Simon Hocken highlights some of the things to avoid if you really want to grow your practice and entice new patients though the surgery doors

Recently, I chaired a seminar entitled “How to grow your practice in challenging times” for the British Dental Association (BDA). Throughout the seminar, speakers presented their comments and ideas on growing practices. Included were some thought-provoking sessions on a number of different areas including business strategies, practice profile, value added service, motivating and retaining staff, financial management, saving tax and reviewing your prices to maximise your profits. All of these issues are of course vital considerations, and time spent discussing them was both interesting and valuable.

I visit many practices in the course of a year and it is fair to say that most, sadly, are not growing. From my experience while visiting practices or being invited to speak to groups of dentists, it would seem that most principals are presiding over shrinking practices.

At the recent Alpha Omega International Dental Fraternity (and also at BDA HQ in London) I was invited to speak at, a straw poll of the 50 or so dentists in the auditorium took place. The results revealed that around three quarters of the principals saw their practice turnover fall in 2009 compared with 2008. Now, although there has been a recession, which has obviously been taken into account, the straw poll shows inverse results for the practices that we work with; where more that 75 per cent of practice principals saw an increase in their turnover last year.

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Growing your practice. For example, many still occupy the same buildings that they have done for many years, with the same number of surgeries and the same number of clinicians. Adding to this, there are essential the same number of new patients entering the surgery and also the same number of existing patients leaving each month.

It is certainly evident to me that this ‘managed status quo’ is alarmingly common and cannot be seen, in my opinion, as ‘growth’. Some may say that it is at least evolution, but this is not growth when considering it in pure business terms.

Let us return now to the BDA’s “How to grow your practice in challenging times” seminar as previously mentioned. The type of growth that I describe is essentially down to acquiring more new patients every month than the number that leave the practice. However, what is equally important is having a team that can deliver the following:

- Effective consultations
- Effective treatment plans
- Effective techniques for overcoming objections
- Effective closing strategies; that is, asking for the business

Ultimately, this is what makes a practice grow. Your marketing strategies, as important as they are, bring people to your door or onto the end of your phone line; it is the selling skills and sales systems that really grow practices.

While you consider the issues above, here are 20 sales prevention strategies:

- A website that doesn’t bring in new patients
- Patients who have no idea what you offer
- No sales support materials
- Nowhere to talk to patients other than in the surgery or at the front desk
- No data on your enquirers, no follow-up
- No sales training
- No effective patient retention systems
- No seasonal offers
- Clinical and reception team lack self confidence and/or product knowledge
- Lack of payment/credit facilities
- Team members lacking selling skills
- Dentists and team members with ‘dodgy’ smiles
- Dirty premises
- Closing doors/phone lines at lunchtime
- Only having one phone line into the practice and no answering service
- Clinicians going home early because there wasn’t a patient booked
- Eager patients can’t get an appointment
- Chatting to colleagues or eating while taking the call
- Having mobile phones on in surgery or at the front desk
- Dentists loitering around the front desk
- Inefficient software systems

Perhaps it’s time to get some advice on growing your practice.

Growth is evident when practices have effective systems in place that retain all of these clients, both new and old. This level of growth means that every three years, the practice equips a new surgery for a new dentist, hires a hygienist for an additional three days a week and by extension provides an additional £350,000 to its turnover.

It is clear then that for practices to truly grow, it is vital that they regularly expand their facilities or even move into new premises to keep up with growth as they experience a steady rise in both the profit and asset value of the practice. Surely this is what REAL growth is?

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