I t has been almost a year since social distancing, Zoom fatigue, and ‘do you have your mask?’ became a part of everyday vernacular. Everyone is weary, and everyone wants this chapter to be put to rest. At the point of print, multiple vaccines have been approved and are being released into the population (based on phases). Everyone is hopeful that there will be better, brighter days ahead. Though the fact remains, there is still so much that is unknown about the virus and also how the world will function post-pandemic. What is known, is how valiantly those in the dental laboratory industry responded a year ago, and how the fight continues to this day. JDT asked dental laboratory professionals to take a moment and reflect on both the good and bad of where they were just one year ago.
What changes did you make in the spring of 2020 that might be here to stay?

We experienced an uptick in digital cases but we were expecting and preparing for that already. Overall, we have been blessed. Removable has grown incredibly and we doubled our partial framework outsourcing that we do for other labs. I hope this is due to less outsourcing overseas, and possibly new government programs that grant people more access to dental healthcare. We also learned the hard way that in 2021, we need to keep larger inventories in stock due to potential shortages.

Were there new services you provided dental clients due to the impact of COVID-19?

At the start of the pandemic we produced a number of PPE visors with our Carbon printers that we donated to local schools and churches. Carbon opened up our plates at no charge so we were able to print more PPE and I am grateful for that.

How have you focused on employee morale and company culture, given the challenges of COVID-19?

Our employees created a family community. Unfortunately, some changes were necessary to dismiss the employees that didn’t want to be a part of this community, but it has only made us stronger and more efficient. We learned which employees were here just for a paycheck and which employees wanted to learn, grow and build a future.

I saw tremendous stress on employees, and even before I knew of the PPP loan, I was committed to pay my employees as long as I could. In order for me to guarantee 80 hours, some had to use vacation time to fill the gap. Once we received the PPP loan, I set it aside to gauge our footing, and by the end of October my employees were repaid for those hours. Essentially I took a loan from my employees but they did it willingly because they were as confused and scared as I was. I also provided more lunches in an effort to help employees save money and reduce exposure.

What did you and your team do well, and what would you do differently?

The team came together as a unit. They knew as a company we were going to struggle, and they stepped up and made it easy to make the changes and to work the hours, even doing maintenance, as opposed to sitting around and griping. I wanted to maintain our team because I knew it would be hard to bring it back together.

I do wish we paid more attention when we first started hearing about the virus and the struggles hitting New York and ordered extra supplies and protective gear. I assumed it would never hit my small Mississippi town, but it’s definitely hit home with multiple members of my family being diagnosed.

War is the only thing that could possibly feel anything close to the past year. Think of the dread felt during WW2 or Vietnam, as an unexpected knock at the door had the potential to be life-changing news. Will our business hold up? Will the entire staff get the virus at the same time? Will our friends be the next statistic? Will it be me? We did survive and thrive though, during a dark time. We must be doing something right.

Who or what were your go-to resources during the spring/summer 2020?

I could sing the praises of all of our suppliers who did their best to get us what we needed, even when they were dealing with the same shut-down problems we were. The virus reminded me to be more patient, thoughtful, and that kindness pays off. Being angry and bitter is not worth the stress.
What changes did you make in the spring of 2020 that might be here to stay?

In order to more effectively utilize our milling operations, we purchased a sintering oven in August. This has allowed us to keep more of our manufacturing processes in the lab. When we re-opened in June, we experienced absolute challenges with UPS and FedEx with lost or excessively delayed shipments. Understandably, they were short-staffed but as most of our clients were out of state, we found ourselves apologizing more often than we wanted to regarding late cases. Since we have been milling most of our zirconia here in the lab, our turnaround time has decreased and our doctors have really appreciated getting cases back in their hands sooner.

How have you focused on employee morale and company culture, given the challenges of COVID-19?

We were very intentional with team communication since the pandemic began. This started in early February when the first cases of the virus were being reported in the U.S. and we heard uneasiness from our employees. We implemented new disinfecting protocols for our internal housekeeping and had regular meetings as the CDC and WHO were issuing guidelines. This has continued through our reopening until now. I know that honest and regular communication has been key as we all navigate through this challenging time. Our employees trust that we have the well-being of our team as our first priority, and they have been eager to be in the lab and busy with what we do best. We also felt strongly about continuing to pay for our employees’ health insurance, and provided access to their earned vacation time and even salary increases.

What did you and your team do well, and what would you do differently?

This year has really brought to light the power of strong and consistent customer service and client communication. As consumers, we have all experienced how frustrating terrible service can be, and we are reminded how quickly that disrupts our confidence. This is not what we want our clients to experience. We held regular Zoom meetings with our doctors as well as with our team during the shutdown and it was invaluable. As a lab, we showed up for one another every day in the most remarkable ways. We leaned in on each person’s strengths and allowed grace and flexibility to each other as we dealt with the challenges of our families, home schooling, financial burdens and all the while keeping our lab healthy. I really can’t say what I would have done differently. I know that I grew tremendously during a time that we could have never adequately prepared ourselves for and I have found that the challenges we are experiencing each day are relatively short-lived. For this, I am grateful.

Who or what were your go-to resources during the spring/summer 2020?

The NADL has been absolutely amazing with their delivery of up-to-the-minute information through emails, social media posts and website updates. We also relied on Safelink Consulting to guide us with safety protocols. Both of these partners have always been and continue to be trusted resources, but they shined through this pandemic like rock stars!

Denise Burris, CDT
Co-owner, By Design Dental Studio, CDL, Atlanta, GA.
What changes did you make in the spring of 2020 that might be here to stay?

Real-time communication became a very integral part of our effort to maintain relationships with current customers. Even new customers reached out to Keating Dental once they realized that the lab is truly 100 percent digital and can accommodate any type of scanner platform. The customer portal was a key element of the communication system. It allowed the customer to track each file sent to the lab, upload future supporting documents, and stay informed of progress until the case was shipped out.

Keating Dental Lab has multiple Roland DG/DGSHAPE DWX wet and dry mills which allowed us to mill various types of zirconia and other materials, and maximize and schedule production, virtually 24 hours a day, without any down time. To keep up with the surge in digital impression technology, we were constantly looking for ways to help streamline the process. We found that our CAM software worked very well with DGSHAPE DWX milling systems, which was important to our overall success.

Are there new services you are providing dental clients due to the impact of COVID-19?

3D printing is a service that has taken off since the pandemic. We are utilizing 3D technology to print dentures and that has given us an advantage over others in the marketplace.

What did you and your team do well and what would you do differently?

We adapted to working at different times of the day to minimize overcrowding. We became more efficient at utilizing our resources based on our needs for that day. We learned that a customer service person can become a shipping person, or a manager can become a customer service person, if needed.

As far as what we would do differently, we would provide an ongoing training program to ensure that as many people as possible are cross-trained and certified in various areas of the business, especially in the digital phase. We should always solicit employees’ interest in learning new activities, and set up a training program to help them achieve it.

Who or what were your go-to resources during the spring/summer 2020?

The American Dental Association has always been a resource for information. We were able to track the closure and reopening of dental offices by state, which helped us forecast the volume per region based on our customers in that region and adjust our workforce accordingly.
What changes did you make in the spring of 2020 that might be here to stay?

We condensed our lab hours from 6:00 a.m.-7:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. We found this schedule to be much more efficient and we have cut way back on overtime. We also placed plexiglass barriers between benches and those helped with the noise level and chatting between the technicians.

Are there new services you are providing dental clients due to the impact of COVID-19?

We started to do in-office custom shades, which we did not previously offer. Our sales manager converted into a custom shade-taker and it has worked out really well. As he takes the shades, he is able to talk to the staff and doctor regarding challenges and how we can help. It created a direct line of communication with the dentists, who typically aren’t open about having people come into their offices, especially sales people.

How have you focused on employee morale and company culture, given the challenges of COVID-19?

It’s tough. Oregon has some of the most stringent OSHA requirements, and discontented employees have several times reported safety violations to OSHA. Although the complaints were very minor and were taken care of, it brought down the morale of the employees who were anxious to work.

What did you and your team do well, and what would you do differently?

We reacted quickly once the order was given that dentistry was going to open back up. The order came out on a Thursday in May that dentistry could open, and we were running by Monday with good safety protocols in place (temperature taking, monitoring the entrance, etc.).

In hindsight, I feel we brought too many people back at the beginning. This created issues with workflow and team dynamics.

Who or what were your go-to resources during the spring/summer 2020?

TEREC by far was the most instrumental in our recovery. TEREC, NA, is a consortium of independently owned and regionally located dental laboratories that work together and we held weekly Zoom calls to share how we were handling infection protocols, COVID-19 exposures and PPP loans. Artisan also has a great HR company that helped us get ready for the layoffs.

Any lessons learned?

Invest in plywood. We have been boarded up since the beginning and every night there are broken windows and more graffiti added to buildings on my street. It is still an unstable environment here in Portland and it’s a lot to go through when you can’t do anything to stop it. I keep telling myself every day is a new day and I have to do everything I can to keep a positive attitude to get through the day.
What changes did you see in the spring of 2020 that might be here to stay?

Here at Dentsply Sirona, our face-to-face meetings went virtual and have pretty much stayed that way. In a typical year, I do 80+ onsite lectures and seminars on behalf of surgeons, labs, and their customers. When things shut down, I did 80 virtual lectures in one quarter.

I started visiting labs pretty early on in the pandemic and saw labs taking the opportunity to trim staff that didn’t really want to be there. When I asked owners if they were up to full capacity, no one said yes, but it was by choice.

How has your organization focused on employee morale and company culture, given the challenges of COVID-19?

Dentsply Sirona communicated regularly and created a website specifically for COVID-19 information and updates. All we had to do was ask, and we received masks, gloves, sanitizers and wipes. They were very empathetic to employees regardless of their role, and gave us freedom to work from home and only travel when comfortable doing so. I feel extremely safe with the efforts they have made.

What did you see that was done well, or what could have been done differently?

Labs figured out ways to keep the paychecks coming and I was impressed with that. Even if it was to paint the building, they kept things moving. The shutdown also gave everyone a chance to regroup. I helped to manage a lab for 40 years, and all of those things we wanted to do during the busy years, like building maintenance and computer upgrades, got done. People took the time to reorient and were ready to go when things hit again.

The sales reps at Dentsply Sirona that weren’t furloughed did a great job of communication. Reps that usually talked to a lab once a month called weekly during the height of the crisis to let labs know we were there. Dentsply Sirona focused on safe procedures, and provided the training and tools to dentists for single visit workflows and partnered with the ADA to have a validation program that verified properly disinfected operatories.

"We are in this together and doing what we have to do under difficult circumstances."

I’m very proud to be a part of my industry and to witness how labs supported each other. I haven’t seen the normal bickering between competitors. We are in this together and doing what we have to do under difficult circumstances. Working together is important. Dentsply Sirona also underwent significant changes in 2020, and even though some of those changes may have come off negatively, they also had to make some tough decisions to on how to trim. Product discontinuations and realignment of staff are painful, but the sales team is willing to help in any way to ensure a lab’s success. My role is to work with the frontline reps and I can tell you without a doubt that they are the heart of this company. JDT