BUSINESS ACTIVITIES

To begin, we asked office managers how important the following activities are to their practice. All categories were ranked as “very important” by the majority of respondents, with the one exception being social media. Although still rated highly, social media appears to be the area with the least consensus (and least buy-in) among dental office managers.

KEY FINDINGS: The top ranked activities (deemed “very important” by over 80% of office managers) were patient interaction, staff training, new patient acquisition, and keeping the schedule full. This reveals a high level of focus on practice growth and retention among office managers.

These findings also mirror the top ranked activities in our 2013 survey, suggesting that these priorities have remained fairly consistent.

The area that has grown most in perceived importance is online reviews (with 63.4% ranking this activity as “very important – compared to only 45.2% in 2013). To deal with this important task, Futuredontics® offers a service called ReputationMonitor® that makes it easy to keep track of the practice’s online presence – including sending real-time notifications about new patient reviews.
We also asked whether the time office managers are spending on these activities has increased, decreased or stayed the same compared with two years ago (or whether these activities are not currently done in the offices). For most business activities, time has increased or stayed the same. Unsurprisingly, there is no activity for which office managers’ time has been significantly reduced in the last two years.

**Key Findings**: Social media is the area with the biggest reported increase in time spent. It is also the area with the most practices not participating at all. This confirms the earlier findings that there exists a high level of ambivalence about the importance of social media to the practice.

The biggest drop in time spent was seen in appointment reminders, likely due to the increasing use of automated services like PatientActivator® that assist with this tasks (a trend revealed later in this report).
Next, we wanted to understand how appropriate office managers feel this division of time is. In almost every category, the majority of office managers feel their practice is devoting the correct amount of time. The notable exception is staff training, a task to which 51.3% feel too little time is given.

**The top four areas where office managers feel “too little time” is spent are:**
1. **Staff Training**
2. **Practice Marketing**
3. **Social Media**
4. **Dormant Patient Reactivation**

Here office managers once again demonstrate a high level of consistency. These are the same four areas that respondents indicated received too little time in 2013.
**KEY FINDINGS:** When combining the data from the three questions above, social media is revealed as a major pain point. Office managers show the least consensus about the importance of this activity – but at the same time they are increasing the amount of time they spend and yet still feel it’s not enough.

The exact opposite is true of appointment reminders. Office managers agree across the board that this is an important task – yet it’s the top area where time has decreased and where the biggest percentage feels they’re spending too much time.

Staff training has also emerged as a major area of concern for office managers, and it’s overwhelmingly rated as a “very important” task to which too little time is devoted. A key follow-up question for future studies will be whether the training needed is in internal operations (e.g., scheduling) or new marketing trends and technology such as social media, SEO, etc.

**NEW PATIENTS & APPOINTING**

As previously shown, office managers consistently rank new patient acquisition and scheduling among their most important tasks – and for good reason. According to a recent consumer survey, 74% of dental patients say their choice of dentist is significantly impacted by how easily and quickly they can book an appointment.¹ In that spirit, we asked office managers about their new patient processes.

Over two-thirds of respondents (67.8%) reported that they block out at least one hour per day specifically to accommodate new patients - and 39.6% follow the best practice of seeing new patients within 48 hours. Another 40% see new patients within one week. These are the practices that could dramatically increase their show-up rates by 56% if they shorten the window by only a few days.²
KEY FINDINGS: Dental practices are finally catching up with patient preferences by offering immediate appointment availability and scheduling new patients within the first two days. Although there is still need for improvement in this area, the trend has been strongly positive.

That said, it’s important to note that 20.8% of offices do not set aside any time for this purpose. This is a major issue if it means that these practices are unable to get patients on the schedule in a timely manner.

Encouragingly, compared with two years ago, the number of dental practices who see a new patient within 48 hours has increased by 17%. As the keepers of the practice schedule, office managers are to be commended for this change, which will directly impact the practice’s new patient acquisition success.

An important emerging trend in patient behavior is the demand for online and after-hours appointing, particularly as the culture of instant gratification and 24-hour online service become the standard. Only 17% of respondents indicated that they currently offer an online option for scheduling appointments after office hours.

We next asked office managers how the practice accommodates new patients who call looking for an appointment after business hours.

![Bar chart showing how practices address patients who contact after office hours](chart.png)

How does your practice address patients who contact you after office hours for an appointment? (Check all that apply)
70.6% of respondents reported that after-hours calls are sent to voicemail and returned the following business day (although almost half at least provide an emergency number). This represents a huge lost opportunity, as many consumers will continue searching for another practice who can accommodate them immediately, and others will simply hang up and fall back into procrastination.

Only 21.2% of practices have adopted a system where after-hours patients can speak with someone immediately – either by forwarding calls to a staff member’s phone or using a third party appointing service.

**KEY FINDINGS:** Dental offices are significantly behind the curve on the important area of online and after-hours appointing. This is increasingly becoming an expectation for tech-savvy consumers, and practices that don’t adapt will forfeit significant potential growth.

To help dental offices meet this need, 1-800-DENTIST® now offers appointing – with live operators available 24/7 to satisfy consumers’ immediate need (getting the appointment) so they don’t continue searching for another dentist.

**APPOINTMENT REMINDERS**

As earlier noted, a decisive 95.7% of office managers feel appointment reminders are “important” or “very important” to the practice, and respondents consistently reported that they are spending the same amount or more time on this task than in previous years.

When asked about their specific time usage, the majority of office managers (63%) estimated that they spend two hours or fewer per week on appointment reminders. Only 7.7% spend more than four hours on this task.

**How much time per week does the staff spend on patient appointment reminders?**
We next asked office managers whether they used any software tools to handle these communications. **76.5% of practices reported that they currently use patient communication software**, representing a moderate increase from 2013. An additional 11.2% indicated that they plan to use software in the future. Curiously, 12.3% of respondents say they have no plans to use patient communication software.

**KEY FINDINGS:** For 92.3% of office managers the amount of time spent on appointment reminders amounts to less than one hour per day - and the majority of respondents feel this is the appropriate amount of time for this task.

This small time demand seems to correlate with the relatively high adoption rate of automated patient communication software, which minimize the front desk workload (for example, PatientActivator members report the service reduces time on appointment reminders by 40% and saves approximately 200 hours per year).

We next asked what types of reminders are being utilized in the practice, and what types office managers plan to use in the future.

Consistent with our 2013 report, respondents revealed that phone calls are the predominant method, with 97.8% of practices using the telephone for appointment reminders. Email usage has likewise remained fairly consistent year over year (with a small portion of offices moving from “we plan to do this” into “we do this now.”)

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

![2013 Reminders](image1)

![2015 Reminders](image2)
Other communication types however showed much more variation over the last two years. Postcard usage, once the standard in dental offices, has fallen by 28%, and less than 1% of respondents indicated that plan to use this medium in the future.

**KEY FINDINGS:** As digital communication has become more standard, dental offices have clearly adjusted their communication strategies – relying less on postcards and increasing their usage of email and text messaging.

Text messaging, previously the least-used method, has increased by nearly 15% over the last two years. This is also the medium office managers indicated that they plan to increase most in the coming years.

**DORMANT PATIENT REACTIVATION**

In our previous study, dormant patient reactivation was revealed to be one of the most neglected areas in dental practices. In light of that, we examined whether progress had been made in this important function.

Office manager attitudes about the importance of reactivation have shown a slight increase over the past two years. More importantly, 35.9% of respondents reported that they have increased the amount of time devoted to this activity.

While this improvement is encouraging news, when asked about their specific time usage, a surprising 11% of office managers said they devote zero hours to reactivation each week. This represents a huge missed opportunity, particularly in light of studies that show that in the typical practice, 20% of patients are dormant (haven’t visited in a year or more). On average, this means there are 1,000 patients who need to be reclaimed. (adding up to tens of thousands of dollars in lost revenue).

How much time per week does the staff spend on dormant patient reactivation?
While dormant patient reactivation still appears to be a problematic area for dental practices, it’s important to note here that office managers are clearly aware of this issue. As shown above, dormant patient reactivation is one of the top four areas that respondents feel is getting “too little time” in the practice.

This is consistent with our 2013 findings that, as office manager duties increase, there often exists a high level of anxiety around other important issues that receive short shrift.

We next asked what methods of reactivation are being utilized in the practice, and what types office managers plan to use in the future. In addition to postcards, phone calls, emails and text messages, we also asked whether respondents use or plan to use a third party (with live operators who call patients on behalf of the practice and get them back on the schedule).

As with appointment reminders, phone calls are still the primary method (94.3%), and postcards are used in about two-thirds of practices. Interestingly, email and text messaging are less frequently used for this purpose – although about 10% of office managers plan to employ these methods in the future.

23% of office managers are using third party service like ReActivation Pro® (see the last page of this report) to handle their dormant patient reactivation, or plan to use one in the future.
KEY FINDINGS: According to both the data and office managers’ own opinions, dormant patient reactivation continues to receive insufficient attention in most dental practices. Although improvement has been made, there is still a long way to go – particularly in the offices that are neglecting this task entirely.

Office managers are still relying heavily on traditional methods (phone and postcards), and under-utilizing digital communication for reactivation. Most patient communication software come standard with automated reactivation solutions, and enabling these across the board would benefit dental practices significantly.

Third party services like ReActivation Pro have also emerged as a powerful, cost-effective solution for dormant patient reactivation – saving the office manager hours and unlocking unrealized revenue for the practice.

PRACTICE MARKETING

We next asked dental office managers how much time is spent on practice marketing activities. 33.7% reported they spend less than one hour per week on marketing activities; 90.6% spend four hours or less per week (less than an hour per day).

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, office managers are acutely aware of this rift.

How much time per week does the staff spend on practice marketing activities?
We then asked which marketing activities the practice is engaged in, specifically for new patient acquisition. Predictably, a practice website was the most widely used – with 94.6% of respondents reporting they currently have a website, or plan to have one in the future. This is consistent with our 2013 findings – and in fact, the five most-used activities remained almost identical in ranking (with the one exception being “incentives for word-of-mouth referrals” pulling ahead of “search engine optimization”).

Four of the five most-used marketing activities were online approaches (websites, social media, SEO and online yellow pages). Similarly, four of the five areas where office managers reveal the most intent to use in the future are online approaches (SEO, paid Google Search, social media and websites.

It’s interesting to note that while yellow page ads were once ubiquitous in dental practice marketing, fewer than 60% of practices use them today – a 34% decrease over the last two years. Online yellow page listings have also now overtaken printed books by small margin.

One troubling finding was how few practices are interacting with Yelp. 49.1% of office managers revealed that their practice neither uses Yelp, nor plans to in the future. According to a recent survey, 70% of patients say online reviews on sites like Yelp influence their choice of dentist (and they view reviews as just important as a dentist’s professional credentials).
**KEY FINDINGS:** Online approaches are dominating the dental marketing landscape, having clearly overtaken print ads, mailers, and outdoor advertising (bus benches, etc.).

Unsurprisingly, encouraging word of mouth continues to be focus for office managers, and with good reason. Recommendations from friends and family are consistently rated by consumers as the top method used to find a new dentist.⁴ (NOTE: Dental practices are cautioned to always check with their local state regulations before instituting any incentive program).

Yelp remains an unfortunate blind spot for dental practices, and perhaps the area in need of the biggest improvement. The reality is, patients can post reviews regardless of whether the practice is participating on the website. That means having a strategy for actively engaging with Yelp is no longer optional – it’s critical.
We asked office managers whether the time spent on various marketing activities has increased, decreased or stayed the same compared to two years ago.

The marketing activities where time has increased most are:
1. Social Media
2. Practice Website
3. Incentives for Word-of-Mouth Referrals
4. Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

The marketing activities where time has decreased most are:
1. Printed Yellow Pages
2. Online Yellow Pages
3. Billboards/Bus Benches
4. Mailers to a Purchased List

**KEY FINDINGS**: Office managers are understandably allocating their time based on the perceived importance of each activity. Online approaches, which are viewed as most important, are being given more time, while those deemed least important are being given less attention.
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.

Here again, office managers were extremely consistent. For each marketing activity, the majority reported that the time being spent is appropriate – with the one exception of social media (48.7% of office managers report that too little time is being spent on social media). There was no area where a significant number of office managers feel too much time is being spent.

Another notable finding was that over 20% of office managers believe more time should be spent using paid patient lead referral services like 1-800-DENTIST.

**KEY FINDINGS:** Once again, social media is revealed to be a source of anxiety for many office managers. This is both the top area where time has been increased, and the top area where “too little” time is invested. Despite mixed feelings about the importance of social media, office managers are devoting more time to this task – and still feel they’re coming up short.

While 48% of office managers feel that more time should be spent on practice marketing in general, they are unclear about which specific activities that time should be invested in. This suggests that more information may be needed in the industry to help dental offices prioritize their limited time.
SOCIAL MEDIA & ONLINE REVIEWS

We delved deeper into the topics of social media and online reviews – both of which have been shown above to be under-utilized and potentially problematic for a majority of dental offices. First, we wanted to understand who in the practice is responsible for monitoring and reacting to activity in these online spaces.

Who in the practice is primarily responsible for monitoring & posting on social media?

The office manager is the most likely person in the practice to be responsible for both social media and online reviews. The dentist manages these tasks in almost 15% of dental practices, followed by other front desk staff, “other” (most common answers were marketing personnel or family members), and third party services.

One interesting finding was that office managers are more likely to be responsible for monitoring online reviews than social media (a difference of 12.6%). One explanation for this may be our earlier finding that office managers tend to view online reviews as more important than social media – by almost exactly the same margin.

11.9% of practices say no one in the office is responsible for social media. 13.6% of practices say no one is responsible for online reviews.
We also asked office managers about the specific sites and services being utilized relating to social media and reviews. Facebook (77.6%), Google+ (57.2%), and Yelp (46%) are the clear leaders. Fewer than 30% of respondents reported using any of the other sites asked about.

Does your practice have a business profile page on any of the following sites? (apply)?

We also compared these results with our 2013 data and found that in almost all cases, usage had slightly increased. The significant exception is Yellowpages.com. Consistent with our earlier findings, usage of yellowpages.com has fallen by 12% in the last two years.

**KEY FINDINGS:** Social media and online reviews are most often the responsibility of office managers – but that is far from universal. In roughly half of dental practices, someone else is primarily responsible for these important activities.

Once again, yellow pages are revealed to be in decline. Although still used by nearly a third of offices, yellowpages.com has shown a dramatic drop in usage. Combined with our earlier findings, it seems likely that the trend will continue downward.

Over 75% of practices have a Facebook profile (an encouraging fact given that 24% of consumers say they’d now use the site to search for a new dentist[3]). However, this number may be misleading: a recent study found a large discrepancy between dentists who have a Facebook profile, and those who actively monitor it.[6] It’s crucial to note that in order for Facebook, or any social site, to be an asset, it must be actively monitored and maintained.
**STAFFING**

In our 2013 survey, office managers revealed that their workloads had grown faster than they could keep up – in short, across the board, office managers were being asked to do more with no increase in resources.

To understand whether that was still the case, we asked office managers whether the dental practice had increased (or decreased) their staffing in the last two years. Respondents in **58.7% of dental practices reported that they have added staff since 2013.**

![Pie chart showing staffing changes](image)

Next we asked office managers whether they felt the current staff was at an appropriate level. 62.3% of office managers said their practice has enough staff to support the number of duties their being asked to perform. 29.1% said they still do not have enough staff.

![Pie chart showing staff adequacy](image)

**KEY FINDINGS:** Not only have a large percentage of dental practices added staff in the previous two years – in roughly the same percentage, office managers now feel they are adequately staffed. This is a huge improvement over 2013, when the majority of office managers felt they lacked the necessary resources.

Conversely, a third of office managers reported that their staffing has remained the same, and approximately the same percentage feels they do not have the staff they need.
CONCLUSIONS

Dental office managers are held responsible for countless tasks in the dental practice, and that list has grown dramatically over the last few years. As the front lines for the practice, it is left to them to identify and adjust to new trends in technology, marketing and patient behavior – often without acknowledgement of the changes, nor commensurate increases in resources. Fortunately, over the last two years office managers have risen to the challenge.

The findings of our 2013 survey pointed to a high level of anxiety among office managers and prevalent worry that important tasks were being given insufficient time. Today, although office managers are still stretched thin, they are much more likely to report confidence and stability in the practice operations. This can be attributed to three important findings:

1. **Office managers are utilizing tools and services that streamline or automate many of their tasks at a much higher rate.**

2. **The majority of dental practices have hired additional staff in the past two years, reaching a level that feels appropriate to the office manager.**

3. **Office managers have become increasingly sophisticated about prioritizing practice activities, adjusting away from manual and print marketing approaches and embracing automation and online spaces their patients use most.**

In these three areas, office managers are expected and encouraged to continue to progress. It also seems clear that for practices that have been unable or unwilling to make these changes, the office manager has a high level awareness of what needs to be done. Hopefully this data will prove a useful tool to help facilitate change and aid in discussions with all other decision makers in the practice.

**Key Improvements**

Relative to 2013, office managers demonstrated significant improvements in many areas they had previously identified as problematic. One of the most notable is appointing. Office managers revealed they are blocking out more time in the schedule and, as a result, are consistently appointing new patients much sooner than in previous years. As this trend continues and more practices commit to seeing new patients within 48 hours, the impact on show-up rates and production will be considerable.

Large strides have also been made in embracing digital communication. Both in practice marketing and patient communication, office managers revealed a transition away from print media and more utilization of email, text messaging, and online sites and services. In an industry that is traditionally slow to adopt new technology, this is a significant achievement for dental office managers.

**Persistent Issues**

Social media continues to be a trouble spot, and an area with the least consensus among office managers. As a result, this is the top area where office managers still report large discrepancies between how much time is spent, and how much time should be spent.
Dormant patient reactivation also remains an area that is often neglected in the practice. Although office managers agree this is an important activity, as with previous years, it’s a task that receives little attention in many offices.

The solution for both issues may be to better utilize the practice’s patient communication software (which the majority of practices already have in place). Services like PatientActivator come standard with automated solutions for dormant reactivation and integrate seamlessly with social media sites. Office managers are encouraged to enable these features. Similarly, ReActivation Pro is a cost effective way for dental offices to reactivate their dormant patients, using live operators to take this important task off the front desk’s hands.

**Future Fixes**

Finally, there are two relatively new areas in dentistry where most practices still appear to be behind the curve, and these should be a primary focus going forward. The first is Yelp. Office managers consistently view online reviews as important – but fewer than 50% have claimed their practice profile on the most popular reviews site in the world. Yelp can no longer be ignored, and becoming active in this space should be an immediate priority.

Second, online and after-hours appointing are here to stay. At a minimum, the practice website should allow patients to request an appointment (but fewer than half of dental practices currently offer this feature). But allowing a patient to actually make an appointment after-hours is increasingly becoming an expectation for tech-savvy consumers, and practices that don’t adapt will miss a significant opportunity for growth. This is an area where office managers need to lead the practice into new territory, whether by having phone calls route to a staff member’s phone or utilizing a full-service product like 1-800-DENTIST that offers after-hours appointing.

**The Final Word**

Overall, the 2015 office manager survey revealed a tremendous amount of resilience among dental office managers, as well as a willingness to learn, evolve, adopt new tools, and juggle an ever-growing list of responsibilities.

As the person in the dental practice with the most insight into patient behavior, marketing effectiveness and daily operations, it will continue to be up to office managers to continue to guide their practices through an evolving marketplace and on to even greater success.
About Futuredontics®

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 8 million new patient leads to dental practices nationwide and now includes 24-hour appointing so you never miss an opportunity. PatientActivator®, the company’s patient communications, social and online reputation solution, increases production and boosts the practice’s online presence with automated appointment confirmations and tools for social media, reviews and much more. WebDirector® delivers dynamic dental websites, dedicated mobile sites and matching social pages. Futuredontics also 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.

For information about our suite of dental marketing products visit us at www.futuredontics.com

To get a FREE copy of any our additional resources, including whitepapers, videos, webinars and more, visit www.futuredontics.com/MoreResources.

Additional Resources

2 Futuredontics, Quick Scheduling Improves Patient Show-Up Rate by 56% – Marketing Matters, July 2012

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