



THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGING

"Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth saving
Then you better start swimming or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a changing" - Bob Dylan

Looking back to 1978 when I started in the orthodontic field (I worked in a general practice from 1974-1978), the majority of orthodontic practices were run by solo practitioners. People communicated in person, by telephone or by mail – although the first email was written in 1971, email providers such as AOL, did not make an appearance until 1993. Patients were typically seen every month for an adjustment, which correlated with their payment plan. In most cases, patients were treated using the same treatment modality – fixed appliances with bands and brackets.

In many ways, life and running a successful orthodontic practice is a lot more difficult today than it was in 1978. The orthodontic industry is fierce; you are competing with other orthodontic practices as well as general dentists, SmileDirectClub, and Candid Clear Aligners. Corporate, group, interdisciplinary, and multiple doctor practices are now taking the place of many solo practitioners. Today, more than ever before, it is imperative to focus on your strengths, your vision, your mission statement, and your goals.

Regardless of whether you have been in practice for one month or 20 years, make a list of your goals for the next ten years. Close your eyes and envision the type of practice you dreamed of when you were accepted to the orthodontic residency program. How does your vision compliment your current or desired lifestyle? Is there a specific demographic of patients you would like to target? Do you want to open a

by Debbie Best

start-up practice, buy an existing practice, work in a group practice, or join a corporate group?

Let's look at some of the key ducks you should have in order to open and run a practice on your own. Being a solo practitioner can be very rewarding as you are in charge of your own destiny. All practice decisions are in your hands. From the hours you work and your preferred modality of treatment to the number of patients you see daily and the size of your team. It's your baby to nurture and groom into something you will be proud of as it matures.

Develop your unique brand, one that reflects your philosophy and vision for the practice. There are several logo design sites that run a contest open to developers. For a minimal investment, you will receive dozens of designs created specifically for you. I used www.logomyway.com to design my logo and the total investment was less than \$250. Use your logo on all printed materials you give to patients, your referring doctors, and within your community.

Take the time to put together your team member handbook before you hire your first employee. It makes managing the team a lot easier if you have a clear outline of rules, expected behaviors, and benefits. Material covered in the manual would be:

- Mission statement
- Office policies (90-day probationary period, health and safety, smoking, uniforms, patient confidentiality, harassment, verification of licenses, etc.)
- Discuss chain of command if team members have a concern or need to call in sick
- Office hours
- Payroll information (payroll deductions, when are

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- paydays, hourly or salary, classification of employees)
- Benefits (sick leave or PTO, vacation, holidays, leaves of absence, bonuses, continuing education, etc.)
- Copies of internal office forms (time off request, mileage reimbursement, non-disclosure statement, performance review, verbal and written warnings, etc.)

Rather than giving each team member a copy of your handbook, keep a copy in the office for them to read and review. Unfortunately, I have seen many office handbooks “shared” by employees who have left the practice. The team members each sign a statement that they have had the opportunity to read the handbook and have had all of their questions answered.

Create detailed, progressive job descriptions for your current and future team members. For example, you might start out with one administrative team member who is in charge of scheduling, financial, and new patients. These responsibilities can be separated as the practice grows, just as the clinical team’s duties can be divided based on licensure and experience. It is a lot easier to hire new team members when you know exactly what position and duties they will be responsible for.

Just as taking care of a baby can be difficult and time-consuming, the same can be said of a solo orthodontic practice. Non-clinical duties including accounts payable, payroll, marketing, HR specialist, and practice planning consumes many hours every week. As a private practice grows, duties can be shifted over to a team member, outside accountant, or a marketing company. A rule of thumb for solo practitioners who have been in business for five years or less is for every three clinical days you work, plan on one administrative day to take care of non-clinical duties, as well as treatment planning and submitting Invisalign scans. Mature practices can often have a 4 to 1 or 3 to .5 ratio of working/administrative days.

Keep your eye on key numbers when making decisions regarding office hours and the number of team members on your payroll. Following are goals to strive for:

Dollar earned for each clinical hour orthodontist worked \$1,825 and higher

Dollar earned for each team member hour worked \$ 150 and higher

Dollar earned for each patient visit \$ 275 and higher

Number of patients seen per doctor hour 8 or more

Another rule of thumb is to hire one team member for every

\$200,000 of production. Start out with two team members for a new practice, and then add a third employee when you hit \$400,000. Once you hit \$1.5 million in production, you can typically stretch it out to an additional team member for every \$250,000, if you utilize an effective schedule and cross train team members. You can effectively run a \$1,500,000 practice working 12-15 patient days per month with eight team members (two administrative, one treatment coordinator and five clinicians).

Have your telephone covered over lunch and on non-patient days. Many patients will call for appointments when they have time over their lunch hour or on Fridays (many businesses now work four 10-hour days, giving them either Monday or Friday off.) If you missed one new patient call a week and 50% of those patients might have started, you could be missing out on more than \$150,000 in additional production a year. The increased production more than compensates for the additional team hours.

Seize continuing education opportunities for yourself and your team. The better the team is trained, the more you can delegate. The clinical team can be trained to submit Invisalign cases, set up indirect bonding cases, as well as know your wire sequence which allows them to start on a patient without the doctor checking first. Send your team to your software company’s annual user meeting to ensure that they are competent and fully utilizing all features of your system. Offering them the opportunity to take a class on Microsoft Excel or Word will give them the training needed to create spreadsheets, graphs, and letters to keep you fully apprised of the progress of the practice.

Open, honest, and clear communication with patients and parents is the cornerstone of successful orthodontic practices. Often, I observe doctors giving patients the answer they want to hear, even if it is pushing the envelope. For example, telling a patient that their treatment will be completed in 18 months although in reality it will be closer to 22 months. Although the patient and parent are told that patient cooperation is crucial to finishing on time, realistically a percentage of your patients go beyond the target date. Give yourself a cushion; patients do not complain if treatment is finished ahead of schedule.

The number one key action you can take, whether your practice is solo, group, interdisciplinary, or corporate, is to treat every patient as though they are your only patient. When you are seeing a patient, focus only on that patient. Quickly review their chart before they are seated, bringing you up-to-date not

only on their treatment, but also on their activities and interests. Consider them friends and families of the practice, not just patients who are having their teeth straightened.

Above all, remember to smile. Your smile lays the foundation for excellent customer service. It is easy to do, does not cost anything and portrays a positive first impression. ☺

About the Author



With more than 35 years of experience, Debbie Best evaluates staffing needs and systems to develop a strategic plan for practice productivity. She designs customized schedules, personalized job descriptions, and a team member handbook to fit each practice's needs. She is presenting at the 2019 UGM in Fort Worth, Texas.

Contact Info: 206.310.6055 • debbiebestconsulting@gmail.com