Today's retailers certainly will confirm that when the economy takes a turn for the worse, consumer focus shifts from luxury to necessity. More- over, many dentists would con- cur that they find similar behav- iors in their practices. The focus of care may move from elective to need-based. It's tougher to sell those high dollar cosmetic cases.

In addition, patients are less in- clined to stay with your practice if you are not on their company's insurance plan.

You are likely feeling the pain of more no-shows and cancella- tions. Everyone is walking on li- nancial eggshells, many before to pause until they dare ask, 'So how's business these days?'

If you do begin to accept ac- count of benefits, send a let- ter to all your patients—including those that have left your practice. You'll likely find that the defec- tors never really wanted to aban- don your office in the first place and would be glad to return.

Look at your schedule and adjust for down times. If the of- fice is a tomb from 2-4 p.m., this is a drain on the dollars. Con- sider condensing your sched- ule, working a longer morning shift and a shorter afternoon shift, such as from 8 a.m.–1:30 p.m. and 5:30–5 p.m. This will make it easier for working pa- tients 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 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 the value, you still need to get your name out there. The key is smart, cost-effective marketing. Keep the Web site running and up to date. This is just as important as your telephone.

Continue to regularly reach out to patients with a patient- practice newsletter—preferably sent via e-mail to avoid postage costs. Let patients know of existing service, piece of equip- ment, staff member profiles, etc. Perhaps you want to recon- sider your current investment or see if the market will allow for extra care. Someone that bills through CareCredit, that will help the patient afford recom- mended care. A cash-based practice is a worthy goal to pur- sue when the economy is thriv- ing, but there are times, such as now, when you simply have to get real in order to get paid.

Tenet No. 3: Marketing is a must

The No. 1 mistake dentists make during difficult financial times is they shut down their

Remember, everyone on staff is responsible for market- ing. If your front line on the phones is Debbie, and she's cold, rude or simply indifferent when she's talking to patients, you're dancing with disaster. Many pa- tients don't want to spend the money on dental care at this point anyway, and going to the dentist isn't something they're clamoring to do even in the best of times. You don't need staff giv- ing 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 grandparents 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 strat- egy you can implement at any time, and especially during tough times. Involving the entire team in developing service- minded strategies.

Examine the total patient ex- perience from the first phone call to the doctor's after-treat- ment 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 should be clean, unclut- tered and comfortable. The bathrooms must be spotless. The patient should feel he/she is the only person in your practice today; after all, tomorrow he/she might be.

Reach out to your commu- nity. If the schedule no longer has you running from dawn till dusk, use the opportunity to be- come involved in a local school or oral health education program, join the rotary, offer to be the team dentist for a couple of local socor or baseball teams. Encou- rage 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 advan- tage of slower periods to invest in team education. It will pay divi- dends down the road. Send a cou- ple of employees to area dental

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 practice mark- eting and other companies to ensure that your next team member will be a perfect fit for your practice.

In his most recent book, The Masterminds are the first to admit their best efforts can be thwarted by the current economic situation is a vague and distant memory.

Build on excellence. Take extra care in your hiring deci- sions. With a slower economy and layoffs, you'll likely have higher quality applicants to choose from. Carefully evaluate what you want in your next em- ployee. And make the most of ap- plicant testing tools available through McKenzie Manage- ment and other companies to ensure that your next team member will be a perfect fit for your practice.

about the author

Sally McKenzie is CEO of The McKenzie Company, Inc. a nationwide dental manage- ment, practice development and educational consulting firm. She has over 25 years of experience in the dental industry and specializes in organization, efficiency and productivity. She has written numerous articles for dental publications and is a frequent speaker at dental trade shows and seminars. Email: sally@thedentistnetwork.net.