The Internet for Dentists

PROTOCOL FOR THE DENTAL OFFICE

For many dental offices, the Internet will change how information flows in and out. It is therefore important to implement an office protocol to let your staff know how to conduct business using this new technology. The key to using the Internet lies in establishing a process that will enhance your communications with your patients.

1. Netiquette. Learn the rules of communication on the Internet before implementing the technology. For example, using CAPITAL letters in a message is considered yelling.

http://www.fau.edu/netiquette/net/index.html

2. E-mail newsletters. Many dental offices have already begun sending a newsletter to their patients via the Internet. However, people are tired of receiving mail they have not requested. Unwanted e-mail can actually have a negative marketing impact. Consider sending your electronic newsletter via an inner office e-mail sign-up sheet. (This is called an "opt in" method, and will protect your e-mails from being automatically deleted.)

3. Internet content. No profanity, joke sending, or pornography viewing from the office. It is always a good idea to make these rules known to staff. The integrity of your office is based on rules that provide ethical communication. Jokes will inevitably come into your office via e-mail; however, jokes sent from the office should be discouraged.

It's a waste of valuable time and may offend some people.

4. Copies of e-mail. Most e-mail programs allow you to keep copies of incoming and outgoing mail. The e-mail will be dated and timed, which constitutes a fantastic log of your communications.

5. Signature files. Set up a signature that includes your dental office name, address, fax, e-mail, etc. This information will be automatically added to every e-mail you send, giving your correspondence a professional look.

http://www.eudora.com/techsupport/tutorials/win_signatures.html

6. Spell checker. Use an automatic spell checker in your e-mail program to keep your documents looking professional.

7. Time management. Web surfing, online chatting and downloading information for personal use can lead to loss of effective time utilization by your dental staff. During work hours, limit Web surfing for pleasure.

8. Office e-mail address. Choose an address that is easy to remember — the shorter, the better. And consider the marketing impact of the words you choose (frontdesk@pcdentist.com,drmaclean@pcdentist.com).

9. Automatic filters. In the near future, bulk e-mail will be coming into the office. Messages can be automatically filed with "filters" in the e-mail program that put each message in an appropriate folder.

http://www.eudora.com/techsupport/tutorials/win_filters.html

10. Junk e-mail. Programs can be used to protect your office from unsolicited commercial e-mail.

http://tucows.w3internet.com/spam95.html

11. Bank payments. Ask your bank to set you up for Internet payments, which will lower receivables. You do not even need a computer to receive Internet payments. The bank will fax you a daily list of patients who have paid their dental bill over the Internet.

12. Security. If you have a continuous connection to the Internet, make sure you also have a "firewall" — usually a stand-alone computer with a program that prevents hackers from going into your system via the Internet. Since most dental office networks share computer files, these may be seen by unwanted eyes if you are not set up properly.

13. Virus protection. Use a virus protection program that updates itself to prevent new viruses from infecting your computer system. Many programs offer this protection. Programs like McAfee and Norton offer versions that provide excellent protection with automatic updates via the Internet.

14. Backups. You should back up both your dental office records and your online Web site. Consider the problems if your Web site is accidentally deleted from a server on the Internet!

15. E-mail responses. If you answer your e-mails promptly, patients will gain trust in the new medium. E-mail can be used to send bills, appointment reminders, post-operative instructions, information about a treatment, etc.

16. Patient privacy. It is essential that your patients' privacy be maintained. If you are posting pictures on the Web, then obtain written consent. The Internet is a very public place and must be treated professionally. E-mail is not private — it can be intercepted. All system managers have access to user files on their systems. If you want total privacy, then you must use encryption programs.

The Internet is proving to be a valuable tool in the dental office. It is important that dentists structure their Internet communication systems according to professional standards in order to meet the needs of their patients.

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