

BEST PRACTICES

**The Dental Profession and the Internet**

**By Dennis Spaeth**  
*Publisher, DPRactive.com*



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# The Dental Profession and the Internet

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Nearly four out of five dentists would make Big Brother smile today. Whether at home or at the office, 79% of the dentists surveyed by Advanstar Dental Media in August 2006 say they turn to the Web at least once a week for dental-related purposes. And that fifth dentist does so one to three times a month.

Hard to believe given the lukewarm reception with which dentists met the personal computer age in the mid- to late-1980s. Consider that in 1984 only 11% of dentists had a computer in the office, according to the American Dental Association's Survey of Current Issues in Dentistry.

George Orwell had to be scratching his head as that figure only inched up to 37% by 1990.

By 1994, however, some two-thirds of all dentists had purchased a computer for the office, and by 1997

that figure climbed to 80%, again according to ADA statistics. And the Internet was only just beginning to pick up steam.

By 2004, some 92% of dentists said they had an office computer and 97% had a computer at home, based on the results of Advanstar Dental Media's 2004 Computer/Internet Usage Survey, which was mailed to a random sample of our print magazine subscribers.

Of the dentists with office computers, the survey noted, 70% had Internet access at the office. Of the dentists with home computers, 98% had Internet access at home. What's more, about half of those with Internet access at the office had a high-speed connection.

By June 2006, the percentage of dentists with high-speed Internet access at the office had grown to nearly 77%, Advanstar's 2006 Technology Survey showed.

And another 9% said they planned to follow suit within the year.

Granted, Advanstar conducted this last survey entirely online, using the opt-in e-mail list from the DPRactive Website (aka dentalproducts.net), so it would be natural to second-guess the results as skewed toward an online audience. Keep in mind, though, that a clear majority of dentists have been online since 2004, according to the last survey Advanstar conducted based on the print magazine audience regarding this topic.

Surveying an online audience today leaves very few dentists out of the equation. In fact, the questions now are how often do dentists use the Web, and what are they doing when they get there? Clearly, our August 2006 State of the Dental Internet Survey helps answer these questions.

Again, that's how often dentists say they use the Web for dental-related reasons, showing a significant shift in behavior among dentists over the past two years.

In 2004, according to Advanstar Dental Media's

Computer/Internet Usage Survey, the No. 1 reason dentists went online was for travel information. The second most popular reason was to obtain stock quotes and other financial data.

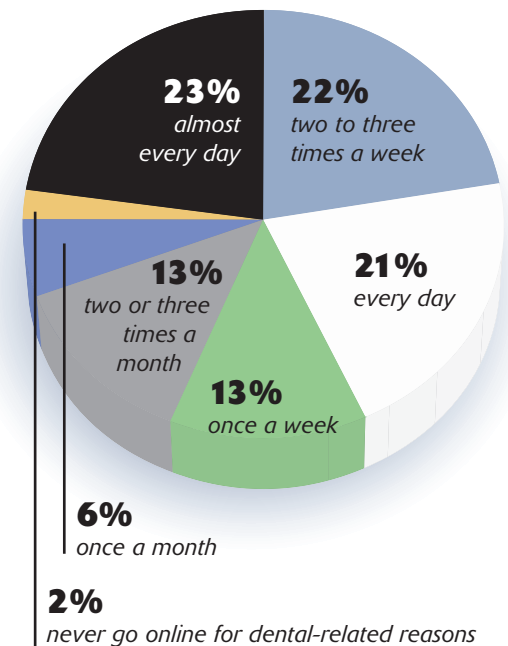
Obtaining dental product information was a distant third.

Today, the No. 1 reason dentists use the Internet is to obtain dental product information. Travel information is a distant second. Plus, dentists are much more likely to go online to purchase dental products now than they are to obtain financial information. In fact, obtaining financial information is 10th among the reasons dentists go online.

### Dental product information

Obtaining dental product information online is so popular, in fact, that 57% of the dentists Advanstar surveyed in August 2006 say they would be "very likely" to watch an online dental-related video demonstrating how to use a new product. Another 39% say they would be "somewhat likely" to watch such a video online.

Of the 635 dentists who responded to Advanstar's online Internet usage survey:



Source: August 2006 State of the Dental Internet Survey

Advanstar recorded similar percentages for dentists who would be “very likely” to watch online video that demonstrated a new clinical technique (62%), and for those who would be “somewhat likely” to do so (34%).

In 2004, just 25% of the dentists surveyed indicated any interest in watching any video online, let alone dental-related videos.

### Continuing education

Some 56% of dentists surveyed in August 2006 say they would be “very likely” to watch online video to acquire CE credit. Another 38% say they would be “somewhat likely” to do so.

And when asked their preference between live, Web-based seminars versus on-demand Web-based seminars that are pre-recorded, 38% say they prefer on-demand seminars while just 17% prefer live. Of course, 35% say they would participate in either type of seminar online.

So look for more and more online dental CE offer-

ings of the multimedia variety.

But there is much more interest in CE online than what’s available via video or other multimedia formats. Nearly 69% of those surveyed say they use the Web to get information about CE courses, while some 41% say they participate in online CE courses.

This new data suggests another significant shift in behavior, considering that just 14% of dentists surveyed in 2004 said they participated in online CE courses then.

Considering that nearly two-thirds of dentists said they don’t currently take advantage of the maximum amount of “home” or “self” study CE their states allow, this promises to be a huge time-saver for dentists in the very near future.

### Online community involvement

While dentists do not appear to be all too enamored with discussion forums (ranked 10th among the dental-related reasons they go online), their interest in conversing with colleagues online just may begin to

### Here is a quick look at the top 10 dental-related reasons dentists say they use the Internet:

1. *To learn about dental products* **82%**
2. *To purchase dental products* **68.7%**  
*(presumably from Schein, Patterson and other dealers online)*
3. *To obtain information about continuing education courses* **68.5%**
4. *To obtain dental research information* **62%**
5. *To obtain pharmaceutical information* **55%**
6. *To submit electronic dental benefits claims* **50%**
7. (tie) *To access multimedia presentations such as video and interactive surveys* **41%**
7. (tie) *To participate in online continuing dental education courses* **41%**
9. *To communicate with patients via e-mail* **38%**
10. *To participate in online dental discussion groups* **27%**

Source: August 2006 State of the Dental Internet Survey

take a different shape. Nearly 52% of the dentists surveyed in August 2006 say they would participate in an online study club where a case is presented and dentists are asked to share their thoughts on a proposed treatment plan. Another 36% were unsure whether they would participate in such a feature, though that may be because there is really nothing like that being offered in dentistry at the moment.

As for the discussion forums that exist for dentists, some two-thirds of dentists simply don't participate, largely because they don't have enough time. Of those who don't participate in discussion forums, 55% cite a lack of time. What's more, 39% say discussion forums are not a "productive use of my time."

Some 29%, meanwhile, are not sure how to participate. While this stat certainly may suggest there is room for growth here, knowing that the learning curve on most forums is less than 10 minutes logically leads to some doubt about how much time this segment of doctors really has to devote to discussion forums.

### Websites

While 35% of dentists surveyed in August 2006 say they have no plans to develop a practice Web site within the next year, the concept is catching on within the dental community. Nearly 40% now have a practice Website, and another 25% plan to develop one within the year.

If these dentists hold true to their word as they did when asked the same question in 2004, then expect some two-thirds of all dental offices to have practice Websites by the end of 2007.

In 2004, when Advanstar asked dentists if they had a practice Website, 18% said they already had one and 21% said they planned to develop one within the year. Clearly, they did.

Curiously, though, a quarter of the dentists with Websites today say they don't know whether their Websites have brought in any new patients. And some 10% say their Websites haven't brought in any new patients.

So roughly about 35% of the dentists with Web-

sites need to reconsider their approach the online community.

On the bright side, 13% say their site has brought in 11 to 20 new patients in the past year; 8% say 21 to 40 new patients; 3% say 41–60 new patients, and 7% say more than 60 new patients.

The growth in e-mail usage among dentists, meanwhile, has mirrored that of practice Websites. The percentage of dentists using e-mail to communicate with patients nearly doubled from 20% in 2004 to 38% by August 2006.

And as more dentists adopt e-mail as a major form of communications with patients, look for more interest among dentists in using electronic patient newsletters to enhance patient communication. While just 6% of dentists say they use an electronic patient newsletter now, nearly 21% of the dentists surveyed in August 2006 plan to develop one to communicate with their patients within the year.

## Conclusions

If Advanstar's past surveys have shown anything, it is that dentists are true to their word. If they say they plan to purchase some product or service, they pretty much live up to that expectation. Practice Websites are a case in point.

But you could also look at the adoption of hand-held computers, or PDAs. Some 24% owned one in 2004, and 11% vowed they would buy one within the year.

While the percentage of dentists who own PDAs has quite reached 35%, based on our August 2006 survey, it has topped 32%. This despite the questionable lifespan of this technology, what with many of the PDAs features being offered through the ever-changing cell phone technology.

Given the historical success with which Advanstar has been able to identify various trends within the dental community, the latest survey suggests that dentists will be much more interested in video- and multimedia-based presentations that offer product

demonstrations, CE credit and at least a modicum of community via study clubs or some type of discussion forum. For the dentist without a practice Website, or even the dentists with a site that may not be bringing in new patients, the message being sent by the majority of dentists is clear: You will be in the minority if you don't have a practice Website within the next year or so.

And if you want to be on the cutting edge, electronic patient newsletters appear to be maturing just beyond the early adopter stage.

The lesson for all dentists, however, is simple: Start collecting e-mail addresses for all of your patients now.