

HOW TO EVOLVE YOUR PRACTICE DURING THE RECESSION

Struggling in the recession? Mark Garner, discusses how to ensure your practice is able to evolve during these tough times, even in the face of reducing patient numbers.

Both long standing and newly established private practices can experience patient loss at any time, but in this period of economic uncertainty this can be a significant issue. Patient loss is often caused by a range of factors and will have a considerable impact on your business and its revenue.

It is therefore important to understand the reasons for this loss and to treat the cause before it has a negative effect on your practice. This could be anything from the levels of care you provide, to patient services and value for money offered by your practice - but it is essential you get the full picture of where you are now and how to get to where you want to be. Below are some tips to help you assess why patients are leaving your practice and how you can avoid this.

Undertake a full review

The first step is to review your practice's finances in detail, to work out where you may be able to make cut-backs without having a detrimental effect on care or service levels. This will guard against any initial drop in income, while you develop a strategy to combat it in the future. The next step is to understand why your patients are leaving you, why new patients are not joining and how to prevent this.

One way of doing this is to undertake a Patient Performance Report. This is a quantitative and qualitative look at exactly how many patients are leaving, why they are leaving, where they are going and the financial impact this will have on your practice income. This should give you a more comprehensive picture on where your weaknesses may lie and where you can make improvements. You don't have to deal with them all but you can select those you feel best equipped to do something about.

Environmental and patient audits

Another step is to invite an honest outsider into your practice to cast a critical eye over your environment and décor. This is called an Environmental Audit and is designed to look at every area of your practice from its outside appearance and reception, to toilets and disabled facilities. Research clearly suggests that environmental factors are crucial in retaining existing patients and attracting new ones and you only have one chance to make a first impression.

Patient audits use specific questions to ascertain the current level of customer service offered by your practice. Based upon the answers given you can produce meaningful data to shape the future direction of your patient services and care. Some payment plan providers can help you with this and undertake patient and environmental audits on your behalf to provide you with straightforward results and advice.

Mystery shopping

Mystery shopping is one of the most helpful tools for monitoring your levels of service, as it gathers the highest quality and level of information. A mystery shopper will use a carefully constructed script to telephone your reception team and those of other practices in the area and will pose as a potential new patient. They can then score each practice according to the level of help and service they receive. This not only gives you the opportunity to benchmark your team, but you also get a valuable insight into the telephone service standards of your competitors.

It is important however, that mystery shopping be undertaken without your team's knowledge, to ensure that you gather meaningful results. Some payment plan specialists can provide a mystery shopping service in order to help you gather and interpret your results and help you move forward. They can also look at your competitors' patient literature in comparison to your own to see if any improvements could be made.

Action plans and training

Once collated, the information from all your research can then be used to develop an action plan to fine tune your patient offering and to address the issues of attracting new patients and retaining existing ones. This plan will also help you decide what changes you need to make and whether they can be achieved immediately, in the medium term or as a future objective, as well as providing a focus so that your practice team remain motivated and focused.

Some providers can also put together bespoke training sessions that focuses on the areas you feel impact on your patient experience, practice services and financial goals and help you to resolve any issues. These can also count towards verifiable Continuing Professional Development (CPD) when undertaken in accordance with GDC requirements.

It can be very easy to assume that it is the recession that is negatively affecting your practice and that everyone will be in the same position. This is certainly not the case and there is no reason why dental practices shouldn't look upon these difficult times as an opportunity to make themselves indispensable to their patients. By undertaking a thorough audit of your services and environment you can not only guard against economic uncertainty, but you can come out the other side more successful than ever. To find our more information about the Denplan Evolve Programme, please call 0800 328 3223.

Top Tips:

- Review your practice's finances in detail to see where you can make cut-backs in the short term
- Undertake a Patient Performance Report to find out why patients are leaving/not joining
- Undertake an Environmental Audit to see where you can make improvements to your practice's appearance
- Invest in a mystery shopper to review your teams customer service
- Develop an action plan to map out your future improvements
- Undertake training to help you achieve your goals.

About the author:

Mark Garner is an Area Manager at Denplan. He joined Denplan in 1996 and, after working as a Consultant for five years, became Area Manager for the Midlands and East Anglia. He leads a team of Consultants who provide support for dentists, pre and post conversion.

Notes to Editors:

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Patient enquiries telephone: 0800 401 402

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Denplan also provides a range of professional services for its member dentists, including the Denplan Quality Programme, Denplan Excel accreditation programme and Denplan Training.

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