

A photograph of a male dentist in a white lab coat and blue gloves, smiling while examining a female patient's teeth. The patient is reclined in a dental chair. The background shows a clean, modern dental office.

The 2021 Healthcare Business Insights Report for Dentists



A new patient boom, staffing shortages & changing expectations are challenging healthcare providers, new research finds

As vaccinations roll out and businesses are getting back into the swing of things, new research from Weave shows healthcare practices and their patients' expectations have been altered by the pandemic, providing new opportunities and challenges for providers. Although many dental practices are already returning to normal, understanding these new challenges is critical to your success in 2021.

Which communication tools have become commonplace? Which types of technology make life easier for office managers and receptionists? How can dental practices improve the patient experience in 2021 and beyond?

To answer these questions, Weave commissioned an independent study of over 1,400 clinics and patients to learn how COVID-19 has changed the way healthcare practices do business. Key insights and actionable tips included here will enhance your practice's quality of service, help you onboard more patients, and grow your business.

Methodology:

Weave commissioned an independent market research firm to study 1,400 small healthcare businesses and patients. The margin of error for this study is +/- 2.6% at the 95% confidence level. Online sampling was conducted in partnership with Lucid, a global leader in survey sampling. The data presented for dental offices is directional.

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Under pressure: Improving during a pandemic



COVID-19 has put immense stress on people of all walks of life, but especially on healthcare workers. Being on the front lines means much higher potential exposure to the virus and the added burden of working around new safety and government regulations.

Despite all these difficulties, our survey indicates that 78% of dental practices say the pressures of COVID-19 have actually improved their quality of care. But how exactly have dental offices continued to improve throughout the pandemic?

First, they've made their environment more hygienic with proper social distancing, consistent sanitization of surfaces, and protective equipment like masks and gloves. Second, clinics have eliminated front desk lines with initiatives such as curbside waiting rooms. Finally, they have re-invented work flows using team chat and other communication tools to reduce inefficiencies.

We will get into more specifics about how clinics have improved during the pandemic. Before that, let's take a look at how patient expectations have been affected by COVID-19.

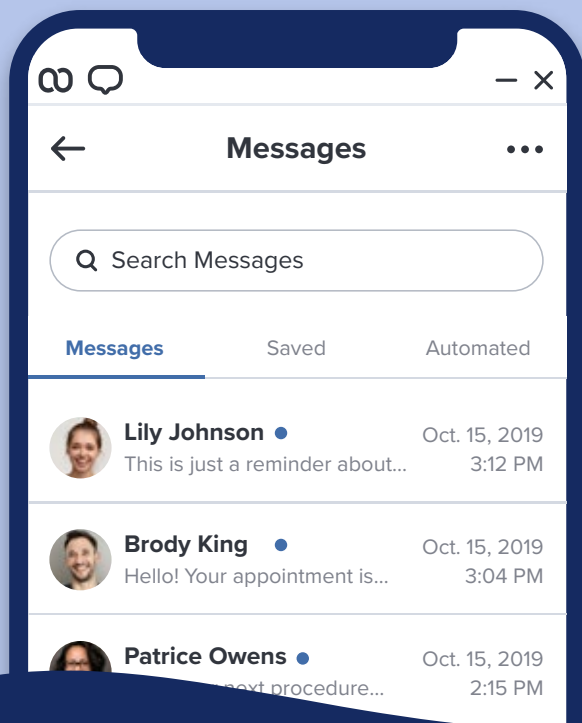
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**Patients are ready
to come back**





70%

of patients say they plan to schedule a non-emergency healthcare visit within the next three months

According to Weave's survey results, 85% of patients feel safe personally visiting a healthcare clinic today. Even among those who don't feel safe returning yet, 81% expect to feel comfortable within the next 6 months. These statistics point to a serious influx of patients and appointments in the second half of 2021.

In fact, 70% of patients say they plan to schedule a non-emergency healthcare visit within the next three months. Patients today believe that they're more likely to contract COVID-19 at public places other than healthcare clinics, including airports, public transit, gyms, public restrooms, and grocery stores. Although they're still wary of the virus, 70% of patients say they're less likely to contract COVID-19 today than last year.

Dental offices should be gearing up to provide quality service to these individuals and to take advantage of the opportunity to expand their practice. And while patients and providers both recognise that practices have improved the patient experience, there is a new patient expectation level that you must meet.

The waiting game: long waits are taxing on patients

Perhaps due to the challenges of the pandemic, 53% of patients say it's taking more time than usual to be seen at a healthcare clinic. Weave's survey shows that patients have a threshold for the number of days they're willing to wait to be seen for non-emergencies. Depending on the type of clinic, this threshold is between 27 and 40 days.

53%

of patients say it's taking more time than usual to be seen at a healthcare clinic

Type of clinic or practice	Max days patient will wait to be seen
Chiropractor	33
Vision care	34
General physician	27
Physical therapist	33
Dentist	34
Medical spa	40

Troublingly, patients who can't be seen in their preferred time frame are ready to find a new provider, and some already have. 33% of patients have switched healthcare providers recently because they weren't able to be seen quickly. In addition, a surprisingly high number of patients are unhappy with current wait times. 40% of patients say the amount of time it takes to get into a healthcare provider right now is unacceptable.

After appointments are set, patients are split on where they would like to wait before visiting their doctors. During the pandemic, it's become common practice to establish curbside waiting rooms by using text messages to check in patients. 47% of patients continue to prefer waiting for their appointment in the car, while 53% of patients want to wait in the lobby.

And patients aren't the only ones who are enthusiastic about the tools that make curbside check-in possible as well. Jessica Bacci, a practice manager and Weave partner, says the following about using text messaging to communicate with patients:

“

Our patients have loved two-way texting. Being able to have instant communication, rather than having to wait for the phone to ring and picking it up, has been really nice with the Weave texting feature.”*

—Jessica Bacci

Practice Manager and Weave partner



Patients prefer the new tools practices started relying on during COVID-19

The top experiences patients want going forward



Online scheduling



Text reminders



Curbside capability



Electronic forms



Contactless payments

Wait times continue to be an issue for many patients. They want clinics to aim for shorter lobby waits and faster check-in times. Establishing curbside waiting rooms and switching to electronic forms can aid practices in reducing the amount of time their patients are waiting for appointments.

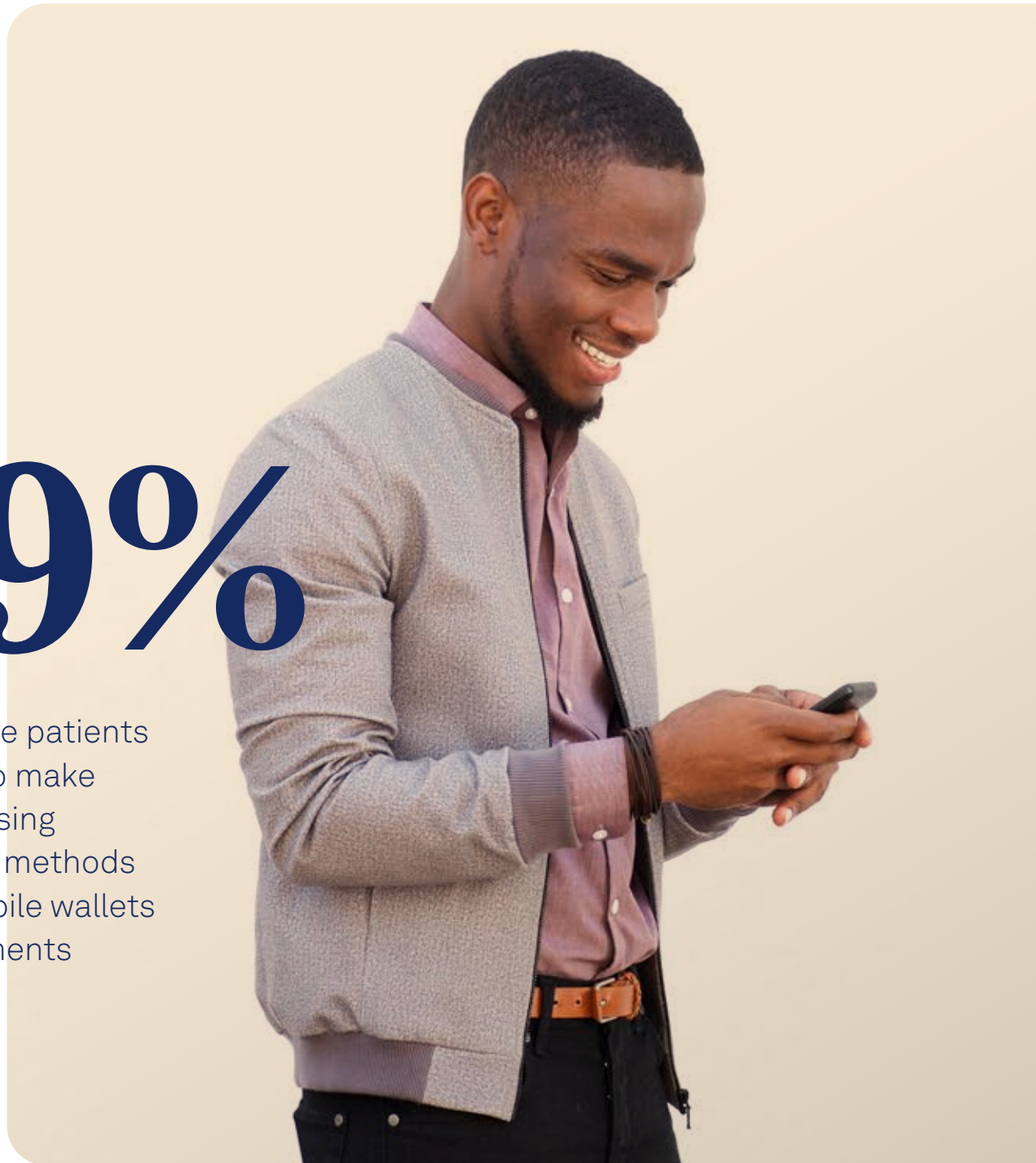
Patients also want to receive scheduling reminders from their providers. Text reminders can be automated to go out at specific dates and times to ensure patients are informed and aware of upcoming appointments. In addition, website tools that facilitate online scheduling

for patients allow offices to book appointments after hours and on weekends, leaving no opportunity to miss out on helping a potential new patient.

During the pandemic, patients have developed a preference for contactless payment methods. Today, 59% of healthcare patients would like to make payments using contactless methods such as mobile wallets or text payments. Weave's Text to Pay feature, for instance, lets patients pay from the parking lot or from home following appointments, and unpaid invoice reminders can be sent en masse to patients with outstanding balances.

59%

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**Staff shortages &
inefficiencies are keeping
practices from helping
more patients**

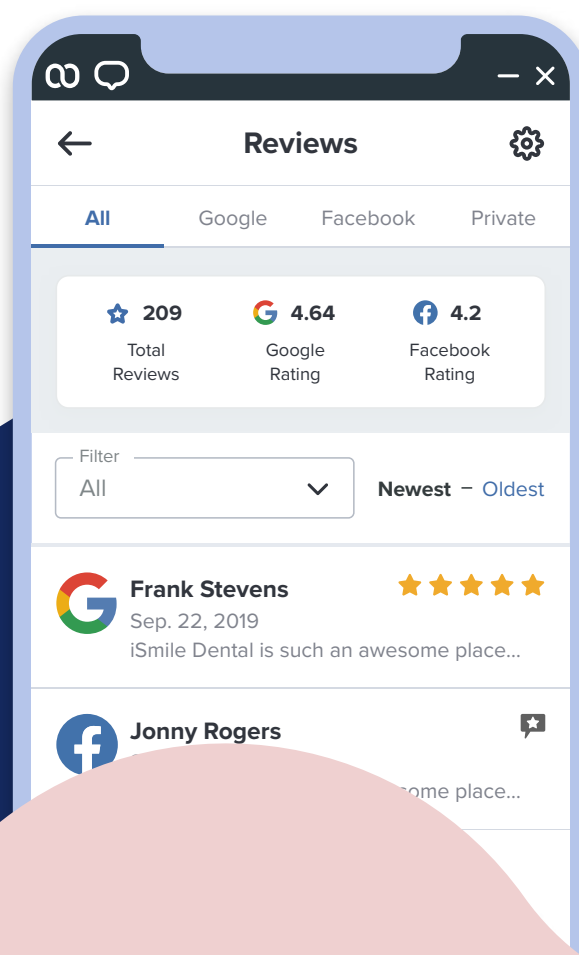


With regulations easing and vaccinations becoming more prevalent over this calendar year, the majority of healthcare practices are seeing an increase in patient appointments. 84% of dental practices are seeing opportunities to grow their patient base right now.

However, many clinics don't feel up to the task of growing their patient base, feeling squeezed by staffing shortages and attempts to re-engage patients who haven't been back recently. 56% of healthcare practices aren't sure they're ready to schedule a spike in patient appointments and the majority of providers say they don't have time to reestablish contact with patients personally.

84%

of dental practices are seeing opportunities to grow their patient base right now





Many clinics aren't equipped with the technological solutions necessary to efficiently reestablish contact with patients or add new ones. Inefficient systems are plaguing offices with staffing shortages in particular, and 48% of the dental offices in our survey say they're currently short-staffed. To overcome these shortages, 41% of healthcare practices are now investing in new technology to help compensate for staffing limitations.

With the right scheduling tools, practices can overcome the challenges presented by patients returning to their offices at a higher rate. Our survey yields some key insights to help you keep the clients you have while engaging new ones.

48%

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our survey say they're
currently short-staffed



Hi Amanda, your
appointment is
tomorrow at 9 am.

Great!
See you then!

Scheduling tools for dental offices with staffing shortages

The tools clinics want to drive efficiency



Text messaging



Website chat



Team chat



Text chat history



Textable patient directory

Weave's survey of providers showed that offices are looking for specific tools to combat inefficiencies COVID-19 unearthed in their business, as listed above.

To help compensate for staffing limitations, clinics are adopting innovations like [website chat](#). This tool lets patients and prospective patients start text conversations with office staff from your practice's website, allowing office staff to respond at their convenience.

It also empowers patients to schedule appointments anytime and anywhere.

A short-staffed office needs to work together. That's why clinics are looking for a [team chat](#) tool for enabling team members to collaborate with each other. If office managers, receptionists, and doctors are communicating from one place, they're more likely to successfully conduct appointments for returning and new patients.



43%

Texting with patients is a tool used by only 43% of the offices in our study

Texting with patients is a tool used by only 43% of the offices in our study. Text conversations with healthcare providers are becoming increasingly popular, especially among younger demographics. [Scheduling software](#) lets offices automate text reminders, saving office managers and receptionists significant time each day. Weave provides this type of text service.

“

Weave has been critical to managing the office and scheduling patients,” says Maggie Blackwell of Gerlecz Dentistry. “I save between 2-3 hours a day confirming appointments, and I’m able to fill more last-minute cancellations.”

Weave’s easy-to-use interface lets office managers and receptionists access [Customer Insights](#) and [Messages](#) from one place, leading to more personalized communication. Clinics also want to be able to view the history of previous text interactions with patients, which is another bonus of a unified platform.

Attracting new patients with Online Reviews

Online reviews gain importance for dental offices with each passing day. 60% of practices say the best way to drive positive patient reviews is personalized service from front-office staff.

Other ways to garner positive online reviews include shortening wait times, making sure office staff are knowledgeable about patient accounts, and doing post-visit follow ups to ensure patient satisfaction. Collecting positive online reviews is simplified by [Weave Reviews](#).

60%

of practices say the best way to drive positive patient reviews is personalized service from front-office staff

“

Before we started using Weave, we just had a few Google Reviews. Now we have over 150, and it's our #1 source for new patients,” says Rachel Fox, an office manager at Riverfront Dental.





As your healthcare practice builds its online reputation, you'll see a stream of new and returning patients in the second half of 2021 and beyond. Having the communication tools to accommodate this rush will be key to your growth going forward. Your quest is to find the solutions that enhance your patients' experience, make your team's work life easier, and allow your dental practice to grow for years to come.

[Schedule a demo](#)

