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Lowering Overhead and Increasing Productivity with Optimized Scheduling Blocks

by Vicki McManus, RDH¹

You've run the numbers. You can't make them work. You're sure that you can't increase productivity any further without expanding your practice and increasing overhead. But you're not sure it's a step that you're ready to take. Are you really in a place where you can hire more staff, add bays and procedures, and buy new equipment? Do you want to take on more debt at this point in your career?

If you're feeling the tug towards expansion but want to reduce risk, it's time to look for ways to increase productivity and lower overhead in the near term so that you can expand in the long term. One of the most efficient ways to increase your hourly productivity while reducing or holding steady on overhead is to change how you schedule appointments in your practice.

How to Know When it is Time for a Schedule Re-Tool:

Practices grow and change over time. Your patient mix develops, you become locally known for certain procedures, and your days develop a rhythm. As your staff becomes accustomed to your needs and the routines, it's easy for everyone to go into auto-pilot mode. You keep doing the same things in the same way, not because they're efficient or productive, but because they're what you've been doing for a while. When was the last time you took a step back, looked at the whole picture, and made sure your schedule and production goals fit your current needs? Since your last scheduling re-tool, have you:

- Hired new staff members to either replace retirees or expand your practice?
- Added new services?
- Adjusted your hours?
- Rearranged your bays and cabinets?
- Added chairs?
- Grown your patient base?
- Used the current scheduling system for more than a year?

If your situation has changed and your scheduling hasn't, you're probably missing out on productivity gains. When you schedule efficiently for hourly productivity, your practice runs more efficiently, staff are engaged and happy, and you don't have wasted overhead costs.

Why Hourly Productivity?

Scheduling for daily or weekly productivity leads to the temptation to reach your production goals through a high volume of low production procedures rather than a reasonable volume of high production procedures.

However, just as in the old joke, 'making it up on volume' is a myth. What happens when you try to cram low production procedures into your schedule? Your staff feels rushed. They're always running behind schedule. As a result, the patients are cranky and stressed out. Your office feels chaotic, and people don't trust you with high production procedures because there's a sense that you

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can barely handle run-of-the-mill cleanings and minor restorations.

When you schedule for hourly production, you can't fool yourself into compensating with a higher volume of patients. You don't have enough time to imagine that you can squeeze extra people in, and you don't have the chairs to add appointments. You have to take a good, hard look at your goals for the practice and schedule accordingly.

Hourly production goals also ensure that doctor time is being used efficiently. If you're standing around in the hall waiting for hygienists to call you in at the end of a cleaning, you're wasting your time. If you want your practice to be productive, schedule high production procedures for yourself. You'll be happier, busier, and less stressed, because you'll be doing the kind of highly skilled, interesting work that you went to dental school for.

Finally, hourly production goals can jump start a cycle of practice growth. The sort of high production procedures that help you meet your hourly goals also create enthusiastic patients. People like you when you give them their smiles back. They're enthusiastic when you provide them with excellent care, care that they couldn't get at just any practice. The patients you book in your major procedure blocks are the people who will bring their families and friends to see you and who will ultimately help you grow your practice.

Concrete Goals for Your Practice:

How do hourly production goals work in practice? Here are a few pointers to get you started:

- To find your hourly goal, start with your monthly goal. Divide that by 4 (for the 4 weeks in most months) and then by the number of hours your practice is open each week.
- Meet your hourly goal with major procedure blocks. Each major block should be 1.5- 2 hours long.
- Once you've blocked out the space for major procedures, you can fill in the other chairs with your less productive services like cleanings, simple fillings, and orthodontia adjustments. All of the production from these appointments will be in excess of your hourly goals.
- Do not violate the blocks. Once you allow a violation of a block, violations become the norm and you lose your blocks. At that point you need to start over from scratch on the schedule.

- Diagnose, diagnose, diagnose. In the past, you may have been unwilling to diagnose emergent issues because you didn't have openings in the schedule to deal with them. You have the time now. You can get the patients in quickly, so don't be afraid to diagnose.

Notice that with this method you are doing major procedures every day that you're open, not just on certain days of the week. At first, you may wonder if you can fill 3-4 major procedure blocks every working day. The answer is yes! One benefit to these blocks is that when you have patients who need major work, you can often schedule them within the week. Patients appreciate it when you take their needs seriously and help them get care quickly. Even if a dental situation isn't an emergency from a clinical perspective, it often feels like an emergency to the patient. When you offer those blocks, patients will fill them.

If your block is still empty 24 hours in advance, you can fill it with patients from your 'sudden opening' list or use the time to do same day procedures for patients diagnosed during their cleanings. However, once you've been using this method for a month or so, you'll find that if you have the blocks, you'll have the patients to fill them.

Track Metrics So the Whole Staff Can See:

Once you implement block schedules, track your hourly production and get your whole staff involved in meeting goals for production, on time appointments, and diagnostic rates. If you're concerned about your overhead, look for places where you can reduce waste, and track your progress towards eliminating wasted supplies or utilities. No one can meet fuzzy goals like 'improve efficiency.' Give your team concrete benchmarks tied to real rewards, and they will exceed your expectations.

A productive, well-run practice benefits you, your team, and your patients. Take the time to implement block scheduling, and you'll be able to do more good for your community, with less stress for yourself.

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Why "Being A Good Dentist" is Never Enough

by Graig Presti²



Recently, corporate dental offices have been attractive targets for investment capital. What do savvy investors see in dentistry? Lots of upside and profit, that's for sure.

Investment firms have told me that the rise of corporate dentistry demonstrates that dentistry can be extremely profitable... and investors have discovered the potential.

I talk to hundreds of solo dentists each and every month. Frankly, most are in denial over the fact that corporate dentistry is a real viable threat to their practice. I'm here to tell you the threat is very real and you need to take it extremely seriously... because gone are the days when "corporate dental" meant bad dentistry. They are going out and hiring experienced dentists who no longer want the "day to day" of running a business and paying them handsomely to come on over to the corporate side. The end result is that corporate dentistry now equates to "good dentistry."

Without pulling any punches, one of the main attractions of investors to corporate dentistry is the "competition," in other words - you! And what investors and managers find attractive is that they don't see you as competitive.

What investors see in the marketplace is that most practices are managed by unseasoned business-people; folks who would rather "do dentistry" than plan a marketing campaign. And in most cases, they're identifying doctors and practices who do no marketing and only have "word of mouth" patients. When investors see this, they start to salivate at the opportunity to crush the local GP. This is bad news for the independent dentist - and their patients.

There is one extremely simple and easy way to fight back and win. What is it? Marketing!

Corporate dental organizations know that this is your biggest weakness, and they leverage the heck out of it. They know all their numbers. They've calculated, down to the penny, exactly how and what to spend to acquire a patient by using marketing systems. That means they can outspend you any day of the week to acquire a new patient because they know that over the lifetime of the patient, they will make a profit. And to be quite frank, they outsource this process to companies like mine.

Corporate dental practices are not cheap; they know their numbers and invest thousands of dollars per month in the marketing and selling of their dental practices. That is how they break private practices in half and steal their best patients. It's that simple!

But it's not all bad news for you, the solo practitioner, because I see that as a huge opportunity! They may have systems and deep pockets, but at the same time they're large and slow to make decisions. A smaller practice can be nimble and act fast, since there is no board of directors or bureaucracy to get things approved, especially when it comes to marketing campaigns.

So what kinds of marketing should you be focusing on? Start simple (and powerful):

- 1. Consistent branding across the internet.** Branding isn't just a shiny logo and a fancy website, although those undeniably play into it. Branding is your entire image; your presence on social media sites like Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc. It's your responses on user review sites. And most importantly...
- 2. Google reviews.** Google can arguably be the most powerful tool in your marketing tool belt. I know doctors who have boosted their production 10X just by getting their Google house in order and showing their satisfied patients how to leave them positive reviews. The potential for getting you higher production is staggering, and there are still many markets across the country where no other practice is leveraging this gold mine. (Meaning you could dominate the market very easily.)
- 3. Video reviews (what we call 6 STAR reviews):** YouTube reports that 1,300,000,000 people use their site and that 300 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute! Video is not going away anytime soon. Video reviews from your best patients are extremely powerful when it comes to attracting high quality patients, because of their personal nature, feel more real and genuine, and thus carry more weight when a potential patient is vetting you because they see how much you care and how well you take care of your patients. Remember, majority of people have dental anxiety, so real life patients bragging about you really takes your practice to the next level.

BOTTOM LINE: You have to market your services properly (beyond the unreliable "word of mouth"). The harsh truth is that if you want to flourish in the upcoming months, keep your doors open and survive the incoming wave of large private and corporate dental practices (which, trust me... are not going away), you need to set your practice apart from corporate dentistry by communicating that through proven online marketing. I'm not talking about putting a paragraph or page on your website. You need real proven marketing systems.

It's time to shift your approach at dealing with real market threats and you will see that you can thrive - and your competition will become irrelevant.

BE BOLD & DO SOMETHING GREAT!

Graig Presti is founder and CEO of Local Search For Dentists and has been recognized as one of the world's top market-leaders in the dentistry world and has led the marketing and PR campaigns that have driven more than 10,000 dental practices to record years. Graig's Google patient review attraction "cheat sheet" system has been seen in The Wall St. Journal, Newsweek, Inc. Magazine, Inc. 500, as well as in CNN, FOX, NBC, ABC, & CBS major markets across the nation. To get a free complimentary copy of the cheat sheets go to www.localsearchfordentists.com/woody

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Dealing With a Hyperventilating Patient in the Dental Office

Hyperventilation usually results from anxiety or stress inducing rapid and deep uncontrollable breathing. The increased respiration rate and volume of air exchange result in a decrease in the usual carbon dioxide levels in the blood.

Symptoms often seen include **numbness or tingling in the hands, feet and lips, lightheadedness, dizziness, headache, chest pain, slurred speech and sometimes fainting.**

The decrease in carbon dioxide results in a higher pH value of the blood, causing alkalosis and calcium metabolism alterations which cause muscle and nerve aberrations resulting, in the symptoms mentioned above.

Calm the patient down and slow the breathing rate. Have them breath into a paperbag to increase blood levels of carbon dioxide. This rapidly reverses the metabolic imbalance and eliminates the symptoms the patient has experienced.

Signs and Symptoms:

1. Rapid and/or deep breathing pattern. (>20-25/min)
2. Anxiety.
3. Air Hunger.
4. Lightheadedness.
5. Racing heartbeat.
6. Vertigo(dizziness)/ Balance problems.

Treatment:

1. Upright position.
2. Calm patient, reduce anxiety.
3. Re-breathing into paper bag.
4. Do not use oxygen for hyperventilation.