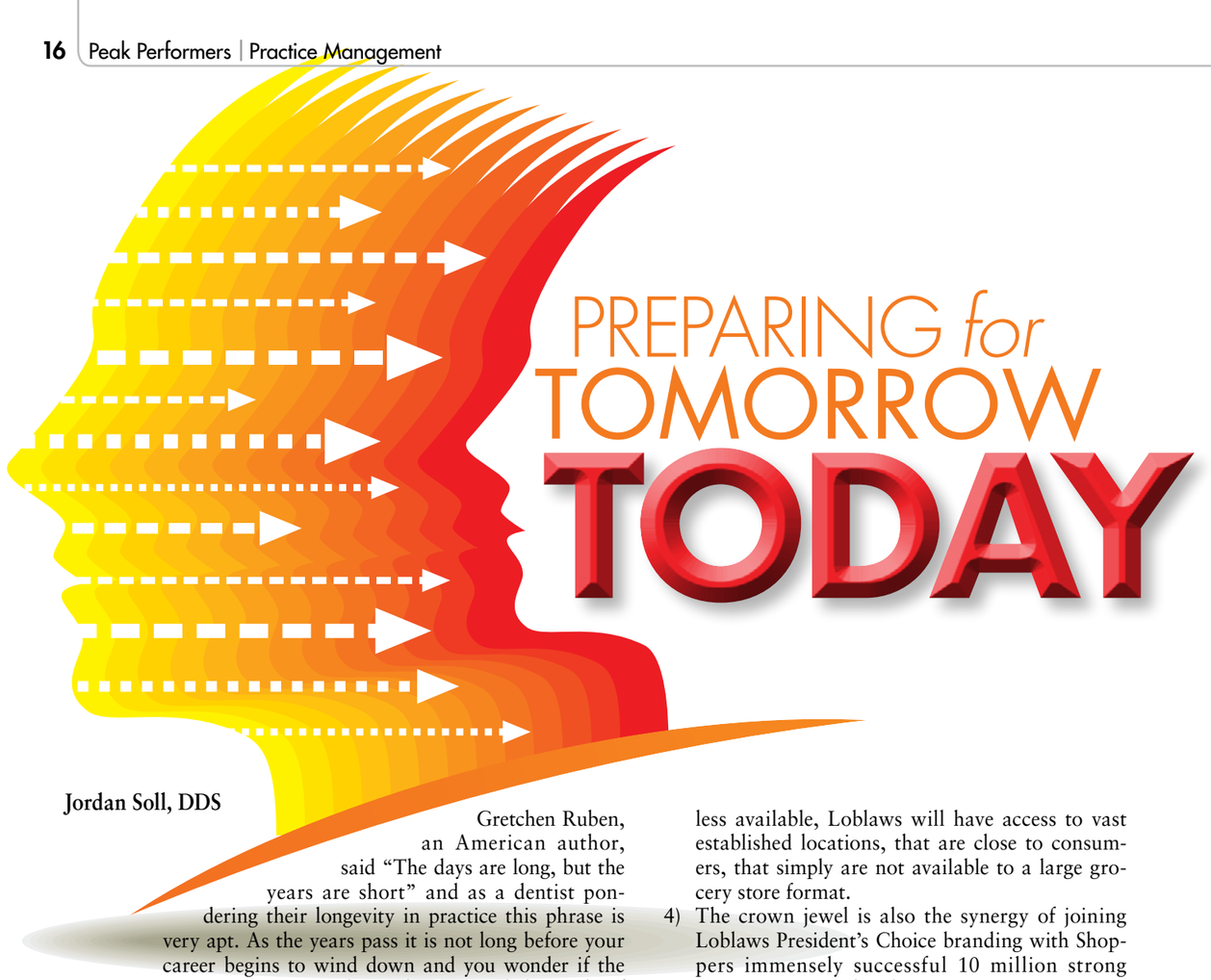

PREPARING *for* TOMORROW TODAY

Jordan Soll, DDS

Gretchen Ruben, an American author, said "The days are long, but the years are short" and as a dentist pondering their longevity in practice this phrase is very apt. As the years pass it is not long before your career begins to wind down and you wonder if the time was spent productively. Personal demands of feeding, educating, and clothing your children, as well as providing for your own lifestyle choices and saving for retirement, have put enormous demands on the productivity of your practice. Dentistry, despite what many practice management gurus — many who have never run a practice — say, is very demanding and overwhelming. Regulatory requirements, government regulations and competition for new patients can be very daunting.

This past July, many were initially surprised at the mega deal between grocery giant Loblaws friendly take over bid of national drug store chain Shoppers Drug Mart. At first look the marriage would have seemed unlikely or even impracticable, but closer inspection reveals the synergies that can be leveraged between the two. The benefits are numerous and some of the reasons are as follows:

1) Ensure a strong competitive position over U.S. retail giants Walmart and Target.
2) Allow each to save on economies of scale by leveraging their vast distribution networks.
3) As retail real estate becomes more costly and less available, Loblaws will have access to vast established locations, that are close to consumers, that simply are not available to a large grocery store format.
4) The crown jewel is also the synergy of joining Loblaws President's Choice branding with Shoppers immensely successful 10 million strong Optimum Points data base.

As I read everything that I could about this blockbuster deal, I reflected on how I could learn from this and determine if there were any tidbits of information that I could apply to my practice that would ensure its continued success in the future. By observing how the "big boys" do it, we often can see an opportunity in our own world that wasn't obvious a short time before.

Similar to the consumer market place in Canada, and in its own way, dentistry is under going incredible changes internally and externally. These changes serve to remind us that it has never been more important to be forward thinking with, for many, our most important asset. We practice as fragments in an industry that collectively is a multi-billion dollar business. No matter if you practice as a solo practioner, a member of a group practice or part of a multi office/chain commercialized healthcare model, it is imperative that forward planning for your practice occurs. This vision can take many forms, whether it is ensuring that you maximize the benefits of your location, complete branding of your practice, having the required clinical skills to meet consumer demands or, like the motive behind Loblaws, utilizing your internal strengths to ensure maximum productivity. In dentistry your internal strength lies with the effective use and information provided by your internal software system. Until recently, attention to internal hardware/software systems were not really espoused in practice management discussions except to acknowledge that all successful practices required a form of computerization, though there are some that are still not. However, as digitalization has enveloped our lives from the way we listen to music, take and view photographs, and conduct business and commerce, we cannot escape the trend that civilization is moving towards. As such, for those in dentistry who want to simply keep up with current business practices, the "Chartless Office" is rapidly becoming a way of life. Moreover, as the level of digitization penetrating the modern dental office is rapidly increasing, the significance of software management is imperative.

I began my practice in 1986 and by 1990 I took the first huge step into computerization of the management side of my office. The entering of patient information was done gradually, but it was not long before our two front desk, big box monitors were completing all of the functions that were required at the time. In 1993, the next step was to place monitors in each operatory to enhance and streamline efficiencies in patient management. Over the years we slowly grew from the original two monitors at the front desk to today where we have a central server and 17 terminals. As I am not technically inclined, this growth occurred as a result of relying on my capable office manager working in conjunction with our software vendor, ABELDent Inc., to ensure that we continuously benefitted from the system enhancements that were developed as my practice grew. Consequently to prepare for the future trends in dentistry, going "chartless" was a most logical evolution in our growth. This trend is already strong in the medical industry and, as the world goes "green," it simply cannot be ignored. Some of the benefits for a chartless office are:

1) Frees up floor space for more productive uses.
2) Reduces manpower hours in pulling and filing charts and never having to look for misplaced charts.
3) Cost savings in purchasing of charts, paper and associated tags.
4) Reduces your carbon foot print.
5) Over time as old charts are destroyed, physical chart storage of former patients will have reduced costs and space requirements.
6) Will enhance the value of a practice at transition time.
7) With the ability of programs such as ABEL Mobile, for those who have the need, they can retrieve all patient information from their laptop/tablet wherever they may be.
8) Creation of treatment plans can be easily recorded and monitored by the business staff.
9) Removes the problems of illegible note taking among different providers.
10) Creates a more efficient work environment among team members, and will serve to set a practice apart when new and younger applicants are looking for a fulfilling work experience.

It is my observation that the most important element in moving a practice to chartless is the commitment to do so. Our office used the lazy days of summer to make the jump. With the technical support of the ABEL team, our transition was achieved in the following fashion.

1) Discussions with ABEL support to advise our goals and timelines.
2) As our current hardware was approaching six years, I decided to update my server and work stations so that the increased storage and usage would not be a burden to my system.
3) A full day with an ABEL trainer to review with my team members the potential of the software and identify the "pearls" within the program to ensure they were able to fully leverage the program. To ensure complete confidence with all team members, after working with the information and techniques from the first training session, a follow up training session was undertaken to answer any outstanding questions and refine our skills.
4) Hiring of an approved business service to scan the respective charts to each patient's e-file.

With the total commitment of my staff, in

Check out the video of Jordan Soll's paperless office on www.oralhealthgroup.com





Photo credit: Dr. Abbas Naqvi

conjunction with ABEL being dedicated to seeing us succeed quickly, the evolution of patient documentation for our office was extremely smooth. Now complete, we have set our sites on integrating ABEL Portal which will allow our patients to interact online with our office to update their personal information (including vital health changes), request and confirm appointments and, if we desire, our patients can also view their financial accounts. In addition, the advent of ABEL Mobile will allow key members of our staff to access our office software via a web-based portal so that they can utilize the system from any location just as if they were in the office. The benefit to a web-based portal is that if you lose your laptop/tablet, there's no proprietary software or security issues to be concerned about.

In further discussions with my ABEL representative, I was excited to learn about some of the enhancements that will be coming to make our patients' experience with our office more rewarding as well as enhancing our user experience. Some of these improvements include;

1) ***Improvement of the capture of clinical information.*** Improvements in workflow related to the capture and viewing of clinical data. This will include improvements in usability, security, workflow flexibility and the use of predictive logic to assist in data capture and use. The Charting, Perio Charting, Image Management, Medications, referrals and treatment planning features will all provide additional functionality and improved usability and integration.
2) ***Maximization of treatment opportunity.*** A variety of new features and improvements designed to maximize treatment opportunities and productivity. This includes new capabilities and enhancements in contact/appointment management, treatment planning /follow-up, patient communication and referrals. This includes new management capabilities and reporting and use of past data to predict future opportunities and behaviour.
3) ***Patient engagement.*** Processes, tools and services that promote greater patient /practice engagement, solidification of patient / practice relationships and practice growth. This includes features and functionality but also greater use of mobile technologies, social media and other web-based platforms for communication and engagement. Portal is one such example but this is only a starting point.
4) ***Multi-device support.*** Taking advantage of the variety of device types and platforms and the strengths and opportunities of each. Rather than just scaling traditional dental software to fit on everything from large-format PC screens, tablets, phones and specialized devices, this involves the use of specific, limited functionality interfaces that are very well suited to a specific device type. Some examples are the check-in kiosk designed for a touch screen, survey / form entry on a tablet and mobile phone specific interfaces for appointment confirmation.
5) ***Mobility and multi-location support.*** Greater support for practice and patient mobility, as well as patient care and practice management across multiple locations. This includes full and partial cloud-based solutions, improved interoperability between practices and enterprise-level functionality.
6) ***Infrastructure and platform protection and support.*** Products and services that provide a greater level of support for the technology that is playing a greater role in the practice. Examples include automated online backup, backup verification and integrity checking, disaster recovery planning and business continuity planning services.

By taking a serious and comprehensive look at how you manage your patient business interactions, you may determine that there are areas where you are no longer current. As you are as diligent with patient treatment, it would follow that the process continues in a 360 degree fashion allowing you and your team to operate your practice in the most efficient manner. Just as Loblaws set out to "prepare for tomorrow today," so too can you, so that you can harvest the rewards in the years to come.



Dr. Jordan Soll is a Diplomate on the American Board of Esthetic Dentistry and Co-Chair of the Editorial Board of Oral Health.