

Putting up a fight

Ashley Latter makes some simple suggestions to help your practice beat the recession



With people tightening their belts, it is the proactive practices that will survive and prosper during this difficult period. There are some simple steps you can take to help you not only survive but also to prosper, and the even better news is that some of these actions will cost you nothing.

Marketing and advertising

Ask yourself whether your advertising is working. Are you getting a measurable return from the investment you are making?

One of the things I believe you need to do is to track every lead you receive from the money you spend. You can do that simply by asking every new patient who contacts you how they heard about your services.

Nowadays, it is simply not enough

to say that you think the practice is busier; everything needs to be measured. With your practice manager, review how many patients have come from your advertising and see if there has been an adequate return on this investment. I am amazed by how many practices spend money on advertising and have no idea whether it is working.

Keep measuring and, if it is not working, stop advertising or reduce the amount you do.

Get some publicity

Every time your name appears in print you are automatically seen as an expert. That is why I suggest you write your own articles or even a regular column in your local paper or magazine, especially the publications that your potential clients might read.

On top of that, why don't you try and get a journalist to write about you? This is perhaps even more valuable, because what others say about you is more believable and more powerful, especially if you have lots of success stories.

Pick up the telephone

Have you ever made a purchase and then received a telephone call from the salesperson or the company just to say thank you and to see if you are enjoying the service or product you purchased? When this has happened to me, it made a real impact on me.

Why not call a few patients a day to see if they are okay, especially if they have had a challenging procedure? Just ask them if they are alright and whether there is anything you can do to help. This call will probably take up less than five minutes of your time per patient, but think of the impact it will have. Your patients will be not only impressed but over the moon – and they will tell their friends.

If you did this, say, three times a day, five times a week, over 52 weeks, you would be impressing over 750 patients. Do you think that will have an impact on your relationships?

Understand selling is not about pushing products and services

Sales legend Zig Ziglar once said: 'You will get all you want in life if you help enough other people get what they want'. You know what? It is true!

To me, sales is all about giving your patients what they want and need and, in doing so, it will give you the income you want, need and deserve.

Never talk to your patients about what you do and can offer. Ask

questions, be quiet and they will then tell you what they want. This is fundamental because people are happy to spend money on the things that they want.

The biggest mistake dentists and salespeople make is that they try to sell their services before they truly find out what the customer requires. If you fail to find out what they want, patients just think you are selling to them.

My advice is that you get into the habit of asking lots of questions and become an outstanding listener. When you do this, you become a world-class solution provider and not a salesperson. After all, no one likes to be sold to.

Promote your website

Many dentists make the mistake of seeing a website as something that they need to do, or even as a necessary evil. If you think like that, it will cost you an awful lot of money.

Research shows that the average time before a potential client leaves a website is eight seconds. In other words, you have only got eight seconds to capture the interest of your clients and keep them on your site.

We are constantly measuring our website and we have been shocked by the results. Often we did not even reach eight seconds, and this has led to me developing a new site (that can be found at www.ashleylatter.com), which was launched recently.

My advice is that you must see website development as a very important part of your marketing because it can generate a significant amount of income for the practice. Please do not shove it onto your 'web guy', who often is a designer and not a marketing expert. They might ensure your website is very pretty and dynamic, but will it create opportunities?

Visit your website/homepage and take the eight-second test. Be absolutely ruthless! Does it engage you and make you want to visit all the other pages or does it bore the pants off you? Your potential clients are not interested in you but rather what you can do for them.

Patients buy benefits and not features

If there is one message I would like to get across to the whole of the dental world, it is that patients do not care about the features of a product or service – they buy benefits. People are interested in WIIFM – 'what's in it for me?'

Patients don't want your products; they want the result of your products. In other words, they don't care what you can do, they want to know what you can do for them. Put yourself in their shoes, see their problems from their point of view and learn their wants and needs. Once you do this, more people will say 'yes' to whatever you have got to offer.

Look at all your marketing literature, your website and the language you use. Is it benefit-driven?

Go networking

Spend quality time where you can find your target market or synergistic businesses. There are plenty of places to network, such as breakfast business clubs. Go to these meetings, take some business cards with you and hand them out. You never know who you might meet.

Last year I was with some clients and they took me to their local pub for dinner. The pub had a new landlord and when paying the bill the dentist handed the landlord her card and welcomed him to the area. She told him that if they were looking for a dentist she would love him to be a patient. You can guess the rest – a new patient, just by introducing herself.

Become a full-time networker and start conversations with people; you never know who you might meet.

Start public speaking

The organisers of networking events are often looking for a speaker to do a short presentation. This is a superb opportunity to present your business to a target audience, all of whom potentially need your services.

I know most people hate public speaking, but it is one of the greatest skills you can learn and develop. It is a

great way of extending your comfort zone, which will also help you in other areas of your life.

You can learn these skills on a course, where you can practise in a safe environment and be coached one-on-one. Public speaking is one of the greatest skills you can learn and your personal development will go through the roof.

Joint ventures

How many other businesses can you partner with in your area? Perhaps there is a way you can link in with local beauticians, hairdressers and wedding fairs.

You could call the owners and put your heads together to work out a strategy as to how you could work hand in hand for the benefit of all your businesses.

My business certainly relies upon joint ventures. Without these relationships, I am certain my business would not be the same.

Exhibition stands

A client of mine attended a full-day wedding fair and had more than a dozen positive visits to his stand. He now has 12 new contacts with whom he has the chance to build a relationship and who might well become new patients. All he needs is for 25% of them to become patients and he will have paid for the event several times over.

Lapsed patients

Why don't you make contact with your lapsed patients? These are patients that have not responded to you for over a year. There could be several reasons why they have not made contact with you or been for a check up.

You could do one of two things:

1. Send a very pleasant relationship-building letter that tells them that they have been missed and perhaps include some vouchers to entice them to come back to you
2. Pick up your telephone and ring them. See how they are and if they want to make an appointment. The

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very worst thing that can happen is they say no. The great advantage of ringing them is that you can find out if they went to another practice and, if so, why they chose to do that.

Stop worrying about the economy

If you continue to follow the news on the economic downturn, you will focus on the problems of the world and not your own business. You might start to think about just getting by rather than setting a challenging goal for your practice.

Set yourself a challenging goal for your business. Even if you fall slightly short, you will still be better off than if your intention had been simply to get by. Aim high and you just might surprise yourself.

Start selling products

I am amazed that dental practices do not push all the dental products they can offer their clients. Patients have to buy their toothpaste, toothbrush, floss and mouthwash from somewhere; why not from you?

Consider the possibility that you could double or even treble your ancillary sales. If you find this to be the case, what difference would it make to your bottom line?

Ask for referrals

Asking for referrals is the easiest way of growing your new client base and it costs you virtually nothing, perhaps

just a thank you card or a small gift in recognition of their input.

Ask all of your nice patients for referrals and they will introduce you to their friends. That is how the world works and you will be surprised at the results.

Just asking for referrals will significantly increase your chances of being contacted by more patients. What if, for example, the only reason they haven't contacted you is because they assume your patient list is at capacity?

Thank the referrers

If you ask for referrals and keep doing this every day, you will build up a steady stream of new patients. What you then need to do is to thank the people that refer new patients to you. Simply by sending a thank you card and maybe a small gift, such as a bunch of flowers or a book, you will delight your referrers and it just might encourage them to tell more people about you.

After all, how do you feel when you receive a thank you card and a small gift in appreciation? It does not happen that often and makes a great impression.

Get cards printed for your team

Get some business cards printed for all of your team members. Not only will it make them feel important, but they will also hand them out to their friends and relatives, and they will help you to grow your practice.

Aim for the high end

I stayed in a lovely hotel a few weeks ago and I was surprised to see how many over-50s were there. By this age their children may well have left home, they have downsized and probably have the greatest disposable income within the population. They also want to look good and stay young.

Someone once asked Jesse James why he robbed banks. He replied that was where all the money was to be found. So why don't you market your practice to appeal to those people who have the most money?

Put your prices up

The vast majority of people do not buy on price alone. It is an issue, of course, but it is very rarely the only issue. If it was, then we would all be buying the cheapest clothes and food, and driving the cheapest cars.

If you put your prices up today, say by 10%, would it make a difference? It certainly would to your bottom line.

Just by putting your prices up by 10%, providing your costs stay the same, your profitability could rise by up to 35%.

And by the way, this calculation works the other way too. If you lower your price by 10% you will need to increase your turnover by 35%, and that is not easy.

Invest in ethical sales and communication skills

Like it or not, your income depends upon how well you and your team can communicate with your patients. Everyone in your practice is in sales, from the receptionist who answers your telephone through to the nurse, practice manager, dentist and hygienist.

Each and every day you are all selling an idea to your patients. Technical skills are paramount. However, if you cannot communicate the benefits of those skills in a language that the patient understands, then no transaction will take place.

Create a world-class patient experience

The following statistics on why patients leave your practice might shock you:

- 1% die
- 3% move away
- 5% follow a friend's recommendation
- 9% find an alternative they perceive to be better quality
- 14% are dissatisfied with your products or services
- 68% leave because of indifference.

In a nutshell, most patients take their business elsewhere because they do not feel valued. Since you spend a lot of money and time getting patients through the door, it is imperative that you look after them so that they do not want to leave. When they are with you, 'wow' them.

Never get complacent

Over an extended period of time I coached a dental practice on its marketing techniques and, in particular, how to increase the number of new patients by asking for referrals.

For a few months they increased their client base by up to 15 new patients a month simply by asking for new referrals. Their appointment books were full and they had an excellent system in place. Then, all of a sudden, gaps appeared in their diary and they realised that for a couple of months they had simply not asked for referrals because they thought they had cracked it.

If you want to achieve outstanding results every month, you have to put outstanding effort in every single day.

Take action

I have worked with hundreds of very successful people. Without doubt these people have many positive traits, ranging from enthusiasm and commitment to taking responsibility and having good people skills. However, the one trait that they all have in common is that they take action. They do not defer action or delay in making decisions, and that is exactly the mindset you need in order to succeed.

Simply applying five of the suggestions from this article will lead to better results.

It is time to take action and accept responsibility for your results. [PD](#)

[Comments to pd@fmc.co.uk](mailto:pd@fmc.co.uk)

Over the last 10 years, Ashley Latter has coached over 4,000 dentists, orthodontists and their teams on his two-day Ethical Sales & Communication Programme and on his How to Develop a World Class Patient Care Culture. To find out more please visit www.thesellingcoach.co.uk.