Four tenets for tough times

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 moves from 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 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—those that have left your practice. You’ll likely find that the dentists at these offices didn’t 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. and 3:30–5 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 lower than your competition? Consider foregoing an in-office procedure or the expensive radio campaign, but this is definitely not easy, successful and affordable.

Look at your schedule and make sure you are not on their company’s insurance plan. It’s easier, successful and affordable.

Remember, everyone on staff is responsible for marketing. 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 patients don’t want to spend the money to get the 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 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 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. 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. Management of the 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.