

# TECHNOLOGY: The Foundation

Our quarterly series will examine how changing your relationship with tech could improve your outlook—mental and financial alike

## From the editors

For dentists, technology should be more than just the newest CAD/CAM machine or practice management software. It affects every part of your office, but too often it's undervalued or given short shrift while the practice focuses on "other things"—not realizing that those "other things" could be improved with the right technological touches.

This year, Dentaltown and Dentrix will examine how changing your approach to technology can make a big difference in the success of your practice. This, our first installment, will be your heads-up about what's at stake, and how most dentists ended up where they are today. Future quarterly installments will examine in greater detail how to reconsider your relationship with technology—and the possible rewards for doing so.

## Facing the future

Many dentists probably believe they're practicing the way they want to ... but also aren't aware of all the obstacles they actually face every day. They spend most of their time on only two things: keeping the lights on and trying to see as many patients as possible. If there's no red in the ledgers, expenses are controlled and patient expectations are met, they think everything's all right.

But nowadays an increasing number

of factors also affect private practices, and can compound the fact that we're not able to focus as much as we could on creating a fantastic, unique patient experience. It's impossible to do that if you're constantly trying to just keep the business in the black and patients and staff satisfied (not delighted or happy).

These problems come from two distinct areas: inside and outside the practice.

by Gerald Bittner, Jr., DDS

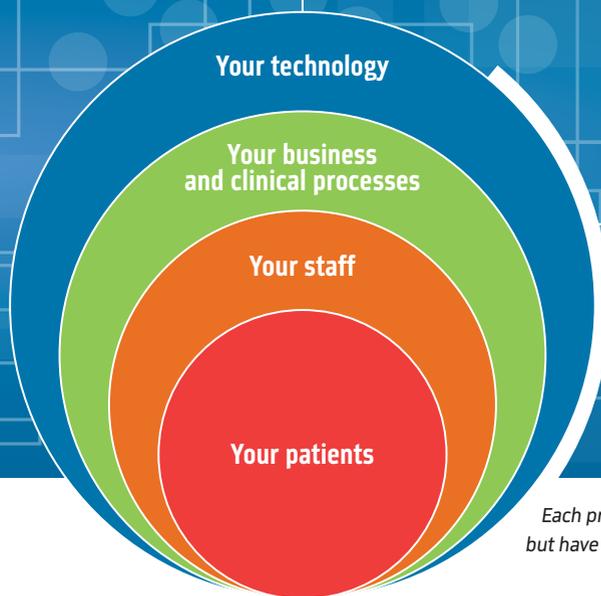


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Pacific School of Dentistry. He is a clinical instructor with the Rosenthal Group and lectures on aesthetics and laser dentistry all over the world.



# of Your Practice



Each practice has layers that operate simultaneously, but have their own issues and requirements.

## A two-pressure system

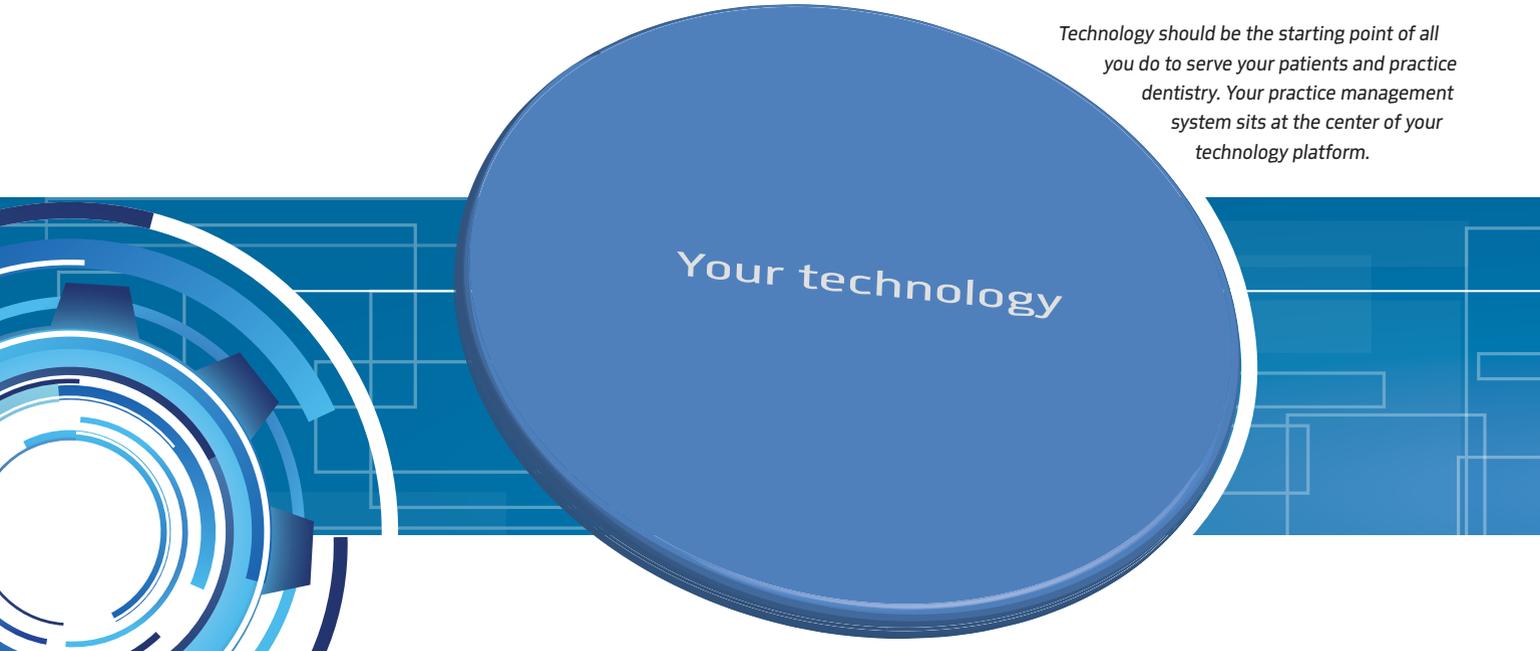
Problems outside the practice are often beyond our control, but the way we react to them is entirely within our control—and can make the difference between quickly finding viable solutions or creating more work for ourselves along the way.

- **Economic pressures.** Dealing with insurance, for example, can be a nightmare—changing plans, PPOs that come and go, the seemingly arbitrary nature of new codes, exceptions, exemptions and inclusions all compound into a system that didn't need to get more confusing.
- **Patient consumerism.** More people now see their oral health as a commodity—something that can be bought and haggled and negotiated, rather than the necessity it is. This has led many to step outside comfort zones to try to be everything to

everyone. You need to ask yourself: “How will my patients want to interact with me next week, next year, and five years from now?”

- **The rate of technology change.** As a consumer, watching technology advancements is exciting and engaging—every day there seems to be a new gadget, product or service aimed at making life better. But as a health-care provider, technology change seems to hit too often and too hard. How many of you have spent thousands of dollars to bring a new piece of equipment into the practice only to see it go obsolete by year's end—or, worse, collect dust on the shelf because it didn't deliver the ROI you thought it would?





*Technology should be the starting point of all you do to serve your patients and practice dentistry. Your practice management system sits at the center of your technology platform.*

## Your technology

Meanwhile, the problems inside a practice are completely different animals. Your own inefficiencies kill you—usually slowly. You often don't feel the severity of these issues until it's overwhelming.

If you're like most successful docs, you focus on the people. As you should—it's the people who make the practice run and make the practice possible, and a doc's focus should be on the patient and the clinical expertise going into the treatment. But past the clinical focus, a practice owner is also challenged with facing frustrated staff, high turnover, poor patient experience and unmet patient expectations. All these problems that come from inside the practice are often because dentists stop thinking strategically about their practices after they've addressed the clinical aspects of treatment.

Dentists start with the end in mind when it comes to treatment planning because they know it's the best practice for delivering the best care to patients. Carry that strategy over to the other aspects of the practice in a way that doesn't create extra work for us or our staff—and just as important, do it in such a way that creates automation and efficiency.

Without understanding what your problems look like, they will seem to continually come from every direction without rhyme or reason. You can, however, easily identify

how you react to those problems and make vital adjustments.

### What practice problems can look like

There's an important dichotomy in how dentists generally react to the problems they face in dentistry.

- The first reaction is **inaction**, where the issues related to patient and staff problems, business and clinical automation discrepancies, and technology that doesn't integrate into existing systems hit all at once, leaving us in a state of frustration. These combine to form a mess that most dentists don't have the time or expertise to fully attack.
- The other road that dentists find themselves traveling down when hit with all these problems is **distraction**. We've all had moments in life where we have a hundred difficult things to do, but rather than thinking strategically about where to start, we focus on just one specific thing. Often, in dentistry, it's when we convince ourselves that a single piece of new technology will solve all the problems we've been avoiding, or provide the "silver bullet" for that amazing patient experience.



A solid technology platform that automates some business and clinical processes will help your practice gain efficiencies it otherwise would not have.

But no single piece of technology can save a practice. Instead, the answer to the problems faced in a practice is in applying a strategic mindset to the foundation of it.

**Technology is the foundation; patients are the pinnacle**

Technology is an enabler, even though right now in dentistry many of us see it as more of a liability or a necessary evil, rather

than an asset or something more important. But technology is only a liability when you don't have a plan for it—and not only should you have a plan for technology, but every plan, every step you make for your practice should have technology at its core.

Imagine your practice as a pyramid: The foundation is the most important part of the structure, and speaking from the heart, we'd all say that our patients are

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*Well-planned and well-executed processes and technologies reduce stress on your staff. When repetitive tasks are automated, employees are freed up to do more innovative things and better serve patients.*



If you make the focus of your practice have the best technology-based foundation that you can, every other part of your practice will inherently thrive.

the foundation of our practice. Everything else—the business and clinical processes, our staff and our technology—plays second fiddle to our patients.

This is a philosophy that nearly every dentist subscribes to, and with the best intentions in mind. But it's also at the root of nearly all of our problems. It's instinctual to think of people before things, especially as healthcare providers. But think of the high level of dentistry you're able to provide to your patients because you're using modern equipment that even 10 years ago was practically unheard of.

If your house has a solid foundation, it will last longer and stand stronger than a house with a poor foundation. It's common sense. Your technology is no different. It should be the starting point for all you do to serve your patients and practice dentistry. You must have a vision for what your products will enable you to do for your patients, day in and day out.

Every practice is made up of layers: people (patients and staff), processes (business and clinical), and technology (hardware and software). Each of these layers depends on the layer below it to make things work smoothly.

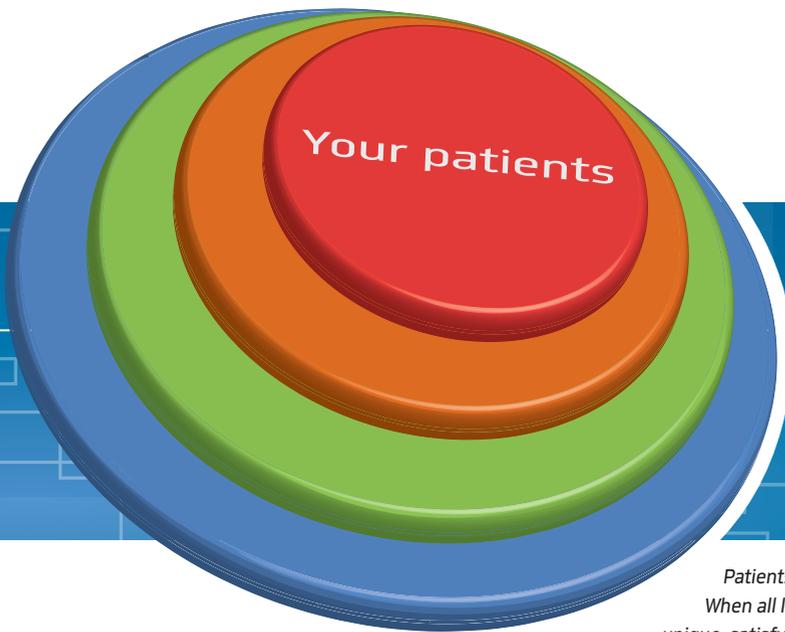
For example, your patients and staff depend on your established processes for a

good experience in the office—taking payments, insurance management, treatment planning, scheduling and the like. Your processes, in turn, depend on integrated technology to make it an easy-to-manage and automated experience. Your practice management system needs to talk to every part of your practice to help manage things your people shouldn't have to.

Placing technology at the foundation of your practice doesn't mean putting patients out of focus. It is possible to provide the best patient experience possible because your equipment allows you the freedom to focus on dentistry, not on the problems and broken processes affecting so many other practices.

If you have a solid technology platform that automates both clinical and business processes, then your practice gains efficiencies it wouldn't otherwise have. Likewise, if your technology addresses the processes of your practice, you will exert less stress on your staff and free them up to be innovative and creative. Imagine every repetitive and mundane task your staff currently must do. Now imagine all those tasks have been automated.

Most important, a foundation built on technology means bringing everything back to a great patient experience. Your patients



*Patients want to know that you care and have expertise. When all layers are working together, you'll be able to craft a unique, satisfying experience that can't be duplicated elsewhere.*

want to know you care, and want to know you have expertise. All the layers of your practice working together can provide a great lasting impression.

### An example in practice

All of this is just talk without specifics. Let's get into one case where well-implemented technology positively affects every other part of the practice: intraoral scanning and patient records. Many docs like using intraoral scanning. It often provides a more clinically accurate picture and assists in diagnosing, and patients love that they're not getting the goop. It is a win-win, at least at first.

As a dentist, if you take that scan and it's sent to reside somewhere in your system rather than directly into the patient's record, there's an inefficiency—and frankly a very basic bit of oversight. If that inefficiency was addressed it would save time, decrease the need for a mundane, repetitive task, and put more clinical prowess in the hands of the doc.

And while it might not seem like a big deal, think of how many times you and your staff are accessing patient records or having to manually update those records because the products you have don't talk to each other. It's not just with scanning that these kinds of problems arise. Everything from diagnostic software to lasers to chairside milling all have their share of extra—and unneeded—steps.

Integration—not just having technology—is key. We all have technology in our practices. It's important that any technology that a dentist buys with the goal of bettering the patient experience is not a technology that adds processes or steps to daily business. That creates inefficiency, and over time, you'll find that intraoral scanner sitting on the shelf because it created extra work instead of saving time.

There are countless examples in every practice of how a change in technology, or how we prioritize it, will bring us from merely surviving among the problems we have and truly thriving in an industry that demands the best from us every day.

The key to start practicing dentistry the way you want and standing out from the crowd is using technology as a stepping stone and starting place to build a better experience for the people in your practice. And that doesn't mean spending loads of money on new equipment or software. It means building a connected fabric of communication in your practice that will reach every corner, every piece of equipment, every person in your practice and elevate them all. ■

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