



Building a Peak

by Charlene White

Seth Godin, the marketing guru behind the success of Google stated in his blog (sethgodin.typepad.com), “Today you have a choice. Become a leader or become a ‘sheepwalker.’” A sheepwalker is a person who fights to protect status quo at all costs. Never asking, “Is this good?” The peak performance practice needs to be ready to change rapidly or it will be left behind in today’s world. I have seen 30 percent market shifts happen within 18-24 months due to competition. The modern orthodontist must be a savvy businessperson who is willing to take action and invest in the best. The following 11 tips are designed as a jump-off point to allow you to begin your journey in building your own peak performance practice.

Step One: Demographics

Location, location, location! No marketing plan can overcome a poor location. It is essential to choose a location that can support a thriving orthodontic practice. The key factors are median family income, population growth, growth of schools, level of education and amount of competition. If you choose a rural area that has no competition, you can build a practice in an area that has a lower median income with average fees and flexible payment plans. If you set up in a competitive area, you need to look closely at the growth of the area, median family income being at least \$45,000 or more and ideally schools being built in the area. If your location choice is based on “I want to live there” accept your ability to build a practice based on the demographics.

Step Two: Building a Team

Craigslist is a great place to look for employees. It is important for orthodontic staff to be comfortable with using a computer. The newspaper is not read by many people under the age of 40. Craigslist and the Internet are much better resources for finding staff. You need a system for hiring. Without a system, you will make mistakes. Hire people who have a good attitude and a professional image. If you are in doubt within a few weeks of hiring a new person, end the relationship as soon as possible. It normally will not get better. If you buy a practice, you need

to rehire and reset the policies when you become the boss. You need to have service-oriented people on your team in order to market your practice. Sixty-nine percent of customers leave a business because they did not like the attitude of an employee. You cannot afford to hire people who do not deliver excellent customer service.

Once the team is in place, focus on keeping the good people. A predominantly female team needs forums for communication and a feeling of connection. Morning huddles, productive staff meetings, responsibility, feedback and rewards are essential. Create an atmosphere where your employees are motivated to invite patients into your practice.

Step Three: Creating an Image

Image brings them to the door and quality keeps them there. You must create an atmosphere that makes a statement about your philosophy of practice. Hire a decorator who knows how to decorate an office that will attract compliments every day. It is not expensive to get a great look on a budget today. Lighting and music are essential. When you go to a place of business and “feel good” being there, look at the atmosphere and take note of the details. Fluorescent lighting and scratchy music do not create a winning atmosphere. Track lighting, good Bose speakers, artwork, warm colors, flat screen and up to date furniture creates an inviting space.

Step Four: Reinvesting in Equipment

Create an up-to-date image and make it easier for your team. Invest in the best equipment, digital X-ray, excellent cameras, a proven software program, attractive units, scanners, computers at the clinical chairs and signature pads. Set up electronic insurance filing and put all new accounts on auto payment. Remove the metal filing cabinets and get rid of the paper. This allows your talented team to work efficiently and focus on patients.

Step Five: Creating a Great Web Site

Hire an excellent Web site developer. Do not invest in the Yellow Pages. Put your money in your Web site. Spend a lot of

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time looking at highly successful Web sites. Do not try to reinvent the wheel. An excellent Web site designer has all the tips for content and positioning. You cannot afford to have a site “under construction.” More people will contact your office over the Internet versus the telephone. Make your Web site design a top priority. Being on page one of the search engines is essential.

Step Six: Setting Goals

Write your goals and share them with your team. Your goals should be written on a visible board in a private area of the office, like the lounge or a private office. Review your goals with the team each day relative to the real numbers. Continue to brainstorm together as a team and discuss how you can reach your goals daily. For example, asking for referrals is a powerful tool not used by many offices. “I don’t know if you are aware of it Mrs. Jones, but your company offers some of the best orthodontic insurance benefits we see in our area. If you have any co-workers who have been thinking of using their benefit, please have them give me a call.” People truly light up when you compliment their benefits.

Step Seven: Develop a Marketing Plan

Most offices that are not happy with their new patient numbers have no plan, no budget and no marketing coordinator. In today’s climate, the orthodontist must be focused on becoming excellent at marketing. The days of “hanging the shingle and they will come” are over. There is a wealth of information available to the orthodontic practice, but you still must take action. You need to set a budget of three-to-six percent of gross collections, hire an enthusiastic person to implement your plan five to eight hours per week and put your plan in writing for the year, out of sight, out of mind. You must spend time with your referral sources, be visible in the community, include your staff and focus on patient care. If you expect to launch a successful plan, you must gather accurate information about how they heard about your office. This data must be entered properly into your software. There is tremendous value in effectively marketing your practice. It is also a time to focus on the basics. For exam-

ple, ask yourself the question, “How many hours per week are you answering your telephone?” Busy people make their calls in the middle of the day. Are you generating positive “soccer field talk” among the mothers in your community? Eighty-five percent of the decisions are made by the mother.

Step Eight: Set Up Excellent Systems

Excellent systems lead to efficiency, profits and productivity. Michael E. Gerber wrote *The E Myth*, which was about why so many franchises thrive and small businesses fail. The number-one reason was repeatable systems. The franchises could plug ordinary people into their systems and get results. The small business owner was dependent on exceptional people. When they left, the system left with them. Purchase an excellent software program and set up as many systems as possible within your software. This allows you to train and switch employees with less stress and time. Review your results monthly as a team. Check every system for maximum efficiency.

Step Nine: Have a Clear Vision and Purpose

The leader is like the rudder on a boat. Without it, you have no course and no direction. The team needs a leader. You cannot afford to say, “I am not a good leader.” You have to learn how to verbalize your vision and your goals to the team. Without leadership, you will end up with chaos. The team cannot do it on its own. That is not its role. The orthodontist must evaluate their leadership skills and get coaching as needed. The book *Credibility*, by Jamee M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, determines the four key elements people are looking for in a leader are honesty, competency, vision and inspiration.

Step Ten: Work Hard and Set Your Priorities

Over the years I have had an opportunity to work with many highly successful orthodontists. They make it look easy but people in general have no idea how hard they worked to create a successful life and practice. It does not just happen. You have to

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make it happen. Reinvest in your practice. Invest time in your continuing education. Invest in the best for your patients. Give them your undivided attention while you are at the office. Do not spend the day on the phone or the Internet. Stay on schedule and stay focused. Patients and staff know when the doctor makes their patients their number-one priority at the office. The most successful orthodontists I know “hop to it.” They do not keep their patients waiting.

Step Eleven: Focus on Clinical Excellence

Work hard on your clinical skills and your ability to present what you can do for the patient. Moving your hands around in an overbite, under bite movement is not enough for the clientele today. The highly motivated orthodontist knows there is a lot more to it than putting a set up ideal models on the table. Aesthetics of the smile and the face are connected. As Dr. David Sarver teaches, you can have a perfect Class I occlusion with the midlines on with an unattractive soft tissue outcome. Patients today are more educated than ever before. Do what it takes to set you ahead of the pack in creating beautiful smiles and faces. Put a detailed treatment plan in the computer record. Define your treatment goals and plan. Empower your clinical assistants and give them the tools they need to help the doctor stay on track. Continue to educate the team on “why” not just “how.”

Peak performance practices take action, remain focused and reap the benefits. They move quickly to action and stay focused on the job at hand. There were many studies done during and after the great depression. The businesses that invested in marketing and took action came out of the depression faster and were far more profitable than their counterparts. According to the McGill newsletter survey, during these difficult economic times, 45 percent of orthodontists have lost market share, six percent have maintained and 49 percent have increased their production. It doesn't matter what type of business you are in today. You have to work harder and smarter to stay ahead of the pack. I encourage you to be a pioneer, not a follower in this market. ■

Author's Bio

Charlene White is an orthodontic consultant with 25 years of experience in the orthodontic management field. Her company, Progressive Concepts, specializes in orthodontic consulting services, orthodontic practice management workshops, orthodontic group seminars and orthodontic training products. For more information, please visit www.charlenewhite.com.

