

Whitepaper

WHAT DENTAL PATIENTS WANT

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Dentists spend a lot of time and money trying to get inside the head of patients. The goal is to “crack the code” that takes their patient acquisition, retention and treatment rates to the next level. But, what factors actually have the greatest influence on a dental patient’s decision-making process? To find the answers, Futuredontics® conducted a major national survey of consumer attitudes towards dentists and dentistry. This whitepaper is designed to provide some definitive answers to some of the most important questions facing dentists today, including:

- What do dental patients in 2013 want and expect from their dentists?
- How do patients go about selecting a new dentist?
- What factors lead to successful reappointing?

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This whitepaper analyzes the results of an online survey sponsored by Futuredontics and administered through an independent research firm. The report analyzes the answers provided by a nationwide research panel of consumers, designed to mimic the national population -- reflecting current U.S. census demographic distribution (e.g. geography, age, gender, income and ethnicity). More than 500 individuals participated in the survey. The margin of error is 4.4%.

Here are the major findings of this survey, along with recommendations on how you can best use this information to increase production and profitability at your practice.

#1 PATIENTS WANT A CLEAR, HONEST CONVERSATION ABOUT COST

Not surprisingly, the survey confirmed one widely held view of dentistry — 90% of patients surveyed said “dental work is expensive.” However, follow up questions revealed that perceived high fees, though a concern, are not an insurmountable obstacle to dentists interested in growing their patient base. A resounding **91% of patients said that they are more likely to continue patronizing dentists who engage in an honest, upfront conversation about costs.** Interestingly, the survey also found that the dental community’s unwillingness to discuss fees upfront is ranked as one of the biggest obstacles patients face when trying to find a new dentist.

Patients want to know the difference between “required and optional” treatments.

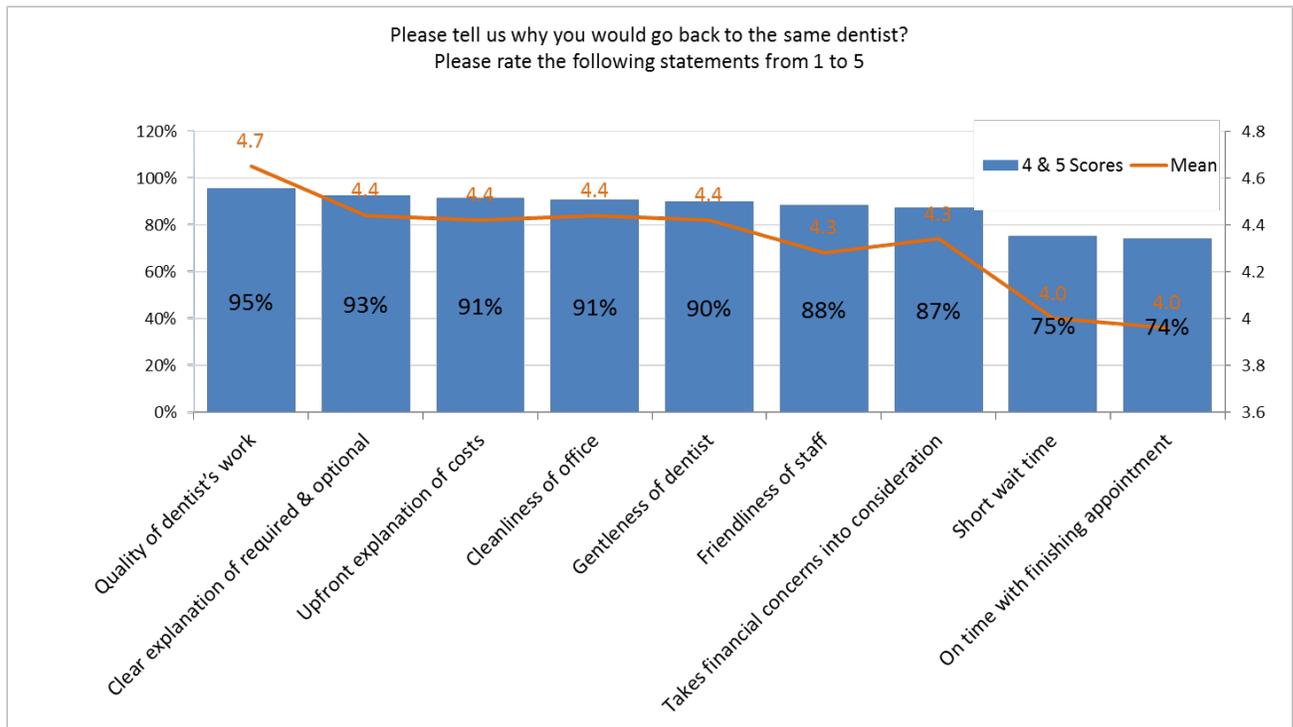
Another important factor for patients is a clear explanation of the difference between required and optional treatment. This was cited as one of the primary reasons patients return to the same dentist for additional treatment. The significance of this finding is magnified by the fact that **31% of respondents believe dentists try to sell them “unnecessary things.”**

Recommendations

As you know, most patients have not budgeted for comprehensive dentistry and are often surprised to learn what care will cost. You can improve the likelihood of treatment plan acceptance if you first determine the patient’s readiness to accept comprehensive care, and avoid over-presenting to those who are less prepared to hear what “optimal” dental health will ultimately entail. Also be aware that over 87% of patients report preferring dentists who take their financial concerns into consideration. With that in mind, we recommend that you:

- Communicate the long-term VALUE before discussing the price.

- Always discuss cost upfront, before beginning treatment.
- Avoid over-presenting during the first appointment. Establish trust first; then broaden the conversation to include the ideal long-term treatment plan.
- Offer treatment options (i.e. essential care vs. optimal care).



#2 PATIENTS WANT DENTISTS TO BE CONVENIENT

The survey revealed that dental practices can be their own worst enemy when it comes to new patient acquisition. As the chart below illustrates, 74% of patients surveyed said the “ability to take appointments right away” plays a decisive role in their decision to choose a dentist. Yet, only 22% of dental practices actually appoint new patients within 48 hours of their first call.¹ Not surprisingly, a significant percentage of patients complain of having difficulty finding a dentist who can see them within a reasonable timeframe.

Today’s busy patients demand convenience and accessibility. Extended office hours during the week are important to 57% of those surveyed. **Nearly half of patients look for dentists offering weekend hours.** Online appointment requests have emerged as the new must-have feature on dental websites.

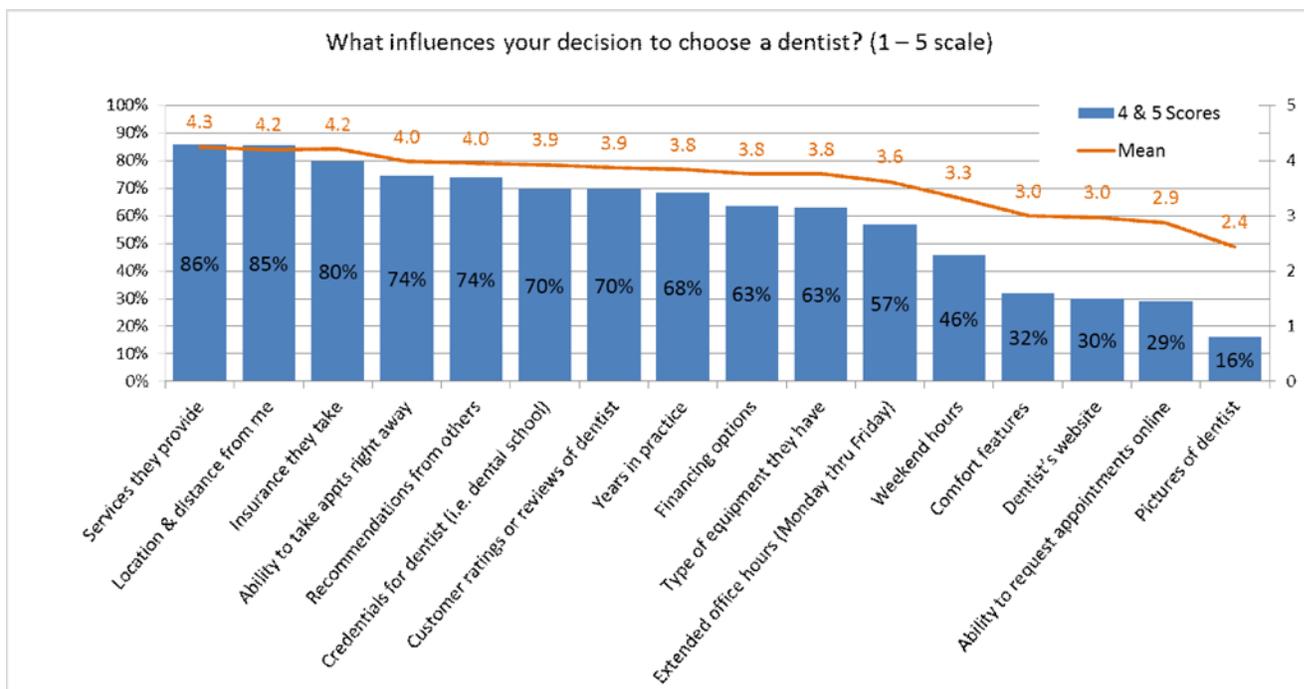
Appointing same or next day would improve show-up rates in the average practice by 56%!

Recommendations

There are many things dentists can do on the convenience front to make their practice more attractive to new and returning patients, the most important of which is to **always see a new patient within 48 hours** of their initial call. According to an internal Futuredontics study of real patient behavior, no-show rates rise exponentially for every day it takes to get them into the office. Furthermore, appointing same- or next-day could improve show-up rates in the average practice by 56%!² Other recommendations include:

- Start offering same-day or next-day scheduling options to all your new patients. Leave room in your schedule to fit them in right before lunch, etc.

- Offer a free office tour or just a 10-minute exam at a minimum if you can't get new patients in for a full appointment.
- Consider staying open late or opening early one or two days a week – and adding weekend hours.
- Add online appointment requests to your website and Facebook page. 1-800-DENTIST has software solutions than can streamline this process.



#3 PATIENTS WANT TO READ REVIEWS FROM OTHER PATIENTS

One of the most notable trends identified by this survey is the increasingly important role online reviews play in choosing a dentist. In a 2010 survey, 53% of dental patients said that online ratings and reviews influenced their choice of dentist. Today, as the chart above illustrates, that number has shot up to 70%. In fact, patients now say **consumer reviews are just important as a dentist's professional credentials.**

It makes sense that growing numbers of people are being influenced by what other patients say about practices online. The survey found that the number one difficulty people have choosing a dentist is that "It's hard to know the quality of the dentist's work." Another major concern is that "It's hard to know if a dentist is trustworthy." No wonder nearly half of all patients are now actively consulting online review sites like Yelp when searching for a dentist.

Patients now say reviews are just as important as a dentist's credentials.

Reviews from other patients lend credibility in the online marketplace. In fact, a recent study shows that 63% of consumers are more likely to patronize a business website if it has ratings and reviews. What's more, when it comes to quality of service, people are willing to pay up to 99% more for a service with an "excellent" rating than one with merely a "good" rating depending upon the product category.³

Recommendations

Clearly, **dealing with online reviews should be a top priority of every practice**. However, the reality is that online reputation management is one of the top three areas where dental offices concede that too little time is being spent.⁴ To remedy this, it should be the job of someone in the practice to regularly visit Google, Yelp and the other sites at least daily, and see if anything new has been posted about your practice. Another good idea is to set up a Google Alert, which will send you an email every time your name is mentioned in a public document. It's also important to regularly monitor social media sites like Facebook and Twitter for mentions of your practice, as patients may "review" your practice in these forums as well.

Although the work of monitoring and updating your online presence across the Web can be done manually, it can also be compressed into just minutes a day using a service like ReputationMonitor®. This groundbreaking tool enables you to monitor and interact with your practice's entire online presence — literally hundreds of review, directory and social sites — from a single screen. Additional recommendations include:

- Post signs in your waiting room and operatories requesting reviews on Facebook, Yelp, Google Places, etc.
- Provide an office iPad or tablet so patients can make Facebook check-ins from your practice.
- Solicit positive reviews from your patients in the office, with automatic surveys, or with custom emails.
- Have a strategy for dealing with negative reviews; step one of which is to always respond quickly and thoughtfully.
- Make sure that positive reviews appear on all of your online locations (e.g. Facebook, your website, etc.)

#4 PATIENTS WANT YOUR WEBSITE TO BE MODERN AND INFORMATIVE

The dominance of Web- and mobile-based searches for dentists means that having a feature-rich dental website is more important than ever before. In the above chart **30% of patients say their choice of dentist is greatly influenced by the quality of the practice's website**. That number is certain to grow with each passing year.

Many respondents complained about the difficulty of finding all the pertinent information they require to choose a dentist. It's worth noting that this complaint extends to the information — or lack thereof — available on dentists' websites. Specifically, patients expect dental websites to include specifics on services, location, insurance, appointment availability, credentials, patient ratings and types of equipment used. **Patients were especially frustrated by the absence of information about financing options and insurance** — two of the most critical factors involved with selecting a dentist.

Patients make judgments about the quality of your dentistry based on your website.

Currently, 64% of dental websites are over 3 years old and 32% are over 5 years old.⁵ This is a problem. The shelf-life of a website's design is only 3-5 years – and these older websites lack the design, features and functionality patients have come to expect of a modern business. For example, a relatively new feature, online appointment requests, is already a requisite for almost one-third of patients. Yet many dental websites don't offer this feature.

Some of the most interesting data about the importance of having a quality website comes from the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab. Their research found that almost 50% of consumers say a

website's design is the number one criterion for discerning the credibility of a company. In other words, patients are making a judgment — unfounded or not — about the quality of your dentistry based on your website alone. It's important to ask yourself: Does your website convey that your practice is modern, full-service, convenient, warm and friendly? The wrong website can seriously undermine patients' perceptions of your practice and your skills.

Another major problem facing dentists involves mobile search. **50% of internet searches are now conducted on smartphones.** The significance of this statistic lies in the fact that the majority of dental websites are at least three years old. The technical limitations of these older websites are such that they will not properly display on smartphones, and many still utilize outdated Flash technology. Frustrated consumers typically abandon these poorly displaying sites in a matter of seconds. Without a dedicated, smartphone-friendly mobile site, your practice will be practically invisible to new patients.

Recommendations

Every dental practice needs a website. And, a practice that hasn't updated its site in the past three years should do so immediately to provide patients with the user experience they expect of a modern dental practice. Practices needing help getting their website up to speed should look into WebDirector®. For one low price, WebDirector provides a state-of-the-art website with a dedicated mobile site and matching social media pages on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. A key advantage of WebDirector is that it's "dentist-friendly." Technical updates are automatic and at no additional charge; plus you can edit content yourself without paying for a webmaster. We also recommend that you:

- Make sure your website provides dynamic, complete information about your services, team, training, insurance/financing options and technology.
- Offer online appointment requests.
- Have a dedicated mobile version of your website.
- Work with professionals who specialize in dental websites, SEO and lead generation.

#5 PATIENTS WANT YOU TO WORK WITH THEIR INSURANCE OR FINANCIAL SITUATION

Insurance can be a divisive subject for dentists. No matter what your personal feelings on the topic may be, insurance and, to a slightly lesser degree, financing, are overriding concerns for the majority of today's dental patients. In the chart above, **80% of patients surveyed said insurance is an important factor when choosing a dentist.** That's up from 73% in 2010. Almost 70% of patients say they would use their insurance list to find a dentist. However, 30% of patients say it's difficult finding a dentist who takes their insurance. This ranks as the third most commonly cited problem patients encounter when searching for a new dentist. State Aid patients have a particularly challenging time finding dental care with less than 20% of dentists accepting Medicaid, etc. at this time.⁶

63% of patients say their choice of dentist is influenced by the financing options

It's clear that patients are worried about being able to afford dental care and they're appreciative of dentists who understand this. **63% of patients say their choice of dentist is influenced by the financing options offered.** 87% of patients surveyed say that a dentist taking financial concerns into consideration influences their decision to return. Currently, over 80% of practices offer third-party financing and almost 40% offer an in-house option.⁷

Recommendations

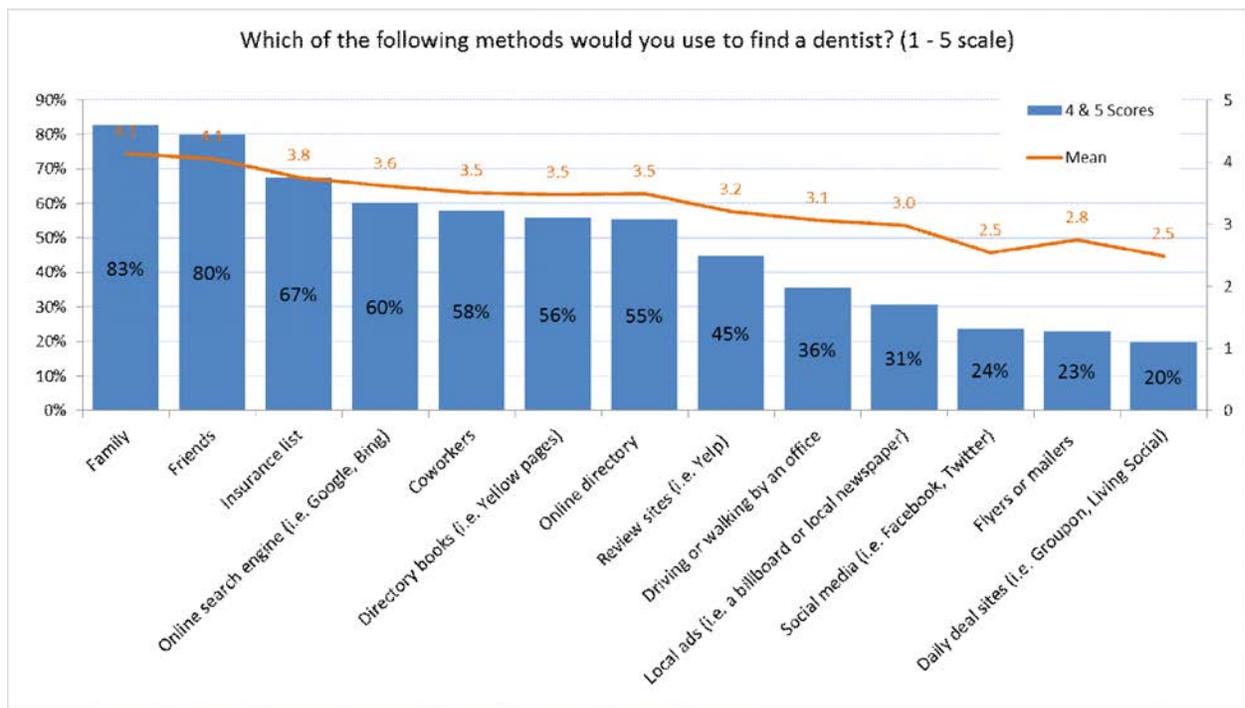
Insurance can be seen as both an opportunity and a headache for dentists. It's important to understand your patient base and if you want to expand, consider adding insurance plans. If you want to move away from insurance, know you're narrowing the market you can treat – and be sure the demographics of your neighborhood support that decision. Other recommendations include:

- Provide patients with a clear explanation about the difference between dental insurance and health insurance.
- Offer treatment plans based on what patients need – not on the coverage they have.
- If you offer financing, let patients know you're willing to work with them to get them optimal care.
- Whatever options you DO offer, make them obvious and available.

#6 PATIENTS WANT RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Patients still heavily rely on personal recommendations when they search for a new dentist. **74% of patients surveyed say recommendations from others influence their decision to choose a dentist.** Referrals from family, friends and co-workers are three of the top five methods consumers use to find a dentist. They rank at 83%, 80% and 58% respectively.

Word-of-mouth referrals are a win/win for dentist and patient. They offer dentistry's most cost-effective source of new patients. In a recent case study, a member of the 1-800-DENTIST new patient lead program ran production numbers from a single patient. She found that this individual was responsible for 14 secondary and tertiary referrals. Together they had generated a total of \$46,007 in production in under two years.⁸ With success like that, it's not surprising that 60% of dentists offer incentives to patients to encourage referrals.⁹



Recommendations

The most effective way to generate referrals is to be a dental practice worth recommending. Pay attention to the details that the survey shows matter most to patients. These include the cleanliness of the office, rapid appointing, the type of equipment used, patient-friendly hours and comfort features like TV, blankets, etc. Other recommendations include:

- Ask for referrals! Do it in person at the office and reach out to patients at home with email reminders from a patient communications service like PatientActivator®.
- Have a reward plan in place. It's preferable to offer a "Thank You" as opposed to an "incentive" due to regulatory concerns. If you do opt to offer incentives, (e.g. gift cards, etc.) be sure to check with your local board about your state regulations before implementing.

#7 PATIENTS WANT TO SEE YOU ONLINE IN THE SPACES THEY USE MOST

While it's not exactly news that the Internet has revolutionized the way people look for dentists, the degree of impact it has on your new patient acquisition efforts may surprise you. **Six out of ten patients are now using search engines (e.g. Google, Bing, etc.) to find dentists** (see above chart). That figure is rapidly approaching the number of individuals who rely on dental referrals from family and friends.

Today 55% of patients are conducting their searches via online directories like Yahoo! Local. Ratings-based review sites like Yelp play a role in almost half of all searches. And, as part of an important new trend, significant numbers of patients are now turning to popular social media sites like Facebook for dental referrals.

Six out of ten patients are now using search engines to find dentists.

Recommendations

The takeaway for dentists is recognizing that from now on a majority of new patients will come to their practice thanks to the Web. It is essential that you establish a positive, patient-friendly presence in the online spaces patients use most.

Much work is needed to be done in this area. According to a recent survey of dental professionals, **56% of dental practices have not claimed their free business listing on Google Places** — perhaps the single most important Web directory of all.¹⁰ Only 60% of dental practices report having a page on Facebook — the world's second most popular website¹¹ with 618 million active daily users.¹² Most troubling of all is that 15% of dentists say they "don't know" which sites they are listed on today.

As mentioned earlier, much of the work required to get your online presence in order can be easily accomplished using ReputationMonitor. However, in addition, we recommend that you:

- Standardize your listings for maximum SEO.
- Have branded profiles on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.
- Update Facebook and Twitter postings daily.
- Integrate Yelp reviews into your website.
- And most importantly, have a modern dental website.

Futuredontics' PatientActivator® also offers a variety of tools to help you reach new and existing patients in their favorite online spaces. This versatile automated marketing platform not only integrates with Facebook, it also helps collect patient reviews and pushes them to the sites that have the greatest influence on patients (e.g. your website, Yelp, Google, etc.).

SUMMARY

The findings of Futuredontics' dental patient survey offer dental practices a practical blueprint for improving their patient acquisition and retention efforts. As the whitepaper illustrates, today's patients demand significantly more information about dentists from a variety of trustworthy, Web-based sources. They also expect a greater degree of convenience and accessibility from dentists in everything from how and when they're appointed to the insurance and payment options they're offered. Dentists who are prepared to implement changes based on our findings and recommendations have an exceptional opportunity to grow their practices.

WHAT DENTAL PATIENTS WANT – SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS AT A GLANCE

- 90% say dental work is expensive
- 31% think dentists try to sell unnecessary treatments
- 91% will go back to the same dentist if they get an upfront conversation about cost
- 93% will go back if they receive a clear explanation of required vs. optional treatments
- 87% say that a dentist taking financial concerns into consideration is important
- 74% say getting an immediate appointment is a top reason to choose a dentist
- 57% look for a dentist who offers extended hours during the week
- 46% consider weekend availability when choosing a dentist
- 70% want to read online reviews from other patients before choosing a dentist
- 30% say their choice of dentist is influenced by a practice's website
- 80% indicate insurance is an important factor when choosing a dentist
- 63% are influenced by financing options
- 74% say recommendations from others influence their choice of dentist
- 60% turn to search engines to find a dentist

ABOUT FUTUREDONOTICS®

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.

To learn more about Futuredontics' suite of marketing products or our additional resources, call 1- 855-230-1313 or visit www.futuredontics.com

Additional Sources

- 1 American Association of Dental Office Managers & Futuredontics, The Changing Role of the Dental Office Manager – 2012 Annual Report, November 2012
- 2 Futuredontics, Quick Scheduling Improves Patient Show-Up Rate by 56% – Marketing Matters, July 2012
- 3 PeopleClaim, The Review of Reviews, January 31, 2013, <http://www.peopleclaim.com/images/review-of-reviews-peopleclaim.jpg>
- 4 American Association of Dental Office Managers & Futuredontics, The Changing Role of the Dental Office Manager – 2012 Annual Report, November 2012
- 5 Futuredontics, Dental Marketing in the Digital World – 2013 National Survey, May 2013
- 6 American Association of Dental Office Managers & Futuredontics, The Changing Role of the Dental Office Manager – 2012 Annual Report, November 2012
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- 8 Futuredontics, Case Study: How a Single New Patient Lead Generated \$46,007 in Production, October 2012
- 9 Futuredontics, Dental Marketing in the Digital World – 2013 National Survey, May 2013
- 10 Futuredontics, Dental Marketing in the Digital World – 2013 National Survey, April 2013
- 11 Top Sites, October 5, 2012, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>
- 12 Facebook Newsroom Statistics, April 22, 2012, <http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts>

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- Facebook 101
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- Dental Marketing Best Practices
- The Changing Role of the Dental Office Manager
- A Practice Divided (Office Managers vs. Dentists)
- Dental Marketing in the Digital World
- SEO Decoded

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- Google Hates Your Website
- Pain-Free Social Media
- The Dangerous Mind of the Dental Patient
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