It was a move the dental industry had expected for quite some time. But it still created a buzz when Kodak announced last year it was getting into the dental digital radiography business. One reason for the excitement: instead of acquiring a stand-alone digital radiography company, Kodak picked PracticeWorks, Inc., the dental practice management company that had itself purchased Trophy Radiologie less than a year prior. So the first question on many people’s mind was: Why a software company?

KODAK'S MOVE INTO
Signaling New Leadership Role To

by Carol Murphy, Executive Editor
Kodak’s acquisition of PracticeWorks was based, in part, on the company’s conviction that dental practices will increasingly seek to integrate digital imaging with other data. The critical tool for this task: practice management software, like PracticeWorks’ SoftDent, pictured here.

Kodak’s entry into digital imaging will not, however, lessen their commitment to traditional dental x-ray film. Pictured here is their newest—and fastest—intraoral film, Kodak InSight intraoral dental film. InSight film lets dentists reduce radiation exposures by as much as 60 percent compared to D-speed films. It’s available with SureSoft packets, which have a cushioned edge for optimal patient comfort.

Overnight, Kodak’s acquisition of PracticeWorks and Trophy launched the company into the dental digital imaging marketplace. Their flagship intraoral digital product is now Trophy’s RVGui digital intraoral sensors, which provide true resolution greater than 21 lp/m.

Kodak’s involvement in digital imaging includes its digital cameras, including this Kodak DX4900 Dental Digital Camera Kit. The Kit features a 4.0 megapixel zoom digital camera optimized for dental photography: a close-up lens system and built-in distance and framing guides ensure professional, properly framed views of patient teeth and other areas of interest.

**DIGITAL RADIOGRAPHY**

Span Imaging, Information Management

**IMAGING AND INFORMATION**

One person in a position to answer this is David Allen, director of new business development for Kodak’s dental systems. Allen played a lead role in evaluating Kodak’s strategy relative to direct digital—including evaluating prospective acquisition strategies. As a result, he often finds himself being approached by people curious about Kodak’s latest move. “It’s easy to understand why we would want a direct digital company,” he says. “We have a long history of leadership in dental imaging, and the Kodak medical business has a long history developing and manufacturing digital x-ray technology. But what dentists want to know is why Kodak would be interested in PracticeWorks.”

The answer, Allen says, rests on a fundamental fact: digital radiography is more than a one-to-one swap for x-ray film. Instead, like all digital imaging technology, as soon as it’s deployed, it becomes part of a broader digital information stream. “Digital images are more than images. They’re also digital data. So when you start acquiring x-rays digitally, you...”

Another key reason Kodak acquired PracticeWorks and Trophy: the companies’ technology assets, such as the TrophyPan digital panoramic imaging system—the first panoramic imaging system in dentistry designed from the ground up to be truly digital. TrophyPan is also software-driven and seamlessly integrates with PracticeWorks’ key practice management software products.

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need to integrate those images with other types of data that flow through and out of the dental office—otherwise, you fail to leverage the full benefit of your technology investment.”

Allen points out the relationship of digital imaging to information processes has Kodak’s full attention, not only in the dental business, but corporate-wide. “Across all our lines of business, we’re embracing ways to leverage the inherent flexibility and portability of digital technology to enhance the value of images.”

Within dentistry, the merging of imaging and information systems means Allen and his colleagues look beyond imaging per se to the broader questions of how digital data is used by dental practices—and how it might be used, in new ways, in the future.

Which brings us back to dental practice management software. “Practice management software is the information backbone of the digitized dental practice,” Allen says. “When dentists install a software application like SoftDent or PracticeWorks Office, that system becomes the place where patient digital images and other components of the electronic patient record come together.”

Al Fiore, vice president of marketing and corporate development, (PracticeWorks), also sees the joining of imaging and information management as crucial to the computerized dental office. “Diagnostics is the heart of dental patient care, and imaging is the foundation of dental diagnostics,” he says. “In a digital dental practice, diagnostic imaging data is one of the key components of the practice management work flow.”

For Allen, this means Kodak can’t confine its vision to simply providing digital image capture or output technology. “On the contrary: we believe our responsibility goes far beyond that.”

How far? Allen’s answer hinges on one word: integration. “As soon as you start linking components of the digital information chain together—digital radiography systems, digital cameras, electronic patient records, computerized billing applications—seamless integration becomes crucial. These components have to talk to each other. They have to pass data among themselves. If they don’t, instead of streamlining a practice, the technology adds overhead to it and therefore costs. And of course, it becomes a huge hassle for the dentist and his or her staff.”

In fact, Allen says, protecting dentists from integration nightmares figures largely in Kodak’s decision to acquire PracticeWorks. “We’ve been working side-by-side with dentists for over 100 years,” Allen says. “Kodak is one of the most trusted brands in dentistry, and we see it as a strategic imperative for us to retain that trust into the future.”

There’s no question the digital radiography business has looked, in some ways, like a technological hodgepodge. Allen believes many dentists have hesitated to transition to digital for precisely this reason. He also believes this is about to change. “We fully expect that by pulling practice management software and digital radiography into the Kodak family, many dentists who had legitimate concerns about digital imaging and moving to an electronic patient record will feel more comfortable. For the first time, they’ll be able to turn to one manufacturer that is committed to standing behind all the critical components of a digitized dental practice.”

It helps, he adds, that Kodak also brings the advantage of long-term stability. “It’s no fun to invest tens of thousands of dollars into a piece of equipment, only to have subsequent concerns on the future reliability of the company. Dentists know that Kodak has been around since the dawn of dental radiography. They know we’ll be around for a long time to come. We’ll be here to stand behind the imaging and information systems that we sell.”

So does this mean that Kodak is now a software company, not just an imaging company? Allen says yes. “The fact is that with digital imaging, you have to attend to the entire digital workflow. Acquiring PracticeWorks gave us the way to do this. And don’t forget, it’s not only the software we acquired—it is also the people and the intellectual resources within PracticeWorks and Trophy.”

**IMAGING EXCELLENCE**

Kodak’s interest in the dental imaging and information systems workflow is one reason they selected PracticeWorks, but it’s not the only one. Kodak also took a hard look at the third company involved in the deal—Trophy. Allen, who has kept close tabs on dental digital radiography since its infancy, notes the issue of image quality was always on the table. “Kodak’s imaging reputation is based on meeting the highest quality standards. It was critically important that we maintain those standards with our digital radiography strategy.”

So a team of Kodak imaging specialists subjected a number of direct digital radiography systems to a battery of tests. Trophy’s systems, he says, emerged a clear winner. “Based on our internal evaluations of sensors—sensors we know of and that are on the market today—we found that Trophy’s clearly had the best overall image quality and resolution.” As a result, Allen says, Kodak was confident about attaching its name to Trophy’s products. More than confident, in fact—eager. “It’s exciting to broaden our portfolio with such a strong technology line-up,”

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Allen says, citing in particular Trophy’s RVG intraoral sensor, the new TrophyPan digital panoramic system and the new TrophyPanC cephalometric attachment to that system, which is currently awaiting FDA clearance in the United States.

Dominique Vincent, president and CEO, (Trophy), notes that advancements in Trophy’s technology have lessened the importance of image quality as a factor in dentists’ film or digital decisions. “The image quality of Trophy’s sensors not only makes them stand out when compared to other digital radiography systems. It also means that, when comparing film to the Trophy RVG and TrophyPan systems, dentists no longer have to weigh a trade-off in image quality. They can concentrate on other factors, like time-to-image, overall costs and impact on work flows.”

This leads to another way Kodak can now add significant value for dentists making technology decisions. “Evaluating the relative advantages of film and digital isn’t always a straightforward exercise. But with this acquisition, Kodak became the only technology-neutral dental radiography company,” Allen says. “As a result, we don’t have a vested interest in pressing dentists to switch to digital, or to stay with film. We can partner with dentists to help them make the change to digital when it is right for them to do so.”

That implies Kodak realizes that not all dentists are on the same technological timetable. So it’s no surprise that Allen also emphasizes another point: Kodak has no intention of backing away from its traditional x-ray film product line. Quite the opposite. “There’s a reason that x-ray film has been the diagnostic imaging gold standard for over 100 years,” he says. “It’s a proven technology that incurs relatively low start-up costs. And the quality of Kodak x-ray film speaks for itself. Our intraoral film products, Kodak InSight Film and SureSoft Packets, along with our Ektavision Extraoral Film, are still state-of-the-art products with sizeable market shares. We believe many dentists will continue to rely on these products for the foreseeable future. But when it is time for them to migrate to digital, we will be there for them.”

Kodak is equally committed to its other products, such as digital cameras. “As a corporation, we have tremendous imaging resources available on both the film and the digital side. Our dental team is able to tap these resources and tailor products to meet the needs of dental professionals. Our dental digital camera line is a great example. The Kodak DX4900 Dental Digital Camera Kit has been tremendously successful—in fact, DentalTown readers and online members selected it for a Townie Choice Award last year. And our intent is to continue to advance dental digital photography as well as digital radiography.” Trophy’s intraoral x-ray generators and intraoral video cameras, Allen adds, are also welcome complements to Kodak’s product line-up.

Allen is also quick to speak of future imaging technologies. “When you start to think in terms of imaging science—where digital imaging research and development can take the dental industry—that’s when things really get exciting,” he says. “We’re using processing algorithms in our medical radiography business today that have tremendous potential for dental imaging. And that’s only scratching the surface.” Technologies like 3-D imaging and computer-aided diagnostics are definitely within the realm of possibility. “Our goal,” Allen states, is to make dental imaging technology more intelligent—to make it do a better job capturing, interpreting and displaying diagnostic information. When we do that, we believe we’ll be able to offer dentists powerful tools to help them in their diagnostics, which in turn will help improve their patient outcomes.”

Which brings Allen back, once again, to the subject of imaging and information systems—and the key role of practice management software. “Dental diagnosis still rests, in many cases, solely with the primary dental practitioner. But more and more, dentists are tapping into a larger data matrix. They’re sharing digital images with specialists and physicians, as well as labs and insurance companies. They’re participating in virtual consultations. But they need to do these in a manner that maintains the necessary security and privacy of the patient’s information.

“Kodak’s responsibility is to help dentists find ways to do this—which means, to manage and, if necessary, share clinical information in such a way we maximize the benefits to the dental office and its patients.”

“Kodak is, and always will be, a leader in dental imaging,” Allen concludes. “But as we move forward, we are also committed to being a leader in dental imaging and information systems in partnership with the dental professional.”

(Note: Kodak, PracticeWorks, Trophy, Trophy RVG, PracticeWorks Office, SoftDent, TrophyPan, InSight, SureSoft and Ektavision are trademarks.)