So where are all those starts?

By Scarlett Thomas, President, Orthodontic Management Solutions

With summer coming to a close, a slower economy, fewer starts and less than ideal cash flow, many orthodontic practices are wondering how they will survive the coming months as they approach what typically is the slowest time of the year for business.

Many orthodontic offices have already experienced a significant decline, not only in their summer starts but also in their overall production numbers for the year. Regardless of how grim the picture might seem, there are still opportunities for growth.

So, where are all the starts?

The starts are out there, but they are becoming more challenging to find and require a lot more effort to capture. What it takes now is strategically leveraging all resources to achieve a higher level of success and maintain a healthy and positive cash flow within the practice.

Most orthodontists still can experience tremendous growth within their practice, but it will require much more work and effort. Sitting back and hoping for the best never creates results. You have to be willing to do whatever it takes in harder times to achieve your goals and stay on track.

You also must be willing to adapt and work differently. The practitioners who are willing to reinvent their approach to running their practices can still achieve higher levels of success and continue to be at the top of their profession.

Rather than relying on the same handful of referring general dentists, it’s time to branch out and establish new relationships. It may now take 15 general dentists to get the number of referrals you would normally get from your top five in previous years.

The “will call back system” is another important area to concentrate on during these challenging times. Unfortunately, some offices still don’t know what a “will call back system” is. They never had a system and never did make calls to any of their past non-starts.

The truth is, in a healthy and growing economy of the past few years they did not have to. They were meeting their objectives without putting in any extra effort.

Well, now times are different and it will require a different approach in order to be successful. What you do in this area can generate a tremendous amount of revenue if the techniques are executed properly.

For example, in one of my client’s offices, I suggested mailing out letters to all past non-starts, offering them a $500 “troubled economy courtesy.”

As a result, they generated more than 32 new contracts, signed within two months from sending out the letter. There are ways to continue to generate starts, but you must be willing to think outside the box to make it happen.

For the recall patients who are “too young to start,” instead of waiting for a few more permanent teeth to erupt and placing them on a four- to six-month recall, recommend starting now. There may be much to accomplish while you are waiting on the eruption pattern to be complete.

Willing to step outside the norm is what creates positive results. Doing the same things over and over and hoping for different results is the recipe for failure.

What worked 10 years ago may not work today. Being stuck in repetitive tasks is like a hamster on an exercise wheel that runs endlessly but ends up right where it started.

As the market toughens, more and more orthodontist must be willing to reach out differently to the prospective patients in ways they never would have considered.

Direct mail marketing is becoming a fast growing and effective method of prospecting for new business.

With fewer general dentists referring and an overall decline in revenue, some orthodontist are willing to try new avenues in ways they have never considered.

Creating excitement within your own practice among your existing patients also can bring in new referrals.

Think about investing in a large, flat-screen TV and placing it in the reception area, offering all patients who refer someone to the office a chance to enter the drawing to win the TV.

This alone will help generate new starts and create excitement among the existing patients.

As the year ends and the holiday season approaches, most orthodontic offices will experience a much greater decline, not only in starts but in revenue. Mailing out a year-end appreciation letter, providing all your patients who have an account balance a 10 percent discount if paid in full, will help generate additional revenue.

As the slower months for business approach, using this strategy can help strengthen you financially during the less than ideal times.

Creating a new mission statement with your employees that is based on creativity, drive for success, passion for growth and unlimited levels of higher achievement can be the beginning in finding your new starts.

A fresh and renewed sense of working toward a mission can motivate and energize you and your team, paving the way for great success in the coming months and years.

For more information on creating new starts within your practice, I invite you to attend my upcoming Webinar on “Marketing For Success” on Sept. 25. For more information regarding this Webinar and many others please visit orthoconsulting.com.

Scarlett Thomas is an orthodontic practice consultant who has been in the field for more than 25 years, specializing in case acceptance, team building, office management and marketing. As a speaker and practice consultant, she has an exceptional talent to inform, motivate and excite.

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