

THE MILLENNIAL



EFFECT

To help build a profitable pediatric dental practice, you've got to learn how to connect with Gen Y parents

Pediatric dentists have some unique marketing and practice growth advantages compared with other dental specialists. It's relatively easy to define their audience—most pediatric dentists treat infants through teenagers, and may even specialize in a particular subset. There also tends to be less competition within the specialty than in other fields, such as cosmetic dentistry and adult rehabilitation.

However, pediatric dentists now face the challenge—and opportunity—of connecting with a patient-parent base that consists largely of millennials. If you're a pediatric dentist, it's vital to the health of your practice for you to understand some common characteristics of this group, whose buying and decision-making habits vary from their older peers.

Millennials differ from previous generations in how they choose and maintain dental and other medical treatment. While there isn't much research available on the dental habits of millennials with respect to their children, we can pull from quality general health care studies to draw conclusions. Most important, we'll also discuss what these conclusions might mean for your practice.

by **Steve Klinghoffer**



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The millennial shift

“Millennials” are generally defined as individuals between 18 and 34 years old in 2015. In 2016, the millennial generation was on track to outnumber the baby boomers as the nation’s largest living generation, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Importantly, millennials are tremendously diverse. The Brookings Institution concludes that racial diversity will be this generation’s most defining meaningful characteristic. So, while we explore some generalizations, be mindful of the many exceptions. That said, the more you understand these parents’ common characteristics, the better it will be for your practice.

Millennials have high expectations.

Most millennials were raised with constant access to information and have an array of expectations to accompany that. It’s no surprise that, being aware of the plethora of options and conveniences available to them, they have high standards when it comes to the care and treatment of their children. They expect dentists to both have an excellent chairside manner and to keep up with advances in technology, from your reception check-in to your billing back end. They believe your office should showcase the fact that you’re efficient and modern, and you provide the best quality of care.

The good news is that high-performing pediatric practices are up to this challenge. Dentists understand that patient-facing resources such as the practice website, social media sites and newsletters must confidently project a successful and healthy practice. If you’re a high performer, families who come to your practice will experience a modern, efficient office with staff members and processes that make good use of parents’ time. If millennials second-guess any of those factors, they’re more likely to take their children elsewhere. You must be responsive to their needs, thoroughly answer their questions and make it easy to schedule and update appointments.

High expectations mandate that your practice be forward-thinking in its use of technology. Millennials don’t want phone calls reminding them of appointments; they want email and text notifications. A Salesforce and Harris Poll survey found that 71 percent of millennials want to be able to book appointments through mobile apps. If your practice isn’t there yet, consider it a requirement.



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Millennials don't value loyalty.

It's painful for hardworking dentists to hear, but loyalty isn't that important to millennials, who change service providers more frequently than previous generations did. They can easily find validation to support a buying decision—or counter it—from online research, review sites, their social networks and feedback from their friends.

This makes patient retention more critical to the health of your practice. It's more important than ever to work hard to keep your patients—even those whose treatments have lapsed. Not only is it important to retain existing patients, but you must also work to recover lost patients. (One method of boosting patient loyalty and retention is newsletter marketing, which reminds parents of the importance of keeping their children on a regular treatment schedule and of the specific benefits of your practice.)

Their attitude toward health care is different.

An example of how the loyalty trend for health care is waning: The nonprofit FAIR Health reported that millennials are more prone to use retail clinics, urgent care centers and emergency rooms for nonemergency

care than are other age groups. (This is a matter of convenience, because such locations usually are open longer.)

The medical scheduling company Zocdoc has found that 93 percent of millennials don't schedule preventive-care physician visits. And you're probably well aware of the Gallup poll showing that one-third of U.S. adults had not visited the dentist in a recent year, revealing an ongoing decline in routine dental visits by patients of all ages.

Pediatric dentists must work harder—or at least smarter—to maintain loyalty with this generation. Of course, the No. 1 factor in keeping them coming back is excellent patient care. There's no substitute for that. But how else can you build loyalty with millennial moms and dads?

1. Educate them.

Your patients' parents are surrounded by information and voraciously consume it all day: the first words they read on their smartphones with still-blurry morning eyeballs; the news they hear via satellite radio on the way to work; the links their friends share on social media.

Be sure to take advantage of opportunities to educate this group. Have printed materials in your office to read while they wait, and regularly send a practice e-newsletter.

Opportunities like these reinforce the parents' need to make oral health a priority for their children, including those younger than 2 years old. Also, be sure to add parent or patient testimonials to the mix, so you can educate while illustrating the specific successes of your practice.

2. Use incentive programs.

Another way to build patient loyalty is to provide reasons to think favorably about your practice. This can be done through drawings for referrals, patient appreciation parties and a patient-of-the-month feature, to share a few examples. Be on the lookout for ways to reward your patients and their parents for their loyalty.

3. Keep in touch.

When pediatric dentists are out of sight, they're out of mind—it's easy for parents to put off making appointments for their children. To combat this and to optimize loyalty, keep in consistent touch with patients' families. Social media is an ideal way to do this, in addition to regular newsletters sent to families, which have the added benefit of educating readers, as mentioned earlier.

Particularly for the millennial crowd, your practice should be vigilant to prevent parents from shopping around.

They listen—and talk—to friends and family.

While the importance of dental-review sites and search engine optimization is well-known, friends and family exert significant influence over millennials' decisions about their health care providers. For example, a Nuance Communications survey of more than 3,000 health care consumers found that 70 percent of younger millennials (ages 18–24) chose their primary care doctor based on recommendations from family and friends. What are your patients' parents telling their friends and family about your practice?

Make it easy for parents to refer you and share their dental experiences with friends, family and colleagues. Do this through referral incentives and patient appreciation activities, and by keeping in touch on a regular basis via print and online.

They crave information—and want it right now!

Millennials rely heavily on social media for health-related advice and decisions. They aren't alone in their consumption of online reviews, but this generation considers these reviews a litmus test for dental credibility. If a physician or dentist has no reviews, or negative ones, there's little chance a millennial will consider that practice unless a friend or family member has raved about it.

Online reviews are only one aspect of this



craving for information. Millennials often need more information before they'll even consider a dentist for their children. Once one is selected, they typically move quickly through the vetting process. Your website and social media sites—on any device, including mobile—must make it easy for them to contact your office, find details that validate your credibility and get a feel for your practice. A virtual tour of your office is highly recommended. Combine great content with prominent “calls to action” and ease of contacting your office to answer questions and schedule appointments.

To ensure you're up to the millennial challenge, give your current and prospective patient resources a fresh look, from your Facebook page to the mobile version of your website to your e-newsletter. Can a new patient easily contact your office and ask for key information? Do all the links work

and take the reader where they should? If not, millennial parents looking for a dentist will move on to another practice.

They care about costs.

According to Becker's Hospital Review,¹ 50 percent of millennials avoid seeing a health care provider to save money. Not only that, but compared with the general population, millennials are more likely to ask for a discount, request a less-expensive treatment option, ask for a price check or dispute an insurance decision, according to a report from PwC's Health Research Institute.²

To address this, dentists should be clear and transparent when communicating costs and fees. Ensure that your billing office understands the clarity requirements. With top-quality marketing resources like

the ones discussed previously, you'll help communicate the excellence of your practice.

But you must also be mindful to show that you deliver value. Millennials want the best for their children, but they will scrutinize materials so they aren't charged more than they believe is fair.

The millennial generation holds a great deal of potential for pediatric dentists. How will you position your practice to make the most of this opportunity—and overcome the challenges? ■

References

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