

You Are Your Own Worst Enemy: Thrive in the New Economy

By: Dr. Leon Klempner

Here's the hard truth: It's not necessarily increased competition from corporate dentistry, online direct-to-consumer orthodontics, or even the economy that prevents most practices from thriving. It's our own rigid mindset and inability to make needed adjustments to the way we do business that hurts us the most. The person who is preventing your practice from thriving is most likely staring at you in the mirror every morning.

It's great to be able to get the right mix of digital marketing in place to reach potential patients online who will call for an initial consultation, but if you find yourself asking why those patients aren't converting, then you're still missing an important element in managing your practice. It's not as hard a problem to fix as you might think. At the same time, it's one of the biggest hurdles an orthodontist has to get over: shed the old mindset to start running a modern practice.

You see it all around you as other industries adapt to today's consumer-driven economy, yet orthodontists became complacent. We took the patient for granted, counting on the traditional business model to hold up forever. This is where we have been the most closed-minded of all.

There are two parts to the perfect formula of running a successful practice today. The first is to market directly to patients: engage patients online through digital media, online reviews, social media, and educational content that can be repurposed into effective advertising. Together, these strategies will position your office in your local market as the go-to practice for orthodontic treatment, whether it's clear aligners, early treatment, adult orthodontics, corrective jaw surgery, or sleep apnea. Effective marketing with smart targeting will connect you to people who are willing to pay a little more for the high-quality service you provide.

That's all well and good, but it only solves half of the problem. If most of those new consultations aren't converting, then all the digital marketing in the world isn't going to help. It's not only about beating the competition to the punch; it's also about beating them at their own game. A lot of other practices have figured this out, as have the DSOs and the online direct orthodontic services. You don't have to lower your fees, but you do have to make it affordable.

In the past, orthodontists called all the shots. Now, the consumer has many options and, as much as they still value the traditional orthodontist/patient relationship, they also want it a little more on their own terms.

So, what's going to really move the needle and increase your monthly starts? Below are some of the best practices we have discovered by collecting data from our clients. Make these adjustments, and you will see your conversion rates climb.

Go All-In Early

You may have been taught years ago, as I was, that orthodontic practices typically don't discuss finances or a treatment plan on the first visit. This had been a carrot to entice a patient or parent to come back to review the diagnostic records and then discuss how to proceed. In the good old days this technique worked for the orthodontist. Consumers today demand instant feedback, so you can't string them along like you used to. Whenever you can, it's more beneficial to take a radiograph (and, yes, for no fee), discuss a treatment plan and then have them sit to discuss how they will pay for that new smile, all on the first visit.

I'm not suggesting you go out of your comfort zone when it comes to technically difficult cases and make quick decisions without all the records. Complex cases that require surgery or a multidisciplinary plan will need more time to estimate and assess, but those are exceptions. For routine cases, it's important to be quick and efficient by explaining the treatment plan and financing options in the same visit as the initial consultation. The end result will be a slightly longer visit, but I guarantee you will have a happier patient because you saved them the inconvenience of making multiple trips back to your office. Your future patients will thank you for it - by signing up to begin treatment!

Affordable is Not a Four Letter Word

You pride yourself on the quality treatment and personal service you provide for your patients. How can you do that if you have to lower your fees to get more patients to begin treatment? The answer is, you don't. You also can't let money be an obstacle to starting treatment. You will, however, have to make treatment more affordable. That's much different than lowering fees. To increase the affordability, orthodontists have to institute systems that will help patients become comfortable with the total cost of treatment.

The first step is to have a flexible initial payment. I have spoken with orthodontists who are still charging an initial fee upwards of \$1,800. This is simply a non-starter for the majority of people today. If you want to send a potential patient packing off to the competition or some alternative orthodontic treatment option, then hit them with a huge initial deposit and see what happens. A more palatable first payment is anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000. If you set your barrier to entry too high, then your conversion rate is going to suffer tremendously.

Next, don't immediately hit them over the head with a huge monthly payment. Try to keep it in an affordable range. I suggest about \$200 per month. You can do this by extending the payment beyond treatment time by about six months. I've heard the resistance to this plan before, but the reality is that in

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the orthodontic industry the delinquency rate is often less than 3%. You should not worry about getting stuck. One helpful trick to getting patients to pay regularly is to require everyone to be on autopay from a credit card or checking account. This eliminates the dreaded "the check is in the mail" conversations with clients.

Another way to really make treatment affordable and help families begin treatment with your practice is to find out their insurance benefits before the initial consultation and then start accepting insurance payments directly as partial payment. This will offset costs greatly for most patients and is much more convenient for them. Instead of having the patient submit their own reimbursements to their insurance, work directly with the insurance company. This will make it easier for patients to agree to your financial arrangements and start treatment right away.

Lighten Up Your Office Environment


Harried patients rushing into your office after leaving early from work or during an extended lunch break means a more stressful experience. Orthodontists can't keep banker's hours anymore. Your office should be open when it's convenient for the patient and their parents. That means you need to re-evaluate the normal 9-to-5 schedule so adult patients can make appointments and parents can bring their children into the office. Flexible schedules with evening and weekend availability will help.

Something that many offices overlook is atmosphere. Successful orthodontic practices have fun. Work to make your office atmosphere inviting, not intimidating. It's going to take a lot more than just a few cool posters. Offer fun things to do for siblings while they wait, and try to modernize your office with the latest tech and something extra that people don't

usually expect - like free coffee for parents, an iPad game play area, and HD televisions to display pictures and videos of fun events, staff, and patient smiles. The idea is to make your office a place where people want to come.

Don't forget people. Your staff is the face of your practice. The people you hire will have the first and greatest impact on new patients. Make sure you pick employees who have the right temperament to deal with the public. Remember: you can always teach skills, but you certainly can't teach personality. A friendly, knowledgeable staff is key to converting patients. Who wants to deal with a curmudgeon at the front desk? Remember that reviews by patients are written not only about the doctor and the treatment results but also about their experience along the way.

Bottom Line: Lower Your Barrier to Entry

Anyone who takes the step to come to your office is obviously in the market for a better-looking, healthier smile. With effective marketing, they didn't end up in your chair by accident. Your reputation or digital advertising brought them to your practice. The hard part is over. People want to use your services. By making it affordable, convenient, and enjoyable, your practice will convert those visitors into paying patients at a much higher rate. If your practice is not growing, have you looked in the mirror lately? 

Leon Klempner, DDS, is a co-founder of People & Practice, a digital marketing consultancy exclusively for doctors. He understands orthodontics because he's been there, with over 40 years of private orthodontic practice experience. Along with his partner Amy Epstein, MBA, they have as many combined years of marketing experience. People & Practice builds trust in your practice online to help you get new patients in a digital era by convincing them (before even meeting you) that you're the practice to choose. For more information or a free marketing analysis, call 888-866-DOCS or email hello@pplpractice.com.



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