



Growing Pains in the Orthodontic Office

by **Pat Rosenzweig**

As practitioners in orthodontic offices, we have the unique joy and privilege of seeing our patients grow from gangly awkward pre-teens, through adolescence, and into young adulthood. This process is not always an easy one and we often see children who are foundering in the throes of growing pains. They are either growing up way too fast, taking on adult aspects before they have adult maturity, or progressing at a painfully slow pace, hanging onto childish behavior when they should be trying their wings in the world. While this behavior may be obvious to us in our young patients, we're often slow to realize the growing pains that exist in our offices.

Growth in an orthodontic office, like that of a child, needs to be watched, monitored, and alternately held back and urged forward all based on the age of the office. Let's take a look at our stages of growth and discuss what we need to do to keep our office maturing wisely.

The "Doors Just Opened" Office

This is the scary toddler stage of taking chances and moving forward as fast as we possibly can. All our options are open and our primary goal is to get patients in the door and started. We just want to get going and get growing! This is a phase where we want to run but would be prudent to hold ourselves back a bit.

Getting good systems in place from the start will not only make life easier in the future, but will also create a picture of our office as an organized, detail-oriented place where parents want to take their children, and a place they will recommend to their friends and neighbors. We need to spend serious time with the basics in this early phase carefully training staff and planning every detail of how we want the office to run. When the only function of the new office is "get them in the door and signed on," we'll find ourselves with a lot of bad habits to correct as we grow.

The "Starting to Take Off" Office

Here we are in our pre-teen stage. We're finally growing

and producing on a level that feels like we're getting somewhere. We have lots of new patients calling and we want to accommodate every patient and parent to the fullest. We really want to be liked. Like the pre-teen, this is where we have to accept the need for structure.

We always strive to provide the finest, high-end experience for our patients, but if we don't pay attention to our staffing and scheduling template in this phase, we'll disappoint them every time. This is a time to accept that growth is normal and necessary. We need to add staff to accommodate our patient load, and we need to carefully structure our scheduling template so that we not only have spots for initial new patient exams but also for all the appointments they will need as treatment proceeds.

This is a place where appropriate growth sounds very counterintuitive to many doctors. We're finally making money, and it's time to spend more money on additional staffing. We're finally getting lots of new patients, and it's time to limit the number of new patient appointments each week. It's the growth equivalent of having more homework as you learn and experience more, and having to choose only one or two extracurricular activities to make time for the homework. This is a tough lesson to get through, but it's a great deal tougher for offices that don't hire more staff and schedule effectively. The new patient numbers will begin to dwindle very quickly if we can't care properly for the patients we've started.

The "We've Really Got it Going" Office

So now we've jumped fully into adolescence. Our office is fully staffed, we have good systems, and our scheduling template is working just fine. Or is it? Just like the high school student who thinks he's got it all together until he realizes it's time to prepare for college.

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We now have to address the reality of debands and recalls. Well before our first limited phases are ready for debanding, we need to start adjusting our schedules to fit these appointments into our week. And well before our first recall comes due, we need to get our system in place for contacting them, and our templates ready to accommodate their appointments. This is a crucial area of growth and offices that fail to plan for the inevitable scheduling needs will spend many hard months as they try to play catch up and keep up with overflowing schedules.

The “We’ve Hit our Full Stride” Office

This is our wonderful off and running, grown-up stage and we cannot afford to be timid at this point in our growth. Just like the young adult who has to summon up the courage to go to college or directly into the working world, we now have to make bold choices.

Growth at this point may need to be paced. If the new starts grow too quickly we may find ourselves adding hours and days to our schedule at times and days we never planned to work. This is where it’s all about balance. As an office, we need the courage and the planning to hold our growth back a bit allowing moderate, measured growth that fits into the schedule we want to maintain.

If, however, we decide that continued rapid growth is where we want to go, we need to work constantly on our template and keep pace with our staffing. The office can grow as large as we can envision but there are still only so many days and hours in the week. Like the young adult who tries to get too much into the day, we can push the staff and the doctor only so far before patient care and the general mental health of the practice suffers.

The “Now We’re Comfortable” Office

If we’ve done it all right, this is the terrific mature adulthood of the practice that we planned and worked towards. Our systems still need minor tweaking every now and then and we need to be sure we’re keeping current with technology and advancements in treatment techniques. We have to maintain the office equivalent of and good diet, regular exercise, and progressive thinking to keep in shape. We’ve all met the 40 something who is seriously out of shape and still wearing the same clothing and hair styles that were flattering 20 years ago, and we’ve

all noticed that the look no longer works for them.

So it goes with the middle aged office. We’ve become comfortable with our way of doing things, and we’re not anxious to change but we need to keep current or be passed by. Our office won’t attract new families by using outdated methods and technology and looking a bit dated and old fashioned. We need to remember at this point that an office that has stopped growing has started declining.

The “We’re Planning to Wind Down” Office

We’ve now fully accomplished what we set out to do and are heading into the retirement years, but we still need to maintain careful vigilance. The practice may well be aging and in desperate need of a face-lift. That face-lift needs to happen and the practice needs to stay in tip-top shape so that when it’s time for doctor to retire and sell the practice, he can get top dollar and pass on a still vital and energetic office.

We all see way too many aging practices that are worth pennies on the dollar because of neglect and lack of planning. Like the retiree who hasn’t saved or planned, a neglected practice is in trouble and will most probably limp through a few more years then just continue to lose ground until the doors close. Had the practice stayed current and vital, the baton could have been passed to an energetic young doctor and its life cycle could have restarted and run another full course. With diligence and planning we can keep a practice running through indefinite, fulfilling lifetimes. Let’s think of it as orthodontic reincarnation; not a mystical process, just a practical one.

Having worked our way through the stages of growth, it’s clear that if we give our practice its due diligence, it will grow, thrive, and finish in a very satisfying condition. That’s all we can ask for our personal lives and it’s the least we can do for the life of our practice. ☺

About the Author



Pat Rosenzweig’s passion for dentistry encompasses a belief that every office is unique, with its own special dynamic, consulting, and systems needs. She is committed to creating an individual plan for clients that puts their strengths into play.