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Increasing Case Starts: Five Keys to Success

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While the slumping economy has affected virtually every practice, doctors offering high-end elective procedures have been particularly hard hit. While potential new patients have continued at acceptable levels, treatment acceptance rates have declined significantly. While the current economic downturn has affected almost everyone, the stakes are especially high for doctors providing elective procedures.

Having given over 2,000 presentations to clients in over 60 different types of businesses, Landy Chase says that unlike dentists, most of these clients do not have prospective customers who show up at their place of business. Furthermore, most of these clients must routinely persuade decision makers to talk to them. Fortunately, most doctors do not have these problems. Prospective patients routinely show up at your door. Moreover, when they arrive at your practice, sign in, and take a seat, they are making it clear that they want to do business with you.

Conversely, when a financially qualified patient leaves your practice without making a commitment, they are also making it clear that they have reversed the decision that brought them to you. During the course of that initial visit, something has made them change their mind.

Because the pool of potential patients actively seeking your services may be stagnant, or even declining, doctors and their staff must ensure that they establish an initial consultation process that maximizes patient starts. Furthermore, doctors must also identify any breakdowns in the process. In that regard, they must determine the reason(s) why prospective patients visiting their practice changed their mind, and take immediate action to correct these deficiencies.

The impact of "getting this right" is huge. Consider a recent study of large orthodontic practices, where average treatment acceptance rates declined from 77% in 2000 to 66% currently. Based on an average of 550 new patient exams per year, the decline in treatment acceptance rates means that practices were losing an average of 60 new cases annually. Based upon a \$5,000 average case fee, this translated into \$300,000 in gross collections per year, and lost profits estimated at \$240,000 (80%) annually. With this much money "on the table", doctors must dramatically increase their emphasis on key selling skills.

So, how do you fix the problem?

Landy Chase says the first step in the process is to review the definitions of "marketing" and "selling" that he covers in his "Closing Skills for the Orthodontic Practice" workshop. "Marketing" is defined as those practice activities that create opportunities for the doctor to obtain new patients. Dentist referrals, patient and staff referrals, and various forms of external advertising all fall within this category. "Selling" is what you and your staff get to do, or in Chase's experience, too often fail to do, once your marketing works and the new patient shows up at your practice's door.

Utilizing these definitions, the initial practice consultation is essentially a sales presentation. It is the doctors' one, singular opportunity to persuade a prospective patient to commit to treatment. Simply put, you and your staff's ability to sell the value of your treatment will determine the number of patients who start in your practice.

Chase lists five key selling skills that doctors must have to improve case starts:

1. Develop a polished, effective method for ensuring that all decision makers attend the consultation - if one parent visits your office with their child and the other does not, your practice's value is reduced to a brochure and pricing for the non-attending spouse, the one who is usually the final decision maker.

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2. Have the doctor personally go over fees with the prospective patient - learn how to do this properly. Do not delegate this critical step to a staff member. Since the doctor is responsible for the service delivered, the fee should come directly from him or her.
3. Since the treatment coordinator is the key salesperson for your practice, make sure that you correctly hire and train this individual. Doctors must hire individuals who have an aptitude for selling. More importantly, they must be professionally trained to lead prospective patients to make a well-informed buying decision. Most importantly, this training must be ongoing and continuous, not sporadic.
4. Develop a polished professional step-by-step methodology for every staff member involved in the initial consultation. Doctors cannot afford to have staff members "winging it" in this economy.
5. Make it a habit to discuss not only the benefits of treatment, but also the negative consequences of putting treatment off. A beautiful smile with the accompanying benefits of improved self-confidence and higher self-esteem is a wonderful thing, but it can wait - - - unless, of course, there are significant negative consequences for postponing it.

In closing, Chase advises doctors not to confuse the term "selling" here with being pushy, brass, or unprofessional. Such stereotypes are inaccurate. Rather, professionally selling your valuable, needed services to patients who have made a decision to visit your practice, is the hallmark of a well-run practice.

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Landy Chase, MBA, CSP is a sales and marketing expert who specializes in helping orthodontists and other elective procedure doctors improve their treatment acceptance rates. He is the creator of Closing Skills for the Orthodontic Practice, an onsite staff workshop.

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