

The COVID-19 **PATIENT EXPERIENCE**

What happens when risk-tolerant
patients fizzle out?



For the Dental Practice that wants to
STAND OUT & Grow!

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DENTAL MARKETING & TECHNOLOGY



Dental offices across North America have made a strong comeback since the COVID-19 shutdown. And the recovery, at this point, is holding steady.

Some stats... 98% of practices were open mid-August, and patient volume was at 73% of pre-pandemic levels, according to a poll by the ADA Health Policy Institute. Also, three out of four people who visited the dentist last year are comfortable going now.

Business has been booming, but will it last? Across the industry, there are concerns of a fall slowdown due to a drop in pent-up demand from "risk-tolerant patients." Currently, the industry average scheduling rate is 35% for upcoming appointments compared to over 50% last summer.

So, the big questions for your practice are, "how will I keep my practice going strong and not only achieve pre-COVID levels but exceed them to make up lost ground in 2020?" "Is my schedule empty or full in the coming months?"

Things are steady right now, but it doesn't mean it will stay that way. A second wave of the virus is possible, and if that happens, it will once again deter risk-averse patients from stepping foot in dental offices.



COVID-19 significantly changed consumer buying patterns. That means that dental patient buying behavior has changed too. Many patients and prospective patients, and particularly those who are risk-averse, will need help to get going again. Dentists need to find ways to educate their consumers and invite them back ... and do it consistently.

As a dental practice owner who is working hard to recoup losses, keep staff employed, and secure your practice value, you want to know which strategies will ensure your security when pent-up demand and risk-tolerant patients peter out.

Is there a false sense of security?

This paper will help you understand two key dental patient personas, how COVID-19 has impacted patient communication, and how you can finish the year strong.

What Happens When Risk-Tolerant Patients Fizzle Out?

With the speed at which business has picked up, some dentists have a false sense of security, according to Dr. Christopher Phelps, entrepreneur and best-selling author. He says that many practices, up to this point, are only seeing *risk-tolerant* patients – those who aren't concerned about new protocols and just want to be treated. And that means those same practices probably aren't seeing risk-averse patients who are sitting on the sidelines.

"The virus has created two main mindsets."
– Dr. Christopher Phelps

Profile Of The Risk-Tolerant Patient

Risk-tolerant patients are the ones who were ready to barge through your door as soon as they could. "They couldn't care less about the precautions we [dentists] have taken," says Phelps. Also...

- Risk-tolerant patients are eager to get out and be social
- They don't wear a facemask or they do so reluctantly
- They have no concerns at all about walking into your practice because they believe you've done your part to make it safe. You'd never put them in harm's way.

And because of the scarcity of appointments after a full shutdown, risk-tolerant patients have been very motivated to secure their spot and have dental treatments completed.

Profile Of The Risk-Averse Patient

Risk-averse patients are cautious patients. They've been wearing masks, washing hands frequently, using hand-sanitizer regularly, socially distancing, and even isolating. The complete opposite of risk-tolerant patients. Pre-pandemic, Phelps says, they are the ones who...

- had good insurance coverage
- bought into your practice's dental membership plan
- consistently scheduled checkups
- and called your office the moment something didn't feel right.

Risk-averse patients are anxious about going out in public while the pandemic continues. It will take more convincing before they book an appointment, even though they made up a considerable chunk of your production pre-pandemic.

So, how do you move someone who is risk-averse?

Conclusion: Risk-tolerant patients can only keep your schedule full for a few months at best, according to Phelps. Once you've treated the first wave of them, it will be some time before you see them again. If you want to keep your practice going strong now and through any future uncertainty, it will be **essential to raise the comfort level of the risk-averse crowd** while also meeting the needs of worry-free patients.

3 Tips To Close The Gap With Powerful Communication

Before COVID-19, many patients were already fearful of going to the dentist. Now, there's additional anxiety with fears of catching a potentially deadly virus. For this group of patients, your risk-averse consumers, as you know, the risk is often an illusion and by changing their mindset, you can assuage fears and get them back into your practice.

Patients will have different perceptions of what risk is, says Dr. Phelps. "There will be a degree of uncertainty among all patients." Those worries aren't limited to physical risk, but include financial risks, social risks, and time risks. These also include difficulty with change, and boy, has COVID-19 changed things!

So, can your practice help these patients remain calm and carry on? The answer is yes.

Consistent and effective communication is key. There's no such thing as too much of it, especially when a global pandemic is still raging. Patients need reassurance that your practice is safe and that putting their dental care on hold will be more detrimental to their overall health.

The good news is that both the CDC and the WHO say there have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 transmission via a dental office. Your patients and community need to hear this news consistently from your practice.

TIP #1 – GAIN INSIGHT INTO HUMAN BEHAVIOR.

It's not easy to change behavior, especially if it has been established over time. It's challenging to get a risk-averse person to return to a regular routine, especially while they could still be going through a stressful and uncomfortable time. By understanding what your patients might be experiencing, it will help you craft marketing and communication pieces that will better hit the mark. And that will impact their decision-making and how they perceive dental care.

TIP #2 – COMMUNICATE WITH PATIENTS & YOUR COMMUNITY.

Since the start of the pandemic and through each phase (shutdown, reopening, and recovery), dental marketing experts and clinicians have said communication is the number-one way to:

- alleviate fear through education
- share information about the extra health and safety measures at your office
- explain new check-in and check-out procedures
- introduce new dental technology (and how it makes the office safer by eliminating aerosols, etc.)
- set expectations to reduce any confusion, which always improves patient satisfaction
- gain momentum to get practice production back to stabilized and growing levels.

Dental offices have always adhered to strict sterilization processes to keep patients and their teams safe. And now, even more precautions are being taken. The truth is, the only place with better infection control is a hospital operating room, says Dr. Travis Campbell, dentist and author of the article *The Second Wave: Should Dental Offices Close Again?*

Campbell points out that patients should be aware that *The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data shows ZERO cases of COVID-19 linked to a dental office or among dental healthcare providers.*



TIP #3 – MAINTAIN COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR TEAM.

Your associates, receptionists, hygienists, and dental assistants are the backbone of your practice. And now, many of them are distressed and fearful, says Dr. Campbell. By being transparent and sharing information with them, they will remain motivated through tough times and work cohesively to achieve your dental practice's new goals. For your strategy to work, involving your team in patient communication strategies and development of messaging for patients-of-record and prospects will help you thrive. This is also a great way to strengthen office culture by adopting a "we're in this to win together" attitude.

Dental Marketing Solutions To Bring Patients Back

Now more than ever, it's critical to take a multi-channel approach to marketing your practice. **Why?** Because 62% of dental offices plan to spend the same or more on their marketing budget in the next 6-12 months. And also because it's a must to differentiate your practice to stand out among patients to win them back and gain needed market share, and to recoup COVID-19 losses and get production back to pre-pandemic levels.

Don't have room for new patients?

You need to make room.

Why?

Because annually, new patients are worth 2-3X that of an active patient. That means you need that additional revenue flowing back into your practice at least at the same pace as you had pre-COVID. Otherwise active patient activity will not bounce your production back up to previous levels. It just won't happen despite a full schedule of active patients.

Some offices are leveraging this as a community differentiator. Market your "new-patient day" or "new-patient scheduling block" and stand out in your community.

To get more of these high-value patients coming into your practice, you need to raise awareness of your practice in your neighborhood. There is expected to be good opportunity for those dentists who act. Many consumers have not been satisfied with the level of care – or attention – they've received from their current provider in recent months. Some dental offices shut off the lights, didn't communicate at all, and now upon re-opening, expect patient loyalty. It's going to be a long-haul for those practices. And others aren't expected to re-open at all.

Start new-patient marketing now and capture more of your market area. This will set you up for a more secure and profitable future.

And what about the balance of your patients, as mentioned earlier, who don't feel safe walking out their front door let alone through yours. It's going to take a consistent flow of messaging and focus on relationship-building to get them to take the plunge. But as soon as they do, they'll quickly realize their experience is as fantastic as it's always been and no compromises have been made. They'll want to rebook afterward.

Here are the best ways to target current and new patients...

- 1. Print communication.** Because it reaches 100% of your target audience, newsletters are the best way to not only raise awareness of your practice in your area, but to provide reassuring educational content. Direct mail is proven to connect with consumers on a personal level and generates 10-30X higher response than email.

Direct mail is the perfect option to inform both risk-tolerant and risk-averse patients about your practice and services, and for those who are a little skittish, you can include what your practice has done in recent months to keep them – and your team – healthy. A monthly targeted household drop will provide you with the consistency you need to ensure that your practice is known as the dental authority in your area to which patients should turn.

- 2. Email communication.** Email is a great way to help retain patients. Appointment reminders, dental membership plan promotions, and patient eNewsletters all help keep your name visible in patient homes and educate patients about the importance of regular dental care to support their oral and overall health. Send out new emails every month (or more with personal updates) and include quality content (e.g. oral health tips, recipes, office updates, new services, etc.).

3. **Social communication.** Social media use has skyrocketed since COVID-19. People are using it even more than ever to connect with the people and organizations they care about. One study across 30 markets showed that engagement soared 61% above regular usage rates. Share reassuring video messages and spread knowledge as it relates to dental care. A tip from Dr. Phelps is to post photos of patients who have been to your office, felt safe, enjoyed their experience, and are healthy. This will help change the mindset of risk-averse patients.
4. **Website communication, reviews, and paid media.** Include a sterilization and safety protocols page on your website. New patients are looking for this because they want to be sure the dentist they choose is doing everything by the book. Ask for patient reviews. This social proof influences buying decisions for 97% of consumers. And recency matters. 84% of consumers think that reviews older than 3 months aren't relevant. New reviews build trust. A tool like Practice ZEBRA's Review Booster makes getting and managing reviews a breeze. And since consumers are surfing online, make sure your practice is found when they're looking for dental services. An expertly crafted PPC (pay per click) campaign for your dental office will generate new patients.
5. **If applicable in your area, launch and promote a dental membership plan.** With COVID, many people have lost their jobs ... and their dental benefits. And as we know, lack of dental insurance is one of the top reasons 50% of adults skip necessary dental appointments. With a dental membership plan, you are more likely to bring these patients back into the practice.

On average, membership plan patients are worth 2X the value of non-insured patients. To get patients to sign up and renew, you must ensure they know about it. An automated communication system (like Practice ZEBRA's Dental Membership Plan Booster) that sends enticing texts and emails about your program to patients without insurance will help you convert more low-value, non-insured patients into high-value membership plan patients.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted patients' lives. And with the risk of a second wave, things could get harder for many before it gets easier. Be the dental practice who reaches out, who is visible, who shows patients they care. When your business provides value at a time when consumers need and want it most, you will differentiate yourself from others and stand out in a very crowded and uncertain marketplace.

At Patient NEWS, we've helped many of our valued clients get back on track with effective communication and marketing strategies. Through the pandemic, we extended thousands of dollars in discounts to support dentists across the country. It's made a big difference in their patient volume and in the appreciation patients have shown them.

We can help you with your patient and community communication strategies too.

Call (888) 699-2755 now to schedule a FREE CONSULTATION to review your situation and goals.

Step 1 Call now. We'll schedule a convenient Discovery Session with you, Dentist/Owner and your key decision makers, to understand your situation and goals and give you a quick overview of Patient NEWS & Practice ZEBRA.

Step 2 \$750 Free Value. We take care of this for you. Practice Analysis – demographics, market share, competitor analysis, online assessment, and connection to Practice ZEBRA.

Step 3 Free Plan. Solutions Meeting – review analysis and discuss patient communication plan.

What Is Practice ZEBRA?

The #1 dental marketing software solution to increase production & practice value.

Make your life easier and your practice more profitable!

Get the dental intel AND the marketing automation you need to improve practice value and long-term security with the dental industry's #1 dental marketing software. Be dazzled with actionable practice and marketing intelligence for your dental practice or group of dental offices.

Practice ZEBRA uses artificial intelligence (AI) for instant alerts so you can capture more new dental patients before they move on to another dentist. It improves practice efficiencies and identifies opportunities to maximize marketing effectiveness, improve patient retention, reduce attrition, and increase practice or group production.

Practice ZEBRA dental software includes:

- dental practice intelligence
- dental marketing intelligence
- call scoring & telephone training for dental teams
- dental office marketing automation.

You get a live, free demo of Practice ZEBRA for your practice as part of your consultation! Call us today to schedule yours. It's absolutely amazing and we guarantee you'll get value whether you decide to work with Patient NEWS and Practice ZEBRA or not!

Our team of dental marketing experts has been serving the dental community for 27+ years. We care about you and your profession and it would be our pleasure to serve you. Call today.

Consider the goals you want to achieve and their milestone dates. We can help you get there.

(888) 699-2755