If you do begin to accept assignment of benefits, send a letter to all your patients — including those that have left your practice. You’ll likely find that the defectors never really wanted to abandon your office in the first place and would be glad to return.

Look at your schedule and adjust for down times. If the office is a tomb from 2–4 p.m., this is a drain on the dollars. Consider condensing your schedule, working a longer morning shift and a shorter afternoon shift, such as from 8 a.m.–1:30 p.m. and 5:30–9 p.m. This will make it easier for working patients to see you during their lunch hours, and staff won’t be sitting around. Or, if you can keep three days full but the fourth is riddled with holes, cut back to three days.

Tenet No. 2: Get real and get paid
Look at your fees. Are yours higher than your competition? You may feel your practice is worth the extra money, but unless patients are buying into your high dollar philosophy, you’ll have a tough time maintaining patient flow. It’s simply the realities of the current marketplace.

Consider foregoing an increase in fees this year. Send a letter to your patients thanking them for their loyalty to your practice. Take the opportunity to tell them that you are sensitive to the fact that many patients are experiencing difficulties as a result of the current economy. Note that, in an effort to be responsive to the needs of your patients, your office is going to the extent of whatever they’re clamoring to do even in the best of times. You don’t need staff giving them any excuses to take a pass on your practice.

Debbie needs to be a rock star. It needs to come across clearly that she enjoys people, from chatting it up with the grandmas to expertly handling the demanding executives. Don’t fool yourself into thinking patients see past a not-so-friendly front line. They don’t.

Your practice must scream superlative service. It is the most cost-effective marketing strategy you can implement at any time, and especially during tough times. Involve the entire team in developing service-minded strategies.

Examine the total patient experience from the first phone call to the doctor’s after-treatment follow-up call. And if you’re not making those after-care calls, there’s no better time to start than now. The waiting room must be clean, uncluttered and comfortable. The bathrooms must be spotless. The patient should feel as if she is the only person in your practice today; after all, tomorrow she/he might be.

Reach out to your community. If the schedule no longer has you running from dawn till dusk, use the opportunity to become involved in a local school oral health education program, join the rotary, offer to be the team dentist for a couple of local soccer or baseball teams. Encourage your staff to be involved as well and get the name of your practice out there on a regular basis.

Tenet No. 4: Make the most of your team
During thriving economic times, dentists argue they are too busy to train staff. Take advantage of slower periods to invest in team education. It will pay dividends down the road. Send a couple of employees to area dental meetings and ask them to present what they’ve learned to the rest of the team during staff meetings. Ask each employee to give a mini-workshop to the group on their specific responsibilities. Educate the business team about dental procedures performed so they can better answer patient questions.

Build on excellence. Take extra care in your hiring decisions. With a slower economy and layoffs, you’ll likely have higher quality applicants to choose from. Carefully evaluate what you want in your next employee. And make the most of applicant testing tools available through McKenzie Management and other companies to ensure that your next team member will be a perfect fit for your practice long after this current economic situation is a vague and distant memory.

Finally, along with your team, use this slower period to examine practice systems and carefully look at what could be improved. Now’s the perfect time to implement necessary changes and shore up strategies on everything from patient flow to treatment presentations, scheduling, collections, pursuing unscheduled treatment plans, telephone communication and so forth.

Invest in those management experts that have a proven track record of success to guide you through the improvements in practice systems so that you are prepared for rapid growth when the downturn is over.

About the author
Certified Management Consultant Sally McKenzie is a nationally known lecturer and author. She is CEO of McKenzie Management, which provides highly successful and proven management services to dentistry and has since 1980. McKenzie Management offers a full line of educational and management products, which are available on its Web site, www.mckenzieimgmt.com. In addition, the company offers a vast array of practice enrichment programs and team training. McKenzie is the editor of the e-Management newsletter and The Dentist’s Network newsletter, sent complimentary to practices nationwide. To subscribe, visit www.mckenzieimgmt.com and www.thedentistsnetwork.net. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at (877) 777-6151 or at sallymck@mckenzieimgmt.com.