



# Will millennials kill private practice dentistry?

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**THERE ARE MORE THAN 80 MILLION OF THEM IN THE UNITED STATES.** What are dental practices doing to adapt and change to serve the growing group of millennial patients?

Millennials have gotten a bad reputation as killers. Economy experts claim that this generation, born between 1982 and 2000, are killing off industry strongholds. Shopping malls, designer clothing lines, and even the auto industry have felt the pain. It's not like millennials are deliberately setting out to kill. It's more likely that these industries didn't keep up with the wants and needs of this generation. Will private practice dentistry be next?

The millennial generation would rather spend their money on the latest gadgets and technology than own cars. They buy online and check out their own groceries. While the invention of the smartphone transformed

this generation, they rarely use their phones for actual talking.

Dentists need to understand the motivations of this wave of potential new patients, because it's a big wave. Millennials are now the largest generation, and practices should be taking them seriously, according to Fred Joyal, cofounder of 1-800-dentist and author of *Becoming Remarkable: Creating a Dental Practice Everyone Talks About*.<sup>1</sup>

"First of all, the oldest millennial is 37 years old," said Joyal. "They're not kids anymore. They have their own kids. They are prime patients. And at this point, many of them have good careers going for themselves. They are no longer living

with their parents."

By 2025, 75% of the US workforce will be millennials.<sup>1</sup> The teeth of many millennials have been subjected to more than a decade of drinking Red Bull and Starbucks sweetened drinks. It's time for dentists to make these people lifelong patients. But if private practice dentistry can't attract and retain this enormous group, corporate dentistry is there to pick up the slack.

Dentists need to take these four important steps to transform millennials into lifelong patients.

## **BECOME DIGITAL**

Many millennials do not remember life without a smartphone, and they constantly carry one. Yet actual phone calls are a thing of the past. A new survey done by phone service

providers reveals that 80% of millennials would be willing to trade in the ability to place calls for unlimited data plans.<sup>2</sup> So, is your office still accepting only phone calls to schedule appointments? Practices who want to communicate with these young adults need to make a digital shift into online scheduling.

“Patients today are mobile and time-strapped,” said Mark Joseph, cofounder of CareCru, a company that helps dentists manage their practice with artificial intelligence (AI). “By giving patients visibility into your schedule, you allow new patients to book right then and there, without the need to visit your competition.”<sup>3</sup>

Research has also shown that millennials value extended hours on evenings and weekends and don’t have the patience for a long wait time. Sixty-one percent of millennials said they would change providers just for the ability to book appointments quickly, according to a study in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*.<sup>4</sup>

In turn, they don’t want to receive calls either—not from their best friends, and certainly not from their dentists. But they do want to get a text—to book their cleaning or follow-up care, to confirm their appointment, or to report their condition post-treatment. All of this can be achieved with two-way text messaging, and in some cases, AI.

If you think AI is something from the distant future, you would be wrong. By the end of 2019, 66% of US health systems will offer digital self-scheduling and 64% of patients will book appointments digitally, according to the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*.<sup>4</sup>

## GET CONNECTED

Gone are the days of a static website with your phone number, address, and an outdated picture. Millennials want more, according to the Lincoln Financial Group study, which found that 40% of millennials cite a dentist’s website as “very important” as opposed to 14% of baby boomers.<sup>5</sup>

“Think of your website as a dental office, but online,” Joseph said. “Imagine walking into a dental office with magazines strewn everywhere, no clear direction to the front desk, and old, worn-out furniture. Not a great look. A poorly designed website can have the same effect.”<sup>3</sup>

Millennials are not only looking for a website where they can make and change appointments, but they also want to verify that their insurance is accepted, learn about the dental procedures offered (especially cosmetic options such as whitening), complete paperwork before an appointment, and learn more about the office staff. Most importantly, that website needs to be mobile optimized, which means it’s easy to navigate on a mobile phone.

Millennials are inherently visual consumers. They love photos and short videos. Seventy-two percent of millennials use free streaming services such as YouTube, and only 46% watch TV.<sup>6</sup> Create videos that highlight your practice. Let them take a virtual tour of your office. Do quick interviews about procedures you specialize in, or interview your hygienists for educational videos. Millennials value quick and authentic content more than they value videos that involve a lot of production.

“Up to 97% of new patients will look you up online and compare you to your competition before making a decision about which dental office to visit.”<sup>3</sup> This means that your website will be your chance to make a first impression. Let it be a good one.

## BE SOCIAL

Do tumbleweeds roll through your practice’s social media pages? Has it been a while since you posted something? If so, you’re missing out on cheap marketing right where millennials live—on social media.

“A dentist has to be focused on all three digital areas: their website, their Facebook page, and their Google and Yelp reviews,” Joyal said. “This is also a great way to reach millennials, by advertising and boosting posts on those media.”<sup>1</sup>

According to a study by *Search Engine Watch*, 90% of millennials say that they trust information from their health-care providers on social media.<sup>7</sup> I suggest you post photos and short videos that highlight the people behind your practice, as well as tips and tricks on health topics. This type of social media activity will help drive millennials to your website.

Also, millennials seek Instagram-worthy experiences in the places they go and things they do. Develop a practice hashtag. Use it

and promote it in your office. Give them a reason to find your practice worthy of a social media post. You can leverage the power of your patients’ social network because millennials trust what their friends and family have to say. If you encourage or incentivize them to post on social media about their visit to your office, or you get them to like and share your page, this may pique the interest of their social connections.

## GET SPECIFIC

How do big companies such as Starbucks and McDonald’s find the best locations for their stores? Why does it seem like the ads you see online are all relevant specifically for you? The answer? Big data, specifically geographic information systems (GIS) data and consumer buying data that provides a 360-degree view of consumers’ choices, preferences, and habits. But this data isn’t just available to the corporate giants. Small organizations are using it too.<sup>8</sup>

“Often dentists open a new location or buy a practice thinking they can use the same marketing campaigns from their existing practices to make the new one thrive. But that simply isn’t true,” said Ashley Newman, vice president of marketing at Smile Source. “It’s critical to understand who lives and works near your practice as well as what their lifestyles are like in order to make your marketing relevant and successful.”<sup>8</sup>

Dentists often find marketing challenging and feel confused by all the available options, especially when they consider that they could spend as much as 10% of their revenue on marketing to grow a new practice. Corporate dental practices have giant marketing departments that work hard to find new ways to bring patients into the dentists’ chairs. What can a private practice dentist do to compete?

“For most private practice dentists, marketing can feel like walking in a fog. Data makes your marketing decisions and path to success clear,” said Newman. “We help dentists understand not only who their patients are but how they prefer to consume media and which marketing channels actually influence their buying decisions to maximize return on investment (ROI).”

When it comes to the millennial audience, dentists can target their online marketing

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with digital channels such as satellite radio and mobile display advertising—including Facebook, Instagram, and Google Ads—to make sure they reach potential patients.

Meeting the expectations of this generation must begin in your practice today, but change is never easy. Take the first step by understanding the needs of millennials, and then find ways to adapt. This generation will change dentistry, so be the practice that's ready for it. Start with the small stuff, such as updating your website and connecting with your current and future patients in their digital world. **DE**

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