

ABELDent
Grow Your Practice



**Automating Patient Communication
for your Dental Practice: A Smart
Business Decision**

Introduction

In recent years, heightened competition among dental practices across North America has caused a shift toward a more value-based and patient-centered care model. This shift has made improving the patient experience a major objective for many dental teams. Implementing automated communication is a great way to achieve this objective since it provides convenience and time savings for patients that ultimately lead to increased satisfaction.

This e-book explains what automated communication is, how it works and its many benefits for patients and the dental practice.

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Will Patients Embrace Automated Communication from You?

For many people (including your patients), checking their mobile device is the last thing they do at night and the first thing they do in the morning. In fact, smartphone owners report using their device more frequently today for mobile email and texting than to actually make phone calls.

So automation of messaging that caters to convenience has become the communication standard for today's marketing and consumer-focused organizations. It helps build one-on-one relationships with existing and new clients (or in this case patients), providing personalized options and direct connections. Since it offers quick, easy solutions for day-to-day routines and tasks, it's the perfect tool for a busy dental practice (or one looking to get busier with more patients).

In Bell Media's fourth annual "Canadian Mobile Media Snapshot", users voiced their opinion of mobile marketing:

- 82% agree it's a good way to learn about new products and brands;
- 80% believe it can influence them to investigate a product or service;
- 71% accept that it can change the way they think about a product or service; and
- 65% report that it has the power to influence them to BUY a product or service.

Immediacy is a most significant benefit: SMS is real time – and it gets attention. Consider these facts:

- The average "open rate" for SMS is 98%. For email marketing, it hovers around 11% (1)
- 97% of mobile subscribers will read a text message within 15 minutes of receipt; 84% will respond within 1 hour (2)

¹<http://www.mailermailer.com/resources/metrics/2011/open-rates.rwp>

²Nielson Mobile



Automated Patient Communication

The primary/initial use of automated patient communication typically involves using a software application to send individual customized messages in a batch via email, SMS (Short Message System) such as texting, or voice mail. The most common message types sent by dental practices are appointment notifications, confirmation requests and outstanding treatment notices.

As an example, with a keystroke, or automatically based on a pre-set schedule, the software application sends individual "request for confirmation" messages for a selected group of patients using the preferred communication method/s of each individual. Message recipients can respond using their smart phone, notebook or computer and in many cases, automatically update their e-calendars. With fully integrated systems, patient responses automatically update the affected data fields within the practice management software such as scheduled appointments now showing as confirmed.

In short, there is a tremendous time and cost savings opportunity when managing appointments.

Main Street Dental



Dear Jonathan, your appointment is on April 11, 2018 at 9:50 AM for 10 minutes. Please confirm that you will attend your appointment by clicking the following button.

[Confirm Appointment](#)

[Unsubscribe from appointment related emails.](#)
[Unsubscribe from all emails.](#)

Main Street Dental Office, 125 Main Street Burlington, ON L7S 1X7

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Patients can easily and quickly confirm appointments from their electronic devices.

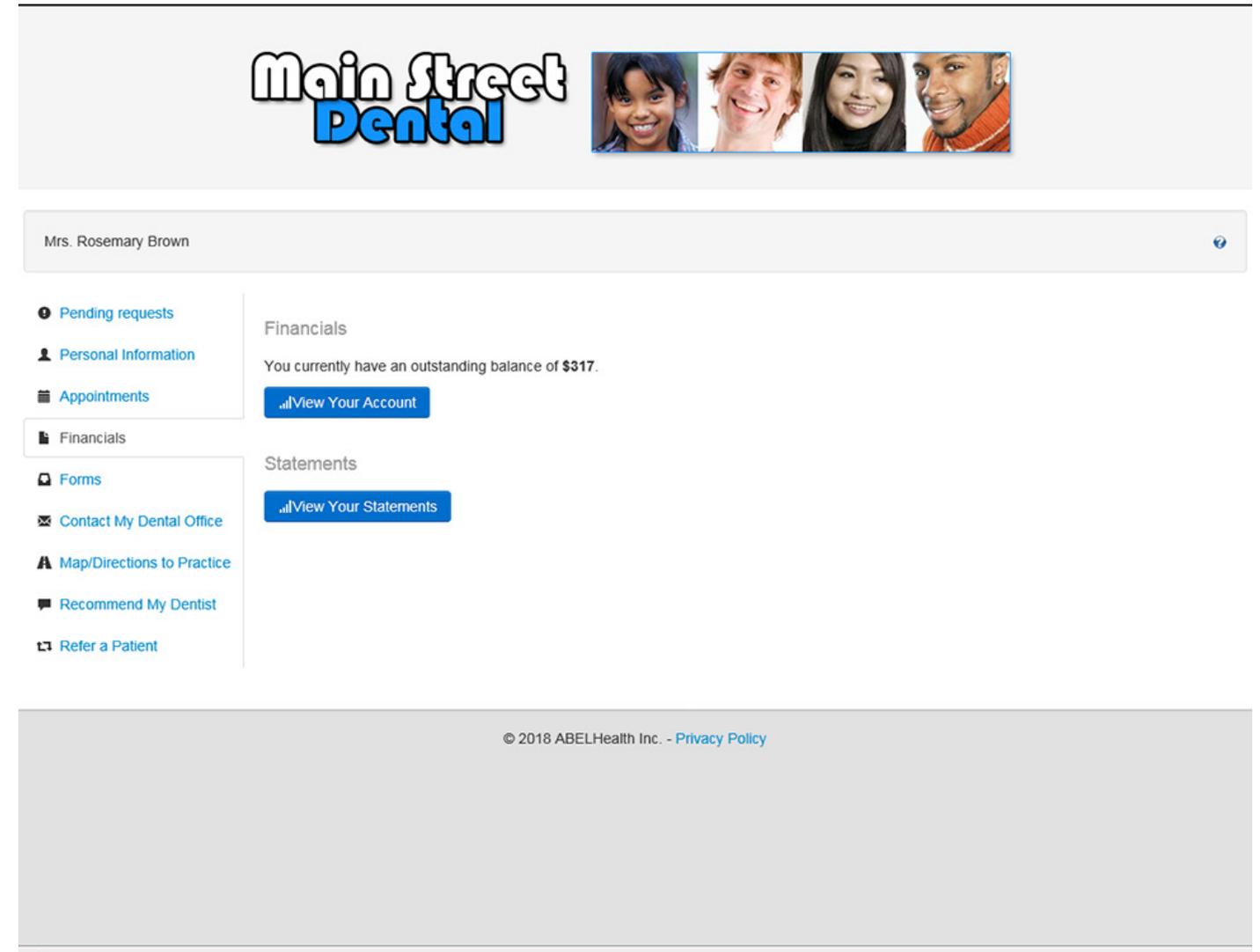
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				



Patient Portals – Electronic Communication Facilitators

In addition to software applications that automate patient messaging, patient portals have also become popular. They are websites that provide 24-hour access to a secure online conduit for the exchange of information and documents between patient and dental practice (as determined by the dental practice). Statement and receipt retrieval, health history entry, appointment requests and patient information updates are protected by encryption, and data does not need to be stored anywhere during transmission.

Put another way, patient portals enable individuals to carry out an array of tasks that previously had to be completed either via telephone or during an in person visit. It's a smart next step in giving your practice the platform and the power to move towards increased patient engagement.



The screenshot displays the Main Street Dental patient portal. At the top, the logo "Main Street Dental" is shown in a stylized font, with "Main Street" in white and "Dental" in blue. To the right of the logo is a horizontal strip of four small portrait photos of diverse individuals. Below the header, the user's name "Mrs. Rosemary Brown" is displayed in a light gray bar. A left-hand navigation menu lists several options: "Pending requests", "Personal Information", "Appointments", "Financials", "Forms", "Contact My Dental Office", "Map/Directions to Practice", "Recommend My Dentist", and "Refer a Patient". The "Financials" section is active, showing a message: "You currently have an outstanding balance of \$317." Below this message is a blue button labeled "View Your Account". The "Statements" section is also visible, with a blue button labeled "View Your Statements". At the bottom of the page, a footer contains the text "© 2018 ABELHealth Inc. - Privacy Policy".

Patient Portal screen allows secure patient access to personal information.

Functions for Patients

Instead of phoning the dental office during office hours, using a secure user name and password, patients anytime can typically:

- View upcoming appointments
- Request appointment changes and cancellations based on your office policies
- Request new appointments for emergency care, regular check-ups and unscheduled treatment
- View their personal health information record, including allergies, current medications and medical history

A Patient Portal is also a more convenient way for patients to respond to your requests for:

- Changes in their demographic information
- Medical history form entry
- Post visit-surveys
- Recommending and referring patients to the practice



Functions for Your Practice

With a Patient Portal Practices can typically:

- Provide account statements and receipts through a private and secure channel rather than through unsecure email or expensive snail mail
- Automate appointment-related email and SMS messages based on a preferred schedule
- Track the status of Portal emails sent, equipping them to make informed decisions about follow up for specific patients
- Offer electronic forms for secure pre-submission of health history
- Send post-visit surveys and store results in the patients' charts for quick reference
- Request referrals in a convenient and non-threatening way
- Link a New Patient Registration form to the practice website



Addressing Security Concerns

Well-designed Patient portals ensure:

- Which patients have access to the patient portal
- Whether and under what conditions patients can confirm, book, reschedule, or cancel appointments
- Which appointment and demographic change requests you accept
- Which areas of personal health information are available to patients
- *CASL (Canadian Anti-Spam Law) Compliance

*In short CASL prohibits businesses including dental offices from sending commercial electronic messages, to an electronic address, without the recipient's consent (permission). This includes emails, social networking accounts and text messages. Failure to comply can result in significant fines. In addition, consumers have the right to private action against CASL violators.



Patient Portal Benefits

- 1. Increased Administrative Efficiency** – the portal improves workflows with a more efficient means of exchanging information between patients and staff members.
- 2. Patient Convenience** – patients can make requests and responses, when and how they want.
- 3. Enhanced Patient Care** – both patients and providers can access the most up-to-date patient information in real time, such as an accurate health history and current medications.
- 4. Reduced Incidence of No Shows** – patients can be sent regular appointment reminders and requests for confirmation.
- 5. Improved Patient Engagement/Communication** – patients become more actively involved in their healthcare with more frequent contact.
- 6. Anywhere, Anytime Access** – mobile technology is the prime message receiver and deliverer.
- 7. Efficient Marketing Tool** – patients can easily refer patients and provide testimonials.

Portal Cost Savings/Revenue Increase			
Savings/Revenue Factor	Practice Parameters Example	Cost Calculation	Monthly Saving/Revenue Increase
Appointment Confirmation/Patient Info Exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 appts. per day • 3 min. per appt. • 25/hr. labour • 20 days/month 	1 hr at \$25/hr. to confirm 20 appts. by phone X 20 days/month	\$500
Reduced No Shows	Cost of average no show \$250	Reduce by 1 per month	\$250
Increased Referrals	New patient exam \$250	Increase by 1 per month	\$250
Net Increase Savings/Revenue			\$1000

Validation

A User Study recently conducted by ABELDent confirmed similar time/cost savings as suggested above. One Office Manager reported that by changing telephone appointment confirmation and patient information requests to a methodical, automated SMS approach, she saved at least 25 hours per month (approx. 300 hours/year). That's over \$7,500 in annualized savings based on average dental practice labour costs. This real life example does not even factor in reduced no shows or consider the more revenue-producing initiatives that she was able to undertake by using those recovered hours.

Josh Gray, Vice President, Athena Research, says online access translates into patient retention and financial rewards: "If you can get a patient on a portal, they're thirteen percent more likely to return. The value of the patient who returns is eight to twenty percent higher."

Portal Strategy: Build Your Database!

Some practices wonder whether they should wait until they have amassed contact information for most or all of their patients before implementing their Portal; in fact, the opposite is the recommended strategy. The sooner you can set up and start using the capabilities of your new portal, the more efficient your team will be and the better you will meet your patient's expectation.

Developing a strong database of mobile contacts and email addresses to the point of a critical mass is necessary to truly leverage the power of the portal and realize all the subsequent benefits. However, it takes some time, strategy and patience to build.

Here are some strategies to help you build your database:

1. Take advantage of every patient encounter to create excitement about the new Portal. Explain how it will benefit them, and explicitly ask for their mobile phone number.
2. Add your Portal information to all staff members' email signature.
3. Update all your paper and electronic forms to include a space for the patient's up-to-date mobile number and email address
4. Make sure you promote the use of your portal on any patient-facing documents such as receipts, statements, brochures, business cards, and treatment recommendations.
5. If you have a website, a Facebook page or any other social media presence, use it to get the word out.
6. Mention your Patient Portal in your voice mail messages. If possible, promote it in your on-hold message.



Patient Communication Best Practices

- 1. Personalize your emails**
Using a simple merge tool to personalize emails increases their appeal and effectiveness.
- 2. Be specific and brief**
Identify your practice as well as the date and time of the appointment. E.g. "The team at Main Street Dental looks forward to seeing you on January 15 at 2 pm."
- 3. Incite action**
Offering a simple "click to confirm" and "rebook" option to avoid no-shows.
- 4. Maintain a short-notice list**
Keep a list of patients waiting for cancellations or those with last-minute flexibility so they can be contacted as soon as possible when applicable.
- 5. Use your data to get the best outcomes**
Keep data on patient preferences up to date and communicate with your patient accordingly. Experiment with the timing and frequency of your messages to identify what works best for your practice.
- 6. Obtain permissions**
Ask permission to contact patients via email or SMS to obtain their preferred method and ensure regulatory compliance.
- 7. Keep in touch**
Send periodic messages value based messages being careful not to overload.
- 8. Ask for feedback and ask for referrals**
Post-appointment follow-up will help personalize your patients' experience, reinforce the best assets of your practice and identify areas for improvement. Encourage patients to refer to your practice and offer incentives for happy clients who oblige.



Third Party Vs. Practice Management Software Solution

When choosing a patient portal communication system you have two distinct choices:

1. Third Party

These applications are dedicated to automated communication only and are marketed to a variety of customer service organizations including dental practices. Since they are not part of the dental practice management software, they must extract the data they need from the software's database.

2. Practice Management Software Feature/Module

Automated patient communication capability is either built-in to the software or offered as a fully integrated optional module. Since both applications are provided by the same vendor the integration and data sharing between the two is unlimited.

	Third Party Solution	PMS Feature/Module
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically feature rich • Specialize in automated patient communications • Lots of system choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tighter Integration between the PMS software and the portal application • Database updates in real time maintain data integrity • No additional data entry required • System reliability and consistency as with PMS upgrades • One vendor support • Often included at no or minimal cost
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically more costly • Not dental practice specific • Limited integration – only as good as the data it can extract from the PMS system • Database updates not always in real time • May require additional patient data entry • Integrations can break as PMS versions change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May lack advanced features • Not the PMS vendor's primary product/focus

If your Practice Management Software vendor's patient portal offering has the features you desire, the potential cons are a non-issue and thus it is the preferred solution over any third-party offering.



Conclusion

Automated patient communication portals are a way to give your dental practice a more dynamic, modern edge while also enabling you to realize administrative efficiencies, cost savings and increased patient growth. Since portals cater to patient comfort and convenience by utilizing familiar mobile technology, they are rapidly becoming the preferred method for both patients and healthcare providers to exchange select information. User interfaces and data security measures also ensure that unauthorized data changes, patient confidentiality and data breaches are not a concern.

In most cases, the portal preferred solution is one provided as part of a dental practices management software due to tighter integration between the two applications and in many cases, lower cost. In a business model where client communication can extend to six or nine-month intervals, it only makes sense to take advantage of a quick, convenient and welcome opportunity to build better relationships with your patients.

ABELSoft Inc. is a leading provider of outstanding clinical and practice management software, exceptional customer service and 24/7 support.

Established in 1977, ABELSoft Inc. is a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner. The two flagship applications, ABELDent and ABELMed, leverage best-of-breed technologies in cloud, portal and paperless applications to provide dental and medical professionals with a competitive edge in the marketplace.

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