Don’t blink—You may miss something!

By Chris Barrow, UK

I recently took five weeks off work to go catamaran sailing in the Caribbean, get married while there and then leave my lovely new wife behind to explore the mountains and deserts of Oman with seven friends. On my return, the back issues of dental magazines were full of General Dental Council changes to its regulatory systems, the National Association of Specialist Dental Accountants and Lawyers revealing a 53 per cent increase in UK practice goodwill values in the last year, mydentist taking a break from practice purchases, the FGDP (UK) seeking independence, the risk that NHS dental contract reform could force associates to become employees and Simplyhealth announcing their name change for Denplan. Add in the Bupa purchase of Oasis before I started my return and then leave my lovely Caribbean, get married while staying in touch with patient expectations is arguably the single most important way to survive the future.

The challenge, as they say, is knowing which 50 per cent and, frankly, I never have a clue. Sorry! So my purpose here is not to add yet another list of half-truths to the speculations of my peers in writing and speaking, I would rather offer some thoughts on how to survive the disruptive dental market.

Rule 1: Stay focused on the patient

No matter what big business, private equity or shareholder pressure does to the dental industry, the independent dental business owner will be able to deliver a unique selling point built on customer service. The patient experience will always be the way in which you can positively differentiate yourself. Staying in touch with patient expectations is arguably the single most important way to survive the future.

In a recent blog post, I mentioned a presentation given at the London-based WIREd Retail symposium. There Westfield Labs Chief Operating Officer Antony Ritch gave an interesting insight into the future of shopping.

"Shoppers don’t differentiate between online and offline. Omnichannel is the only way that retailers can survive. As virtual reality, augmented reality and full-body scans of shoppers proliferate—and with Amazon launching bricks and mortar stores, the way forward is to act as matchmaker between customer and product in every environment. Shoppers always have their phones and 80% of all physical sales are influenced by the internet. Stores are a social environment where friends and family come out to enjoy a day of shopping, dining and entertaining. We see the digital world in the same manner."

When one considers this quotation alongside the conventional approach to the provision of dental customer service, there is much that will need to change in the next ten years. My belief is that disruption will be applied to the premises from which dentistry is delivered and the current model of reception, lounge, consultation room and surgery.

The patient experience will change and the device-toting, connected consumer will be at the centre of it. Something new this way comes, but as yet I am having trouble imagining what it will look like.

Rule 2: Take the time to research, listen and plan

There seem to be too many dental conferences, websites, publications and social channels. There are nowhere near enough hours in the day to stay abreast of what is happening in clinical dentistry and in business innovation. I have no miracle cure for information overload. If you are committed to your vocation, then you must prioritise that which will keep you ahead of the game and that will include attending, listening to, watching and reading the events, broadcasts and publications that will maintain your edge.

This comes at a price and the need to manage your time very carefully to avoid burn-out. Maria Popova, creator of the excellent Brain Pickings weekly e-newsletter reminds us that: ‘Of all ridiculous things, the most ridiculous seems to me, to be busy—to be a man who is brisk about his food and his work.’ Kierkegaard admonished in 1843 as he contemplated our greatest source of unhappiness. It’s a sobering sentiment against the backdrop of modern life, where the cult of busy and productivity plays out as the chief drama of our existence—a drama we persistently lament as singular to our time. We reflexively blame on the Internet our corrosive compulsion for doing at the cost of being, forgetting that every technology is a symptom and not, or at least not at first, a cause of our desires and pathologies."

Rule 3: Have good conversations

All problems exist in the absence of a good conversation. Many years ago, one of my original mentors advised me to establish a personal board of directors (PBD), defined as people whose opinions I trust and who have the opportunity to give me honest feedback without judgement. The only qualifications are trust, respect and mutual admiration. They do not have to be in the same business, country or demographic. My PBD has changed over the years as members have come and gone, but I still refer many of my ideas and strategies to them for a second opinion before I take risks.

I often attend meetings with owners, managers and teams in which it is obvious to me that the main reason they have progressed so slowly is that they simply do not make the time available in the working calendar to stop and listen to each other. The chase for production becomes all-embracing, whether a unit of dental activity or a sales target, and there are never enough timeouts to take the pulse of the business and its people.

The main characteristic of a Champions League dental business (if I may use that football metaphor) is the meeting schedule, which should be designed to ensure that verbal communication is the primary means by which information is shared. Here too is another way in which the independent can beat most big businesses.

Benjamin Franklin is alleged to have said, ‘When you’re finished changing, you’re finished.’ Focus on your patient experience, stay connected to innovation and stop to listen. Master those three habits and you will be able to take advantage of whatever the world plans to throw at us next. There is, of course, a 50 per cent chance that what I have just said is correct.