

# Web communications will save dentists time and money



BY DR. LARRY EMMOTT

Web communications — using the Internet to communicate with patients, labs, and colleagues — can save you and your patients time and money. Just as you may use the Internet to pay bills, buy airline tickets, or shop for collectibles, so, too, can you use the Internet for many types of professional communication. Dental Web communications will offer many conveniences for patients and staff and, by eliminating paper and postage, they also will save money.

In this column, I highlight some up-and-coming Web applications, including the following:

- e-calls (recalls)
- e-payments
- e-newsletters
- Community (dental) Web sites
- Online lab Rx forms
- Online specialist referrals

My advice: start collecting your patients' e-mail addresses and digital photographs now to get ready for the Web communications era.

By Dr. Larry Emmott

**W**hat has been your best Internet experience ever? Was it buying an airline ticket? Shopping for some hard-to-find collectible? Following your investments in real time?

What do you like about using the Internet? The convenience of getting information quickly? Being able to pay bills or make purchases while sitting at home?

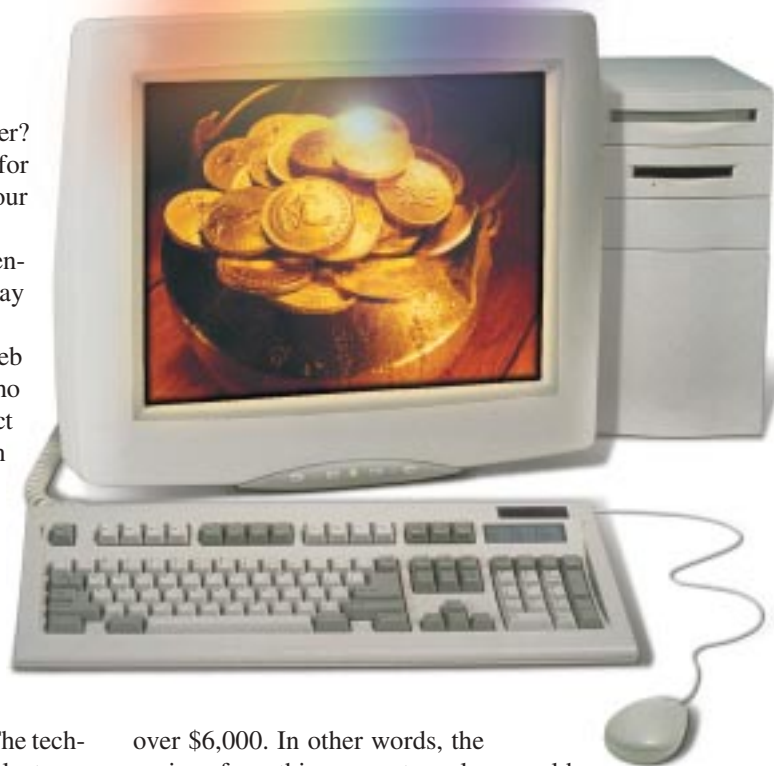
Do you like the personalized service you get from Web sites? Do you like that fact that some sites remember who you are and what your preferences are? Do you like the fact that the site remembers what you have purchased? When you are scheduled for an event? How much you owe?

How can you transfer your best Internet experiences to your patients and colleagues? Here's a look at six types of Web communications, from e-calls to online referrals.

## e-calls (recalls)

Using e-calls (recall notices) is one simple way we can use the Internet to communicate with our patients. The technology is transforming our paper recall system into an electronic e-call system. Instead of sending a paper recall card, we can send an e-call notice via e-mail. In fact, any piece of paper you now send to patients, third parties, colleagues, suppliers, or anyone else can be transformed into an electronic message.

An e-call system will be much faster, easier to administer, and more comprehensive than any paper system, and it will save you lots of money. If you consider the cost of the card, postage, addressing, and the administrative time needed to create and mail the cards, the annual savings to a typical office could be well



over \$6,000. In other words, the savings from this one system alone could pay for your investment in dental software.

How would an e-call system ideally work? You would tell the computer one time what you wanted. For example, you could tell the computer which patient gets a reminder and when; then, you just forget about having to do this task again. The system would remember to search the electronic appointment book for scheduled appointments, create a reminder message, and send it via e-mail automatically. Then the system would search for patients without appointments who are due for one and send them

a different type of e-mail message. It would send e-mail messages every day for whatever future time frame you choose. Furthermore, the system does not have to be limited to prophylaxis recalls. It could track any treatment that needed follow up, such as a one-year post-op endo check.

Dentrix Dental Systems, a Henry Schein company, and EagleSoft, a Patterson Dental Supply brand, each have e-call systems that collect patient e-mail addresses and work with their management software to send out recall notices via the Internet.

For example, to tap into Dentrix's e-call system, users of their Version 9.0 practice management software first must have Dentrix create a practice Web site. Then, the Web-enabled site allows users to upload patient information from the management software and send recall cards via e-mail.

## e-payments

Beyond e-call, essentially any paper you now generate will become an electronic document. For example, some businesses are eliminating paper statements and sending only electron-

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**Save \$30,000 a year with Web communication tools**

Dr. Emmott estimates a typical dental office can save more than \$30,000 a year by using the following Web-based communication tools effectively:

Web service	Annual savings	How savings is attained
<b>e-calls (recalls)</b>	\$6,000	No paper, no postage, no mailings
<b>e-newsletters</b>	8,000	No paper, no postage, no mailings
<b>Dental/community Web sites</b>		
• Access to online patient info	3,500	No need to answer calls on appointments, payment balances
• Ability to e-mail digital photos	10,000	Attract new patients when current patients pass details of treatments (as digital photos for cosmetic procedures) to friends who then want similar procedures
<b>Online lab Rx</b>	2,000	Online perks to dentists for using laboratory's online service
<b>Online specialist referrals</b>	1,000	No need to write forms, duplicate x-rays, copy notes, file letters, and enter data.
<b>Total annual savings</b>	<b>\$30,500</b>	

Source: Dr. Larry Emmott

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ic e-statements. Banks also offer online payment plans that allow users to make payments without paper checks.

Soon dentists will send an electronic bill—no paper, no envelope, no postage. The patients then either will pay with an online bank program, or, possibly, direct-

ly on your practice Web site.

Just like the e-call system, e-billing is set up once and then will run automatically whenever you choose. There will be no need to run statements once a month and create a mass mailing. Further, e-statements could be sent daily, reducing costs and smoothing out cash flow. Of

course, it will work the other way as well. You will receive statements from suppliers and others via e-mail and pay electronically.

### **e-newsletters**

Another piece of paper you could replace with an electronic document is the office

newsletter. An e-newsletter is an easy way to contact current and potential patients about issues and direct them to the practice Web site for contests, community projects, and other fun stuff. If you have 2,000 patients in your practice and you mail a newsletter once a quarter, that's 8,000 newsletters a year. Converting to an e-letter will save you about \$1 for each newsletter, or \$8,000 a year.

### **Community (dental) Web sites**

The next step would be to turn your practice Web site into an interactive patient-communication community. In other words, the Web site should be more than just a static commercial showcasing your office; it could be a communication portal, which will gather and dispense various types of information.

**Patient information.** On a very simple level, your Web site could provide individual patient information, including the following facts:

- Next appointment date
- Current balance
- Recommended treatment
- Date of last visit
- Whether the insurance company has paid yet
- For tax or work purposes, total billings paid from last year

Patients could access this information and other data the office chooses to make available through a password-protected connection. The procedure would be comparable to checking your bank balance, investments, or travel schedule online.

As with e-call, checking individual patient information online would be faster and easier, and less expensive. For example, if an office administrator answers just 15 phone calls a day asking about scheduled appointments or account balances, and if she spends just five minutes with each call, that's over an hour a day spent providing information that a patient could access on the Web. At \$15 an hour for the administrator's pay, the annual savings will be more than \$3,500.

**Dental information.** At a more advanced level, your Web site will provide customized patient education. Your educational segments, which could be linked from various elements, will provide full multimedia content and can be printed out or e-mailed. This content will expand your dental Web-site community. Users can share the content with friends or family, who, in turn, could become part of your Web community and then, hopefully, regular patients.

Research from Jupiter Media Metrix ([www.jmm.com](http://www.jmm.com)), a company that analyzes the impact of the Internet on business, shows an immense potential for medical Web sites. People want to use the Web for medical help, but they do not completely trust large commercial medical Web sites. They would rather get online medical help from a trusted source one-on-one.

Most likely the consumer's search for

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one-on-one medical help will transfer directly to dentistry. This means that patients will want to interact online with a trusted dentist they know. They do not want to use a general site. In other words, your personal practice site has great potential to influence patients and to

develop an online community.

The Jupiter report notes that people value a medical-doctor Web site for data and convenience. They would use the site to “make appointment requests (51% of consumers), request prescription refills or renewals (48%), and see lab results (38%),” according to Jupiter.

“As consumers become more involved in leveraging their medical-doctor Web site for health management, however, disease management becomes a more potent online opportunity: 34% of online consumers with a chronic condition say they are willing to engage in such a management program on their physician’s site,”

according to Jupiter. Transferring this data to dentistry again shows a remarkable potential to build practice resources and credibility using the Internet.

DentistryOnline.com, a CAESY Educational Systems company, provides programs to educate patients about dental health via the Internet. Contents are based on the company’s multimedia patient education program CAESY. The educational content can be accessed from a practice’s individual office site and branded to the dentist’s site rather than to the commercial site.

**Visual information/digital photos.** Another step dentists could take to encourage community interaction on their site would be to put patient photographs into a secure area where they could be viewed with a password-protected connection—just as patient data is viewed and protected. In this way, a dentist could take a digital photo, do some cosmetic imaging, and post it to the Web for the patient to view. Again, the patient could e-mail the digital photo to others or allow others to see it by sharing the password.

Before-and-after photography gives you the ability not only to market cosmetic procedures but also to illustrate all types of procedures. The Internet gives us the ability to educate visually as well as with written content. The online dentist can look appealing

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## Technology connections

Here’s how to contact the Web companies mentioned in this article:

### Dentistry Online.com/CAESY Educational Systems

800-533-5988

[www.dentistryonline.com](http://www.dentistryonline.com)

Educational content for Web sites

### Dentrix Dental Systems/Henry Schein

800-DENTRIX

[www.dentrix.com](http://www.dentrix.com)

Online e-call (recall) systems that work with the company’s practice management software

### EagleSoft/Patterson Dental Supply

800-294-8504

[www.eaglesoft.net](http://www.eaglesoft.net)

Online e-call (recall) systems that work with the company’s practice management software

### TNT Dental

972-989-9137

[www.tntdental.com](http://www.tntdental.com)

Web site development, including on-site digital photography

Source: Dr. Larry Emmott

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to the patient and their friends; in this way, the dental online community grows.

This type of visual Web content is available from TNT Dental, a Web-site development company. Tim Kelly, TNT's director of sales and marketing, offers this advice for those wanting to set up Web sites:

"The two most common roadblocks we encounter when trying to implement onsite features for a dental practice are that the practice has not been collecting patients' e-mail addresses and not been taking any suitable patient photographs.

"Whether you are ready for a Web site or not, I would recommend that any prac-

tice should begin collecting e-mail addresses and patient photographs today," Kelly said.

Developing a practice Web site could be a valuable asset. Gaining one new patient a month from a developing Web community could be worth \$10,000, or possibly even more.

## Online lab Rx forms

We won't be using the Web just to communicate with patients; we also will use it to communicate with specialists, suppliers, and labs. For example, if you ever have used an Internet travel service to buy an airline ticket online, you have an idea of what the ideal laboratory service might be like. The online service won't be a printed form; rather, it will be an Internet connection providing an online Rx form.

Once you have filled out the online form for the Rx service, when you log in again, the system will do the following:

- Recognize you
- Automatically know all the basic details about you, such as your address, account number, and telephone number
- Know your preferences for a laboratory job, including materials, design, and technicians
- Upload the appropriate patient data for the current job from a digital record. Data could include the patient's name or ID number; the tooth, treatment, materials, and shade; and even the due date
- Prompt you to fill in details about the current job using a decision tree. For example, the first decision might be: Do you want metal or non-metal for a restoration? Your usual preference would be chosen. However, if you wanted to do something different for the current restoration, you could indicate that. This step might be skipped, though, if the patient data already has specified a particular material, such as a non-metal restoration.

Let's say you choose non-metal. Your next choice would be to decide the type of material you want from a list of non-metal materials. These might include belleGlass HP (KerrLab), IPS Empress (Ivoclar Vivadent), Procera (Nobel Biocare USA), and Sinfony (3M ESPE). Again, your usual preference would be highlighted, or you could choose another option.

Also, you could choose to view details of any material at any time. For example, is the material cementable? Is it recommended for full coverage? You could download these details, including the clinical technique. Then you could print a copy, or save it in a file for future reference.

At this point, the lab could launch a pop-up window to introduce a new material or technique. The dentist could ignore it, or follow through the links to learn more about it. This could lead to prep designs, photographs, testimonials, and even a chance to sign up for an upcoming technique course.

Once you have made it through the decision tree, you will have a blank page on which to type as many detailed notes as you wish. You also will have a special tool with which to attach photographs and other digital diagnostic data.

When you submit your lab Rx, the lab will acknowledge its receipt, confirm a delivery date, and enter your case into their work-tracking system.

The lab also will add your new Rx to

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your account, which could qualify you for something like “Gold Elite” client status and all kinds of special treatment, perks, goodies, and discounts! Let’s say these perks are worth \$2,000.

Of course, while logged on, you could check your account balance, make an

online payment, or track the progress of any active cases.

### Online specialist referrals

The Internet will completely change doctor-to-doctor communications, as well. If a referral is needed in the future, you will make an appointment at the specialist’s

office via the Internet and inform the specialist with an e-mail. Then all the patient’s information will be transferred to a secure Internet site. The specialist will download the patient’s name and all personal data, such as address and telephone numbers.

In addition, the specialist will get all the diagnostic information, including x-rays,



### E-mail us your tips on Web communications

We’d like to know more about how you use the Web both for patient communications and to manage your practice. E-mail us your experiences with Web communications, including the following technologies:

- e-calls (recalls)
- e-payments
- e-newsletters
- Community (dental) Web sites
- Online lab Rx forms
- Online specialist referrals

E-mail tips to:  
[fran.martin@medec.com](mailto:fran.martin@medec.com)

photos, and treatment plans. The specialist also will get the updated health history, a history of the treatment rendered, and any notes from the general dentist. But that’s not all; the specialist also could get the insurance and payment information.

If needed, the dentist and specialist will hold a real-time Internet conference while simultaneously viewing and annotating the images, chart notes, and radiographs. Of course, once the patient has been treated by the specialist, all the notes and communication, including photos and x-rays from the specialist, will be sent back to the referring dentist via the Internet, and the patient’s chart will be updated instantly.

This will foster better communication using less staff time. If you make just two referrals a week and eliminate the time needed to write forms, duplicate x-rays, copy notes, file letters and enter data, it will save at least another \$1,000.

### e-future

When added together, efficient use of Web communications will return more than \$30,000 a year in hard measurable savings to a typical office (see graphic on page 40). In most cases, though, there will be even higher returns based on efficiency, patient acceptance, and referrals from satisfied patients. High-tech not only will look good; it will save you money.

What is your best Internet experience? How can you provide that experience for your patients? Everything described in this article is possible right now with today’s technology, although some of it has not yet been fully developed for dentistry. However, the future is coming, and it will be amazing! **DPR**

*Dr. Larry Emmott, a recognized authority on dental technology in America, is a practicing general dentist in Phoenix, Ariz. He also is an award-winning professional speaker, a featured instructor at the Las Vegas Institute, and a member of the American Academy of Dental Practice Administration. He has written hundreds of articles on dentistry, computer use, and management. Since 1995, he also has written a monthly electronic newsletter, Emmott on Technology, showing dentists how to use technology effectively. Visit his Web site at [www.drlarryemmott.com](http://www.drlarryemmott.com).*