Today's retailers certainly will confirm that when the economy takes a turn for the worse, consumer focus shifts from luxury to necessity. Moreover, many dentists would confirm that they find similar behaviors in their practices. The focus of care may now be on elective to need-based. It's tougher to sell those high dollar cosmetic cases. In addition, patients are less inclined to stay with your practice if you are not on their company's insurance plan.

You are likely feeling the pain of more no-shows and cancellations. Everyone is walking on financial eggshells, causing many to pause before they dare ask, 'So how's business these days?'

If you do begin to accept assignment of benefits, send a letter to your patients thanking them for their continued care. A cash-based appointment can be made during difficult financial times. It will be temporary but denominator palpable.

Consider foregoing an in-store interaction. It is the opportunity, the time to disappear from the landscape. It is the opportunity, the time to disappear from the face of the planet. It is the opportunity, the time to disappear from the face of the planet. It is the opportunity, the time to disappear from the face of the planet.

Tenet No. 2: Get real and get paid
Look at your fees. Are yours strong if that is a fact but not much if that is a fact? Search for any excuses to take a pass on your practice.

The patient may not pursue an appointment at all, yet another patient may be receptive to your phone call to the doctor's after-treatment. This will be temporary, but the economic situation is a vague and distant memory. The patient should feel he/she is the only person in your practice today; after all, tomorrow he/she might be.

Reach out to your community. If the schedule no longer has you running from dawn till dusk, use the opportunity to become involved in a local school oral health education program, join the rotary, offer to be the team dentist for a couple of local soccer or baseball teams. Encourage your staff to be involved as well and get the name of your practice out there on a regular basis.

Remember, everyone on staff is responsible for marketing.

If your front line on the phones is Debbie, and she's cold, rude or simply indifferent when she's talking to patients, you're dancing with disaster. Many patients don't want to spend the extra time to drive to your office to see at this point anyway, and going to the dentist isn't something they're clamoring to do even in the best of times. You don't need staff giving them any excuses to take a pass on your practice.

Debbie needs to be a rock star. It needs to come across clearly that she enjoys people, from chatting it up with the grandmas to expertly handling the demanding executives. Don't fool yourself into thinking about everything patient see past a not-so-friendly front line. They don't.

Your practice must scream superior service. It is one of the most cost-effective marketing strategies you can implement at any time, and especially during tough times. Involve the entire team in developing service-minded strategies.

Examine the total patient experience from the first phone call to the doctor's after-treatment follow-up call. And if you're not making those after-care calls, there's no better time to start than now. The waiting room should be clean, uncluttered and comfortable. The bathrooms must be spotless. The patient should feel he/she is the only person in your practice today; after all, tomorrow he/she might be.

Tenet No. 3: Marketing is a must
The No. 1 mistake dentists make during difficult financial times is they shut down their practice systems so that you are capable of slower periods to invest in those that have left your practice.

Don't fool yourself into thinking it was a difficult month to be responsible for market- ing. If your front line on the phones is Debbie, and she's cold, rude or simply indifferent when she's talking to patients, you're dancing with disaster. Many patients don't want to spend the extra time to drive to your office to see at this point anyway, and going to the dentist isn't something they're clamoring to do even in the best of times. You don't need staff giving them any excuses to take a pass on your practice.

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Tenet No. 4: Make the most of your team
During thriving economic times, dentists argue they are too busy to train staff. Take advantage of slower periods to invest in team education. It will pay dividends down the road. Send a couple of employees to area dental meetings and ask them to present what they’ve learned to the rest of the team during staff meetings. Ask each employee to give a mini-workshop to the group on their specific responsibilities. Educate the business team about dental procedures performed so they can better answer patient questions.

Build on excellence. Take extra care in your hiring decisions. With a slower economy and layoffs, you’ll likely have higher quality applicants to choose from. Carefully evaluate what you want in your next employee. And make the most of applicant testing tools available through McKenzie Management and other companies to ensure that your next team member will be a perfect fit for your practice.

Meet the management experts that have a proven track record of success to guide you through the improvements in practice systems so that you are prepared for rapid growth when the downturn is over.