Today's retailers certainly will confirm that when the economy takes a turn for the worse, consumer focus shifts from luxury to necessity. Moreover, many dentists would concur that they find similar behaviors in their practices. The focus of care may move to more elective-to-need-based. It's tougher to sell those high dollar cosmetic cases. In addition, patients are less inclined 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 cancellations. Everyone is walking on financial eggshells, many to pause before they dare ask, “So how's business these days?”

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, such as from 8 a.m.–1:30 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. 1: Get real and get paid

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Look at your fees. Are yours the right fees? Are they even worth the extra money? You may feel your practice is worth the extra money, but unless patients are buying into the 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 hold the line on fees this year, even though costs have increased for everyone, including your practice.

Next, make it easy for patients to pursue treatment. You may not be providing as much elective dentistry, but patients still have dental needs. Continue to diagnose based on what the patient needs to ensure the greatest level of oral health. Don’t fall into the trap of diagnosing just what you believe the patient can afford. The recession will be temporary, but dental needs and wants will remain. The patient may not pursue an entire treatment plan at this point, but as the economy improves, so too will the opportunities to provide both necessary and elective care.

That said, you do have an obligation to make it as easy as possible for patients to pursue treatment immediately. Provide treatment financing options, such as CareCredit, that will help the patient afford recommended care. A cash-based practice is a worthy goal to pursue when the economy is thriving, but there are times, such as now, when you simply have to get real in order to get paid.

Tenet No. 2: Marketing is a must

The No. 1 mistake dentists make during difficult financial times is they shut down their marketing efforts. Don’t. You may change your strategy somewhat, but 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 periodic practice newsletter—preferably sent via e-mail to avoid postage costs. Include information on existing service, piece of equipment, staff member profiles, etc. Perhaps you want to reconvene the patient advisory council or the patient support group. Great billboard deals or the expensive radio campaigns. Perhaps you want to reconsider your business cards or oral health education program, offer to the 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. 3: Everyone on staff is responsible for marketing. If your front line phones are Debbie, and she’s cold, rude or simply indifferent when she’s talking to patients, you’re dancing with disaster. Many patients 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 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 superior 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 should be clean, uncluttered 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 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 throughout McKenzie Management and other companies to ensure that your next team member will be a perfect fit for your practice. A weak team can cost your 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 recall 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.