

Back on Track

A Prescription for my ailing practice

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For 17 years I practiced successfully, with little regard to my immediate environment. Quarter by quarter, my productivity increased; new patients were abundant and there was a seemingly endless stock of accepted treatment plans from which to produce. Indeed we appeared to be on automatic pilot, an economic model of what any practice would aspire to. Engrossed in my work, I paid little attention to the rise of managed care, the cyclical gyrations of the economy, or even to what season it may have been.

By March 1997, it became clear that my run was over. My bastion of success was waning for the first time. Oddly, all that seemed right for so long was suddenly wrong. What started as a two-week slump – the type we all endure – steamrolled into a three month free fall with a dearth of new patients, a lack of case acceptance and a precipitous drop in our production.

Suddenly, I was attuned to my immediate environment. Not only was my schedule moth-eaten, but in an era when dentistry's gurus championed a "team concept," my team was in as much disarray as my productivity. Routine protocols weakened and became far from routine. Promptness at meetings was replaced with tardiness, smiles by frowns, willingness by apathy. Complacency ruled instead of commitment. Morale was undeniably in trouble.

As I started to self-examine, it was clear that the years of new patients had camouflaged some fundamental weakness in my practice. After I got over my disbelief, anger soon followed, eventually turning into self-pity. What was I to do? Whom do I lay off? Do I cut my fees?

I'm certain this scenario is far from unique. However, to me it was a revelation. It prompted me to examine my practice and find the right prescription to restore its health.

As you will see, there are no shortcuts or surprises. No coffee mugs or T-shirt giveaways. Rather, I have learned that solid values, service and technical excellence – without fads and trends – can help any practice eventually weather the occasional "storm."

Step One: Self-Inventory

My staff and I started by assessing our practice. We met for a full paid day and reviewed everything, from office morale to service to quality of care.

This meeting proved invaluable and I'd recommend it highly – it will repay you tenfold. But, keep in mind that the factors that identify your practice are unique. In some

practices an examination of new-patient numbers would be very revealing whereas in other offices, a look at the retention rate of existing patients could be most telling.

This type of examination takes time, but will prove well worth the effort. Staff members will give you an unequivocal commitment if they are paid for their contribution. I prepared my staff for this day with a 15-minute proactive meeting, outlining the agenda I planned to cover. Rather than base the meeting on what was wrong with the practice, I focused on my desire to reach previously established levels of performance.

In retrospect, this initial meeting proved to be the turning point. We found we did not have all the information new needed. So we implemented tracking systems. In the areas of service performance, we tracked everything from compliments to complaints, from late seatings to overall patient satisfaction. We initiated exit interviews for all patients completing work. We asked them questions like: “Were we reasonably on time for you?” “Was your bill what we said it would be?”

We also addressed technical excellence. We tracked the number of remakes that came through the hygiene department, the number of times we retook an impression, or anything that would qualify as poor quality.

The meeting produced another great benefit: it empowered the staff to realize I genuinely sought their input and energy to turn things around. I couldn’t do this alone. It clarified their role and responsibility for the practice’s success. It was their initiative that led to the weekly performance monitor that still serves us today.

Step Two: Address Office Morale

Someone once said, “Your office morale is only as good as the worst morale in your office.” What this means is that nine out of ten workers could be very happy and performing to expectation, but one who is miserable could be eating away your office “heart.”

Most of us would overlook office morale as a legitimate factor affecting office productivity. However, take a close look at any successful five-star business. You never see internal disharmony. Happy employees are productive employees.

During those months of introspection, we closely examined office morale. We discussed it during the day-long meeting and realized that our existing bonus system and continuing education efforts needed to be bolstered. So, I instituted a system of clear, attainable rewards for high achievement.

Over time, I have found that short-range (within three months) and clearly defined attainable goals with easily understood rewards (a 20% increase in production) are the most effective. I also found that frequently changing the reward was equally important. I employed *both* cash and non-cash reward systems.

For instance, after we met certain practice production goals, I invited the staff and their spouses to take the day off from work and spend it at a nearby amusement park. I hired a luxury bus and celebrated first class! Not only did the outing reward the staff for their performance, but it allowed us to spend time outside the office, laughing, playing and strengthening our bond as a team.

Another measure we took to increase morale was to reestablish our commitment to continuing education, encouraging staff members to take a course every four months. Not only has this re-energized them but it resulted in a host of fresh ideas around the office.

Last, we recommitted to the principle of job advancement. Everyone's job roles were redefined, and the opportunity to broaden job responsibilities, along with the concomitant benefits of doing so, was made unequivocally clear.

Step Three: Recommit to Community Service

I know what you're thinking. What does community service have to do with office productivity? Well you are right – it won't bring you substantial returns in one week. But everything I advocate is to help you now and , more importantly, in the long term.

For 17 years, my office was a heavyweight in our community. At least twice a year we would sponsor a function for those less fortunate in our area. This accomplished two things. First, it bonded our office to the community, which is the best form of marketing available. I believe that long-term success demands that your business be a very visible part of our community. Second, community service unifies you staff and encourages true teamwork more profoundly than any seminar or "poster" ever will.

There is something spiritually unifying about tackling a project with your teammates outside your office confines. I am not a big believer in luck, but good things do seem to happen to those who give.

Thus, along with the other aforementioned changes, we renewed our commitment to community service. We sponsored a "Skate-A-Thon" for a "Coat-A-Kid" program and a Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless.

We decided to also extend our goodwill effort to our own patient population. We held an appreciation dinner for our senior patients, complete with a sit-down dinner and a live band. The event was a tremendous success in terms of patient relations. It also made staff feel proud to be part on an office that gives back to the community.

Step Four: Marketing

We all have our own comfort level regarding marketing .I practice in a small market (20,000 people and 16 dentists) and have a very specific market. I perform high-end dentistry and deliver top-notch service at a commensurate fee. I do not have an abundant supply of these "niche" patients. We need 10-13 patients per month to achieve our goals. So in our case, marketing is a necessity.

For years, I employed the newspaper and the phone book as my primary marketing vehicles. However, when my staff and I evaluated this strategy, we found our print marketing was stale. We had not change it in years. Our solution: We changed our media advertisement. Several inventive and fresh ideas were drafted to redefine our practice personality. Since it was clear that our niche was phobic patients and "excellence," we narrowed our focus to those potential patients. For example, to reach the pain-fearing

patient, one ad read: “There are five ways to numb tooth without hurting you. Call us to try one.”

We changed who we advertised with, experimenting with smaller, local newspaper and shopper’s guides. We avoided discount advertising, free coupons, and other “gimmicks.”

We experimented with radio advertising for the first time (with incredible success I will add!). Out spot features music, followed by three patients discussing their feelings about their dental care. Then a voiceover says, “Sometimes a person’s work speaks for itself,” followed by the practice name. It’s understood and very powerful.

I began hosting a weekly radio program. “The Truth About Teeth,” a half-hour call-in show where I answered dental questions. In terms of new-patient business, this has been my most successful marketing venture. This small time investment returned at least %90,000 last year in new business. It’s been so successful that I started a second show in another town.

Step five: Boost Patient Retention

It is no coincidence that I saved this for last. When things go wrong, the temptation is for the practice to seek help in the form of new patients. In chasing this solution, we can exacerbate the present problem and neglect what we already have. There could be no greater mistake. Our staff therefore looked at the following solutions:

We genuinely evaluated how well we were taking care of our patients. (This can easily be done with an in-office survey.) It became clear that we were not making the grade.

We began holding five-minute *post-treatment* interviews to assess patient satisfaction following completion of treatment. We selected patients to interview in the morning meeting, choosing both patients we knew were “fans” of the practice *as well as* those with whom we were unsure of where they stood.

We created an office concierge position to greet new patients, keep the reception room clean, provide fresh fruit and coffee and enhance our hospitality. We also initiated tracking systems to improve our “on-time” performance and implemented rigid financial pre-treatment research so we could be exact to the dollar on a patient’s expected out-of-pocket costs. From our experience, it had become clear that an inaccurate pre-treatment estimate was far worse in the patients’ eyes than the high-end fees our practice charges.

Continued Vigilance is Key

I think I am about as proactive a dentist as you will find, but the reality is that we practice today against some challenging odds. Capitation, emerging dental chains and a consumer-beware economy have impacted our profession.

When was the last time you self-assessed? How is your flow of new patients, productivity or office morale? How is your patient retention? It’s easy to become complacent and to mistake a few good years as a signal to maintain the status quo.

My practice, a powerhouse for 17 years, was off 20% when we finally reacted. Although we restored our performance to pre-crisis levels, it required copious amounts of energy, a unified commitment from all staff and honest self-evaluation. It required decisiveness, the moving of game plans into action.

Examining your practice is uplifting. The process is unifying and provides a clear snapshot of how solid your foundation really is.

Today's challenging economy requires a proactive response from the profession. Remaining idle is a decision to lose. My advice: Self-assess, implement appropriate practice barometers and take action to nurture your practice to optimal health.

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