

# Can you manage?

Laura Horton explains why focusing on your business skills, leadership and management processes is so vital in today's climate



In the wake of the recession, dentists throughout the UK are now moving away from clinical courses and instead are focusing on the practice, its systems and structure. Suddenly patients are not falling into your chairs, you have to work hard to gain and retain them, which requires a different thought process as to how you run your business.

## Here are the questions that I ask principals who contact me:

Do you want:

- Your practice to reach its full potential?
- To increase your active patient numbers?
- To increase your turnover?
- To work with a team that delivers?
- To do more dentistry – doing what you enjoy?

If the answer to these is yes, then they are talking to the right person!

## Down to business

First things first, your dental practice is a business and needs be addressed as one – a business that needs to make a profit. I had the unfortunate experience this year of explaining to a principal dentist that his practice was operating as a not for profit organisation. This was because they did not have the correct mindset and they were having big problems. Although, I have to say, they were very easily rectified!

## So what do businesses need?

- Structure and systems
- Vision
- Leadership
- Targets
- Finance systems
- A good brand, and effective marketing
- A skilled team

There are people who can help you in every aspect of your practice, it is important to grasp that you cannot do this alone.

Branding and marketing are the areas practices are investing in, but these are not the same thing, and marketing is not advertising. Your brand is the message that is delivered, it is the personality of your practice. This shines through in your logo, colours, appearance of the practice and team, letterheads, website etc – so what is your message and does it live up to your patients' perception of you? Through your message are you attracting the right people to your practice?

Marketing is the process you use to attract new patients, from adverts, to paying for your website to appear at the top of the Google search, to networking. This process also works the same way for your existing patients, including those who are active or have jumped off your list. You can attract them with offers and services, using the database that you already own. A successful practice is not all about gaining new patients – in my eyes it is about retaining existing ones too.

## Systems

Systems are all about having the business basics in place, the way in which we complete a duty. What happens in practice is that the team are all working hard to complete a task, but they are pulling in different directions. An effective practice works well when there is a system folder that everybody follows (as per their contracts of

employment). Some systems are basic, from back-up to taking the post. Then there are super systems such as the patient experience, and set-up and close-down for complex treatments such as implant placements. I have a list of 55 systems that are implemented into a practice. Once they have been documented they are learnt by the entire team and are then kept in a systems folder. Another advantage of having this folder is that it can be given to new team members so they can learn how the practice operates before they begin their new role.

When you operate in this way and the team follows the systems no one is to blame if something goes wrong. The only option for blame is the system, which would need to be addressed and amended to ensure the same error did not happen again.

## Team development

If you want to have a successful practice the time is right to focus on the skill set of your team – as they can grow the business much quicker than you can alone.

The traditional way of working and managing teams is to inform them at all levels of everything that is happening in the business and therefore everything that they need to do. This may happen in a practice meeting or be passed along the line.

Communicating with your team is paramount to success. I like to evolve teams from being informed to being empowered. This is an approach that takes time to achieve but acts as a fantastic motivator. When you give responsibility to employees they are motivated to work hard for you and achieve the business goals.

Instead of saying to your team: 'This is my goal, now listen to how we are going to achieve it', you would say: 'This is where we are, and this is where I want us to be, so what do we need to do to get there?'

## Key roles

One of the key departments of the dental practice that I have been working with is the front desk. This plays a huge part in your brand. When I started working in a dental practice 14 years ago, the front desk staff were not valued. They were there to book appointments, take money and take abuse from patients, and they were expected to do it with a smile on their face too. Being part of the front desk team was 'just a job', often undertaken by a series of part-time staff who wanted pocket money. The culture was wrong.

I find it exhilarating when practices want to focus on the front desk team and the skills that they can develop. This team is responsible for the impression of the practice, patient care/customer service, and converting patients on the telephone, collecting payments in a nice way and ensuring your diaries are booked productively. You are lost without them, and they should be included in the 'team'.

Another key role that practices are implementing (with my passion and enthusiasm) is that of the treatment coordinator (TCO). Someone from your existing team performs this role. They are responsible for providing consistently outstanding customer service and holding new patient consultations – at this stage they have a discussion confirming the patient's needs and desires, as well as describing exactly what the practice has to offer if they are suitable. They also cover the associated fees as a ball park figure. If the patient wants to know more about whitening, for example, they then book an appointment with a dentist for an assessment.

The TCO can help the dentists (if trained and qualified) to take photographs, impressions and radiographs. They can also help to collate estimates and consent forms, as well as collecting payments and arranging credit agreements once the suitable options have been explained and the patient has made an informed decision. Implementing this role into your practice is life changing!

## Value the patient

So the TCO is building relationships with patients and adding value into the treatment in relation to the fee, but what happens when you complete the assessment? Is the patient lying in the chair hearing a foreign language?

What does 2,1,2,3,2,2, mean to a patient while they have their gums probed? What is upper left 6 MOD?

Ask your friends and your team if they ever hear this: 'My dentist is a rip off – £40 for a check up that takes five minutes'. I am sure they have all heard this, and you may have yourself.

There is no value in an assessment that takes five minutes – the patient is rushed in and out and then you charge them for an experience that they do not find positive. You must build value into your examinations. The last practice I worked for had a full case assessment that cost £365. I could book this appointment with new patients on the phone and collect the full amount there and then. Because of the way I spoke and communicated, I built value into the assessment in relation to the fee.

When you have completed your examination do you often rush to tell your patient the options because you are running out of time? Do you post them the treatment plan or ask them to wait in reception for it?

Do not worry if you do, this is what happens all over the UK! But when you post a treatment plan you have lost that patient – and when they receive it at the front desk and the patient says they 'will think about it' that treatment plan is lost, too. You need to have an effective system in place to ensure that you can treatment plan correctly and communicate the treatment options and the associated fee to the patient yourself. Besides seeming unprofessional, I feel it is unethical not to explain all the treatment options available, and the risks, face to face with a patient.

If you do not have time to explain all the options available and create a plan, bring the patient back to see you in a couple of days time. Patients really like this as they are aware of how much effort and care you are putting into them as an individual.

## The finances

You must look at the figures every month. It is important know your numbers and measure according to what is important in the practice.

Every month you need to be aware of your turnover, net profit, lab fees, wages and material costs in relation to the gross as a percentage. This highlights any problems that you may be encountering.

You also need to have targets in place that your team are aware of – how much do you need to gross each month and why? What does each diary need to invoice through each day, and how do you achieve that?

## What should you do?

Success will come to you – but it depends on how you measure success. It is important to determine your goals for your practice as well as for your personal life.

Next you have to decide how quickly you would like to achieve results. If you work with a business coach/consultant you will get there much quicker, and you will have a motivated, skilled team as well. You will all be on the same path. Using a consultant also takes pressure off you, so you can enjoy the day to day roles and do what you do best... the dentistry.

Laura Horton has been working with dentists and their teams since 2005 and through her own company, Laura Horton Consulting, since 2008.

She regularly lectures on courses and at seminars on the value of business development and the TCO role. She also teaches photography to AACD standard, as well as the DiSc personality system. For more information please visit [www.laurahortonconsulting.co.uk](http://www.laurahortonconsulting.co.uk).