It is always simultaneously tempting and dangerous to make predictions about the future of dentistry. A recent personal review of the articles I have written over the years revealed that I seem to get things right half the time. The challenge is figuring out which half! So, looking at 2018, what does the landscape look like?

I am conscious that you, dear readers, are an international community and so I will resist the temptation to have a good old-fashioned moan about post-Brexit Britain moving into the Dark Ages while our politicians attempt to leave the EU without leaving it. Or, for that matter, riffs and rants about dictatorial pothead leaders playing dice with our futures to further their own agendas, whether that is in politics, media or sport.

Actually, what I want to talk about is us, you and me, ordinary folk going about our business, pursuing careers, raising families and trying our best to make sense of the world around us. What I want to address is how I think our lives are going to change in the next 12 months, as dental practice owners, managers and team members, but also as members of the public.

The Internet of things

The smartphone has changed the way we live (Apple-manufactured or otherwise), and the most dominant economic forces on earth are no longer nation economies; they are Google, Microsoft, Amazon, YouTube and Facebook (and let us not forget WeChat—the largest social media platform in China). The figures for the combined revenues of and cash mountains owned by these organisations are mind-boggling, and the way in which those financial reserves are re-invested will have the biggest impact on the world we live in by Christmas this year.

I recently returned from a dental lecture tour in India, whose 1.2 billion population has overtaken the US to become the largest nation of Facebook users in the world, with around 250 million Indians checking into their profiles every day. It is hardly surprising that my Delhi hotel was populated by fresh-faced young Americans sporting Facebook employee T-shirts, no doubt building a commercial base to accommodate the demands of this new and expanding audience.

Globally, figures for e-commerce over Christmas 2017 were a record, and as we learn to purchase every conceivable commodity online, the high street trembles, looking at those real estate and staff costs under the watchful eye of their investors and accountants.

There is more to it than just e-commerce though. We are learning to live online, reading, watching, listening, reviewing, commenting, liking and connecting to an extent that our parents could never have imagined. Buying more and more.

India is registering 40 million new smartphones every 12 weeks and is representative of a connective revolution that is gender, age, religion and socio-economically egalitarian—everyone is getting online.

With over 75 per cent of website visits to my clients’ dental sites now taking place via smartphones, how your website looks on a desktop no longer mat-
ters. How it looks and performs on a smartphone is what counts.

Dentistry is going to have to learn how to communicate with patients online to a greater extent than ever before. I am already seeing tech start-ups looking at the dental space and thinking about how best to keep patients informed of their oral health and how to make their patient experience seamless.

Wearable technology

This brings me to how that communication will take place (between patient and dentist and vice versa) as the year unfolds. The start-ups I mentioned are developing electric toothbrushes that send data back to an application that monitors not just brushing technique but also simple issues around patient health. Data is analysed and then sent back to the patient’s smartphone to provide dental health education.

Notwithstanding the issues around the confidentiality of that data and its storage, we are seeing the beginning of wearable tech playing a major role in healthcare generally. E-zines and blogs like those published by Dr Bertalan Meskó (the Medical Futurist) show that progress is exponential. Cue the watch that can feed back dental health information, allowing both patient and dentist to predict problems before they occur.

Getting attention

The science and technology are compelling for early adopters and frightening for laggards. Any debate as to the future of digital dentistry has long since left the late adopters behind, and I am seeing many of my clients racing to keep up with change. However, independent dentistry is a business whose purpose is to solve patients’ problems, but whose objective has to be to make an ethical profit, so we cannot ever afford to be distracted from the focus on attracting the right type of new patient and from charging the right price for what we do. These are the challenges that occupy the majority of my time with clients, and the changes I have referenced in the first part of this article have to be embraced in order to survive and prosper in business.

Experts estimate that, as consumers, we are bombarded by up to 5,000 advertising impressions per day, so how do dentists make themselves heard among this noise? In my experience, there is little point in trying to shout loudest by spending money on advertising. The average e-commerce company in the UK now has to invest about £30,000 per month to be heard in the digital marketplace, so a dentist investing £500 per month in search engine optimisation or Google AdWords is unlikely to succeed. In any event, digital advertising in dentistry often attracts price shoppers and bargain-hunters.

The good news is that social media channels allow us to generate internal digital patient referrals in numbers that could never be foreseen in the old days of word of mouth. Thus, a carefully planned and well-executed social media marketing plan is now an essential component of every practice’s overall goals for new patient generation. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are the marketing domains of 2018.

Prices

The interesting irony here is that digital dentistry, once we have moved from the innovation stage of the adoption cycle, through early adopters to the late majority, will actually have the effect of reducing the cost of providing dental healthcare and treatment. I have clients right now who innovated in digital dentistry and are seeing a consequent improvement in their bottom line profit as costs of sales reduce. That may not sound like great news for laboratory and materials suppliers, but that is the inevitable consequence of technological progress.

I am also realistic enough to agree that little of that cost-saving is being passed on to the patients at the moment. That is because we are still in the early stages of the digital adoption cycle, and the pressure on prices will not occur until much later in that cycle. It is time, indeed, for the innovators to make hay. Prices will stay firm in 2018; costs can reduce.

An interesting year ahead

2018 will see the continued acceleration of the impact that digital communication and commerce will have on our lives. The dental practice of the future will fully embrace not only digital dentistry but also the way in which they connect with their patients online. The smartphone will be the place that happens, until smartphones are replaced by the next generation of wearable devices.

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