Let’s face it: Patient trends are changing. Whitening used to be just for the super-wealthy, and braces were just for teenagers. Today, the average American adult is willing to spend thousands of dollars to improve his or her smile. These changes in patient trends have allowed orthodontists to increase revenues by offering a wide variety of costly treatments to a new generation of appearance conscious consumers.

Just as patient care preferences are changing, so are patient payment preferences. Online and electronic payments are growing at accelerated rates. In 2007, the Electronic Payments Association (NACHA) reported that more than 18 billion in automated clearing house (ACH) payments, or checking and savings drafts, were made. That is a 12.6 percent increase over 2006 numbers.

Elliot McEntee, CEO of NACHA, reports, “ACH payment volume continues to double every five years with increases experienced across all transaction categories.” Orthodontic practices must position themselves to meet these changes in patient payment preferences.

Auto-drafting obstacles

While auto-drafting is the preferred payment method for many consumers, implementing this process into an orthodontic practice can be challenging. To provide the most flexible payment options for your patients, you need to make auto-drafting available via check or credit card. While most banks offer software to handle checking account drafts, this requires careful management.

Your staff will have to set up accounts in the software, remember to run transactions daily, weekly or monthly, and keep up with all failed transactions as they trickle in over time.

Failed transactions must be resubmitted. Doing so without first making contact with the patient can result in subsequent failures and bank fees that are costly both to the practice and to the patient. Credit card processing has similar challenges.

The Imaging Sciences International i-CAT®, a leader in cone beam 3-D dental imaging, is the first cone beam system to be certified by OraMetrix, a leading provider of technology-based orthodontic care solutions, for seamless integration with the latest advancements in SureSmile® technology, which transforms cone beam scans of the mouth and teeth into 3-D computer models for orthodontic treatment planning and treatment.

The SureSmile system is a doctor-driven digital therapeutic solution for the practice of orthodontics that replaces conventional manually-managed treatment.

Orthodontists now can take an i-CAT scan of the patient’s mouth, face and jaw and use this data in the SureSmile system for unprecedented control of treatment through virtual diagnostic simulations, instant quality grading tools, prescriptive planning capabilities and robotic arch-wire customization.

“The use of cone beam 3-D technology has enhanced the treatment planning success of our SureSmile technology for orthodontists,” says Charles Abraham, CEO of OraMetrix, Inc. “We have tested the Imaging Sciences i-CAT and found that using the detailed and anatomically accurate 3-D scans will help SureSmile customers deliver high-quality patient results. We look forward to working with I-CAT customers and orthodontists to show the integration benefits of these two innovative technologies.”
A member of your staff must obtain credit card information from your patient and store it securely according to the Payment Card Industry guidelines. Then you must initiate the drafts on the date(s) chosen by your patient by hand-keying the information into your credit card machine.

Sometimes this process will require purchasing credit card authorization software. Once again, payment failures for overlimit cards, expired cards and lost or stolen cards must be handled by the staff, and the transactions resubmitted.

In addition, other considerations must be given. Familiarity with the rules governing auto-drafting is a must. These rules address adjusting payment amounts, moving draft dates, appropriate and allowable charges for NSF fees, etc. You must develop authorization forms that meet the guidelines for ACH and credit card recurring payments, and your office must decide how to handle weekends and holidays when scheduled draft dates fall outside of the work week.

While implementing auto-drafting into your practice is an important step, the obstacles mentioned above may keep offices from making the option available to their patients. Even worse, offices may implement auto-drafting and unknowingly be in violation of the guidelines, which are designed to protect consumers. Such violations can be very costly.

Is there a solution that provides the benefits afforded by auto-drafting that doesn’t present so many obstacles?

Overcoming the challenges

Outsourcing payment management may be the solution. Success stories abound from coast to coast. Delinquencies are down, staff productivity is up and practices are saving time and money. Companies such as OrthoBanc can help your practice meet the payment preferences of the savvy consumer while overcoming the obstacles of auto-drafting.

By outsourcing your payment drafting, your staff is relieved of creating coupon books, preparing monthly statements, handling payments received by mail, making bank deposit runs, processing manual credit card payments, answering questions about patient payments and posting payments into your practice management software system. You also are able to present your patient with the option of checking account draft or credit card draft without creating extra work for your employees.

Selecting a good outsourced solution

When choosing an outsourcing solution, select a company that takes responsibility for proper compliance with auto drafting rules and regulations – not one that merely automates the process while leaving you responsible for compliance. Also be certain to look for a company that manages your accounts. This means it handles all aspects of your payments including making contact with patients whose transactions fail, obtaining new expiration dates on cards and keeping your office informed of progress. Such management removes considerable stress from the staff and insures your payment plans are monitored and acted upon immediately when necessary.

Conclusion

If you’re still not auto-drafting your monthly payments, it is probably time to take that step. The process is made easier through companies that offer complete payment management. Your payments will be received on time each month, even if treatment is scheduled less frequently. With increased cash flow and fewer delinquent accounts, your team will have more time to build great patient relationships and provide excellent orthodontic care.