



ORTHO2

Utilizing Digital Imaging

by **Carol Eaton**

Most of us would agree that in today's technological environment, a well-integrated computer system is an important component in almost any business. From accounting to agriculture, the use of computers makes doing business more productive for the staff and more efficient for the owner. In the field of orthodontics this has never been more true, especially with regard to digital imaging. Not only do we find that a well-integrated digital computer system facilitates communication, it creates a high-tech image that can significantly enhance the professional message of an orthodontic practice.

Digital Imaging as a Communication Tool

When a patient and parent come to you for an orthodontic evaluation, many times their needs differ from those they may have after completing the initial examination. Most patients and parents have never seen a picture that shows how their teeth are aligned in each arch and how they fit together.

Potential patients need to understand their orthodontic problem before they can buy a solution of treatment. Digital imaging allows us to let the patient and parent actually see their dental alignment and occlusion. It helps support our verbal recommendation for change and also gives value to the orthodontic experience. And looking for value in exchange for the investment is a basic need for consumers.

Digital Imaging as an Educational Tool

Communication goes hand in hand with education. Each and every patient and parent who comes through our office doors has a pre-conceived notion of orthodontics and its value. Our goal is to establish what that pre-conceived notion is and add information that will broaden and enhance their perspective. Digital imaging provides a more effective way to communicate that our practice is high-tech and state-of-the-art.

One of the greatest advantages of digital imaging is that

we can provide more information at the initial examination. When the patient and parent have a list of questions for us, we're able to respond immediately rather than wait for the formal consultation. If a recent panorex film has been previously scanned in, we have the ability to display the images and the x-ray side by side to further educate patients and parents.

By providing printouts of the images to add to the new patient "exit" packet, we're able to educate the absent parent who may have concerns about the financial investment for treatment. This visual impact is more meaningful than hearing, "Yes, your son needs orthodontic treatment and it's going to cost \$4800." The custom letter merged with the patient images provides written communication that reinforces your treatment recommendations.

Because the education process continues throughout treatment, digital imaging can be used to educate patients and parents about oral hygiene, treatment progress or lack thereof, and elastic wear configurations. A tangible printout of any of these situations increases the retention of this valuable information.

Digital Imaging as a Marketing Tool

To establish your practice as being patient-centered, you can walk your new patient and parent through images of your practice, highlighting unique services that you offer: computerized patient check-in, pager basket for busy parents on the go, tooth brushing area with disposable toothbrushes, on-deck seating with video games for the patients, homework stations, etc.

You can introduce your team of highly trained individuals via digital photographs by merging a group photo with

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your welcome letter. You can establish a fun and friendly environment by viewing motivational contests and prizes for your cooperative patients. You can outline the orthodontic process and show the patient and parent your progress updates (progress letters to parents and general dentists, reports, etc.) establishing your consistent protocol for keeping patients and parents informed.

Pictures of different types of brackets that you offer show your openness to partnering with your patient and letting them make some of the choices about their treatment plan. If you are using a self-ligating bracket, you can show them what it looks like and explain to them the benefits of using this type of appliance. Custom designed retainers or choices in colored elastics can also be a great way to involve your patient in the treatment process.

A picture of your sterilization center along with tray set-ups can reinforce your commitment to providing a safe environment for your patients.

Digital Imaging and Referral Sources

Communicating with the general dentist and specialist is an integral part of our comprehensive care. Digital imaging makes educating these offices much easier than in the past. By merging patient images with post-exam and post-consultation letters as part of our communication, we keep these offices informed while supporting their role in treatment.

Digital imaging can also be used as we support any recommended pre- or post-orthodontic treatment to be done by the general dentist (bonding, bleaching, restorative work, implants, etc.). Through communication and coordinating appointments with the general dentist and any specialists involved with treatment, we eliminate some of the barriers to starting treatment by proactively assisting the patient with scheduling the needed steps to begin treatment.

Practical Steps for Integrating Digital Imaging

Regardless of the type of imaging system you have, it's not effective unless you put it into action. Here are a few steps to get you started in the right direction.

STEP 1

Begin with your welcome packet

- Inform before you perform
- Discuss digital photographs during the initial phone call with the new patient and in the welcome letter
- Highlight benefits of digital imaging
- Make a visual statement: merge an image of your practice facility, doctor, and/or team with the welcome letter

STEP 2

Take images of all new patients at exam

- Make adjustments in the schedule for different type of exams
- Cross-train personnel
- Create high-tech atmosphere

STEP 3

Use digital images in your presentation

- Verbal skills to enhance presentation
- TC review of images
- Doctor review of images

STEP 4

Streamline the New Patient Process

- Prepare and plan for conversion
- Add impact to the new patient exam
- Combine key initial appointments

STEP 5

Enhance your written communications

- Exam summary letter to patient/parent and GP
- Print out for new patient exit packet
- Cooperation letters/instruction sheets

STEP 6

Use digital imaging as a marketing tool

- Patient certificates and awards
- Community awareness
- GP lunch and learn programs ☺

About the Author



Carol Eaton has been involved with the dental community for over 30 years in her varied roles as practice management consultant, treatment coordinator, and as a registered dental assistant with hands-on experience in orthodontics. As an accomplished speaker, she has lectured at regional, national, and international orthodontic programs since 1992.