

Embracing Online Scheduling

Why You Should Be Considering It For Your Office & How To Choose The Right One For You



As a dental office manager, I'm sure you know how scary bringing new changes to your team can be. Policies, procedures, and new software updates are almost always met with trepidation and pushback. Despite some of the challenges that accompany the changes, it's time to start embracing these advances because they can benefit you and your team.

One of the scariest changes for the front office team can be adding an online scheduling option for patients. Several years ago, when I first heard about the possibility for patients to schedule themselves, I saw nothing but red flags. How will they know what times to schedule? How will they know which column to schedule in? How will they know how much time is needed for each procedure? There are scheduling nuances that may only be handled partially by software, but many of them have come a long way in recent years.

Here are some things to look for when deciding if an online scheduling option is suitable for your office:

FIRM AND FUNCTIONING SCHEDULING PARAMETERS

The best online scheduling programs allow you to control all scheduling options: what kind of appointments can be booked, when they are scheduled, and which services are attached to the appointment. Some can even connect to blocks in your schedule; online appointments can only be scheduled exactly where you want them. Conversely, you can use blocks to restrict certain times from being scheduled, just as you would in the office. You can set appointments to be allowed for same-day scheduling or future scheduling only, and some programs will even let you direct them to specific days, times, or even certain providers, just like you would if you were

MEMBER ARTICLE | BY SARAH HAMLIN, MA, FAADOM



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talking to them on the phone. Some software also has the option to ‘blacklist’ patients that you don’t want to have the option to schedule online. Scheduling programs are meant to be an extension of you and your front office team!

ALERTS ABOUT SCHEDULED APPOINTMENTS

Even though the scheduling software may be thorough, it’s still essential for the office team to be notified when a patient schedules online so you can double-check the appointment. These alerts offer peace of mind that you can still control the schedule and adjust as needed. It also allows you to reach out to the patient with personalized communication so they know they can reach someone if needed.

AUTOMATED APPOINTMENT REMINDERS AND PAPERWORK LINKS

Automated reminders (by text and email) that include an option for online paperwork submission are a huge time saver for your team and patients. An extra bonus is if your paperwork and updates can be written back into your practice management software, updating patient information and medical histories automatically. Imagine a new patient who schedules themselves, completes their paperwork immediately after scheduling, and needs nothing from you other than friendly conversation when they arrive in your office; that’s the dream, right?!

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USER-FRIENDLY INTERFACE

Make sure you take the time to investigate the scheduling program from the patient's point of view. Patients will be more likely to use it if it's simple. Some software allows you to create tracking links to track where patients are scheduling from. Of course, having a scheduling option on your website is ideal, but being able to include a link to schedule recall reminders on social media and your Google business page can help you discover where patients are finding you. Another option is to add a comment in your voicemail message about being able to schedule online, and you can help capture patients no matter what time they call.

We all know it can be hard to get patients to respond to our requests when we reach out to them, so why not remove a barrier to getting them on the schedule? When you use an online scheduling option,

patients can schedule when they have time, even long after your office is closed. Similarly, if you ever have to cancel patients on the fly (for things like a sick team member or inclement weather), including a link to schedule in your text or email and mentioning in your voicemail message that they can reschedule online can help soften the blow of having to inconvenience the patient.

Despite my initial skepticism, online scheduling has been a real game-changer for my office. Our patients love being able to schedule appointments on their own time, and my team loves not having to spend so much time on the phone. Less time tethered to the phones means we can focus more energy on patient engagement, prioritizing the patients in the office. If you're looking to add some efficiency to your office, take some time and research all the online scheduling options available; your team and patients will thank you! ■



MEET THE MEMBER

Sarah is a full-time dental office manager with over a decade of dental experience. She holds a Master's Degree in Professional Communications and was inducted into the 2023 Class of AADOM Fellows. In her spare time, Sarah enjoys all the Pacific Northwest has to offer with her husband, kids and dog.

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