Seminars in Orthodontics

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Mind your business!

Global orthodontic practice patterns and management protocols: Lessons, strategies, and some crystal gazing!

We dedicate this issue of *"Seminars in Orthodontics"* to the Business aspects of our profession: An important and often neglected aspect of our specialty with regard to training and CE curriculums globally! Most young careers start with a vision of a dream career based on the romanticism that exists for the "science" of Orthodontics! Reality dawns soon, as clinicians realize that the deliverance of orthodontic care is more than the biological, biomechanical, technical, or a "critical thinking" of the science. That it is also a business that can be worth anything from a few hundred thousand dollars a year in some parts of the globe, to a few million dollars in other regions of the world![1,2] Albert Einstein did say, "Science is a wonderful thing, if one does not have to earn one's living at it."[3] The truth, however, is that Orthodontists do have to make a living from their science!

The management of Businesses is a regimented training that Orthodontic Programs rarely impart (Dr. Levin, one of the top Practice Consultants in the USA, states in this issue that less than 2% of an Orthodontic Curriculum focuses on Practice Management) and most start-up orthodontists seldom possess. The eight sectors of business management, each as equally important as the others are finance, marketing, human resources, strategy, production, operations, service, and information technology.[4] If we were to assess the Orthodontic Business Model across the world, the CEO (the practicing Orthodontist) has an expertise in "production" or "operations," and absolutely little or only hands-on training in Financial, Marketing, HR, Strategic, Service, or IT Management.

The consequence of this reality is a large number of busy practice coaches and consulting firms. Clinicians across the world have woken up to the reality of incorporating "Management Protocols" in their repertoire of skills. While established practices hire these professional services to iron out current or past mistakes, and forge future strategies, the burden of these management mistakes can hit the newcomer hard! The solution: Resource material on Orthodontic Practice Management that is based on definitive data, and a Syllabus that is incorporated into residency programs. The Development and Implementation of a Practice Management curriculum have been an important "missing link" in Orthodontic Education. The Goals, Didactics, and the Outline of what could be a possible "Practice Management Module" for residents have been extensively presented by Sinclair and Grady.[5] As administrators for the Indian Orthodontic Society, Dr. Joseph Varghese and I have been instrumental in evolving a curriculum for a symposiums on *"Practice Management & Ethical Marketing (PMEM)."* Nine of these symposiums were held between 2013 and 2015 in various parts of India, attended by close to 800 young orthodontists and residents. The 2-day event encompassed the Basics of Business Education that every Orthodontist should know. This program was customized for an Indian Orthodontist. We encourage colleagues and orthodontic leaders across the world to take the effort and create such programs and curriculums for their regions. Most of the Data and Educational Material on this branch of orthodontics emanates from the United States,[2,6,7] and some from Europe. Demographics and Practice Patterns across the world are different, and customizing a syllabus for a given region is important. The PMEM curriculum is outlined in Table 1.

Lessons learnt!

What defines a financially successful orthodontist? Are there any attributes or personality traits

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Table 1. Practice management and ethical marketing (PMEM) symposium syllabus and schedule template.

Day 1	*SESSION 1: Setting up a practice (9 am–2 pm)*
	Career options for an orthodontic graduate
	The scope of the symposium
	Goal setting, making a vision statement
	Making a business plan
	Office design
	The art and science of scheduling appointments
	SESSION 2: running the practice (2:30 pm–8 pm)
	Human resources and the orthodontist
	Conducting successful consultations
	Inventory management
	IT and computer systems for a practice
	Financial planning
Day 2	*SESSION 3: Marketing the practice (8:30 am–1 30 pm)*
	Marketing concepts
	Brand creation for the orthodontist
	Internet marketing and technology for patient communication
	Internal marketing
	The ethical code
	SESSION 4: Visiting orthodontic practices (2 pm–6 pm)
	Visiting orthodontic practices—an overview
	Resolution of problems in visiting practice
	Financial considerations in visiting practice
	The general dentist's perspective of visiting orthodontists
	Corporate (managed care in orthodontics)
	Concluding remarks

that are different? And are they different for different parts of the world? It is the nature of any business that profitability will vary from one establishment to another. When service differentiation is supposedly negligible, it has been suggested that client experience and the service provider's personality are actually very important determinants of success.[8–10]

Coats et al., in an analysis of financially successful orthodontists, noted that (1) they allow their practices to grow if it increases their net income, (2) view control of overhead as a key principle, (3) emphasize the competence of staff in determining the success of a practice, and (4) believe in marketing.[9] The JCO Practice Survey (2015) makes a very significant finding too. Practices that do employ management methods (A written philosophy, office policy manual, staff meetings, measurement of staff productivity, in depth analysis of practice activity, patient satisfaction surveys, monthly contracts, etc.) see greater case starts than practices that do not employ them.[6]

Table 2. The 4**M**'s of orthodontic practice management.

1	**M**anagement/admin protocols
2	**M**arketing principles
3	**M**onetary analysis
4	**M**arket-customized skills

In 2013, from a survey of orthodontic materials sales teams, we shortlisted a list of their orthodontists who constitute the top 10% of the market (having maximum case starts) in India. We then asked these teams to draw up a list of practice/personality traits of these orthodontists. The top six traits that could be drawn up for these success stories were as follows: (1) they are open to learning and listening, (2) respect all they interact with as equals, (3) empower others and share knowledge, (4) they are punctual and respect time, (5) they are organized in their offices and focused on their practices, and (6) have made "Brands" of themselves. Being a successful orthodontist entails attending to not only treatment needs but also organizational needs and an "interpersonal connect". The patient manager system described by Dr. Lisa Alvetro in this issue is an idea that integrates the "connect" and "organizational efficacy" seamlessly.

The captains of their fate must understand the sociological evolution in any given environment if they are to chart an appropriate course for their professional contributions. That is a non-negotiable lesson learnt from trends across the globe!

Strategies for the orthodontic entrepreneur

The dynamic nature of the global business environment also demands that the Orthodontic entrepreneur (the word has probably just been invented) adhere to core business ideas and strategies as well as be in tune with trends that are changing the business landscape. The "Vision" is fundamental to any enterprise, so is it for a practice. Karen Moawad, a leading Practice Consultant, emphasizes the importance of Goals in this issue. In other words, how can you pick a road to somewhere when you do not know where you are going? The standards of practice and management modalities employed should just be an extension of the vision document with strategic goals in place. The **4M** checklist for the orthodontic practitioner is a philosophy that we have often discussed and taught at the *PMEMs*.

The 4Ms denote (1) **M**anagement/admin protocols, (2) **m**arketing principles, (3) **m**onetary analysis, and (4) **m**arket-customized skills. Let us understand the scope of each one of these for an orthodontic practice (Table 2).

Management/admin protocols

Marketing gets patients to the door of a practice. However, it is the management protocols (both clinical and administrative) that keep them in a practice. What to do, is as important as what not to. The most common mistakes that orthodontists make are related to HR, leadership, communication, and the vision for practice.[11] A written down standard operating protocol (SOP) culture for the A–Z of practice protocols is an idea that practices must incorporate in the present era to minimize errors and optimize efficiency. Dr. Anoop Sondhi has mastered these protocols over years and shares his efficacy mantra of "Doing the right things, the right way" in this issue. Inventory management, appointment scheduling, and an optimized office design are also extremely critical to this philosophy. Six orthodontists from India; Drs. Patil and Singh, Drs. Deshmukh and Rahalkar, and Dr's. Varghese and Doshi have collaborated to outline efficiency parameters in these areas, respectively, for this issue.

Marketing principles

Marketing, probably a few decades ago, was considered a "bad word" for orthodontists. It still in many parts of the world is a misunderstood word for healthcare professionals. The simplest perspective for marketing in health care is "Controlling conversations people will have about you. Without marketing no one will know how good you are!" People have always had conversations about their doctors. However, with social media, the terrain has transformed, and management of the Message, Media, and Market today is an inseparable part of Practice Governance! Drs. Neal Kravitz and Jay Bowman in this issue, emphasize the importance of marketing directly to the consumer. They reiterate that this is a trend that could be the future of Orthodontic Marketing. The Internet today provides an opportunity for that direct interaction and brand awareness. Dr. Gupta and his team provide the roadmap for optimizing online presence, in this issue.

Monetary analysis

The early days of most practitioners are spent grappling with financial jargons. Statistics that define practice growth and financial success are often confusing and rarely taught to an orthodontist. Some key parameters that need evidence-based values for every orthodontic economy are (1) Orthodontic consultation to treatment conversion rate, (2) Phase I to Phase II conversion rate, (3) average starts to finish, (4) average value of orthodontist hour, (5) average overheads percentage, (6) average net collection to patient ratio, (7) referral rate of completed patients based on (a) appliance, (b) age, and (c) population group. Simply put a successful practice controls both bottom-line and top-line parameters.

Market-customized skills

Management Case Studies have outlined the importance of Soft Skills for success at workplace. Soft Skill gurus claim that 85% of financial success is due to one's personality, ability to communicate, negotiate, and lead. Shockingly only 15% is due to our domain skills (which for Orthodontists implies 100% of our education!). The scopes of soft skills are Communication, Presentation, Interpersonal, and Leadership skills. These skills can be acquired to unlock the hidden potential in individuals and improve the health of a practice. Practice Coaches, Books, and Courses are the best resources to incorporate and improvise on these life-altering abilities in a competitive market.[12] Chris Barrow (a Practice Coach from the UK) in his article talks about how "tribes" or coaches make efforts in this direction sustainable and worthwhile. These abilities can be the game changers in the Overall Orthodontic Experience for a patient. Rosemary Bray, a leading consultant from the USA emphasizes that SERVICE around the world means the same thing to everyone regardless of his or her country, education, or level of understanding. Everybody wants it, expects it, seeks it out, and pays for it. Meghna Vandekar and her team from India have actually quantified the experience parameters and the experience tools that help patients connect with their orthodontic experience positively. A piece of information, that is a must for any Orthodontic Marketplace!

It is crystal gazing time!

While speaking with colleagues in developing orthodontic economies, reflections often focus on how the profession has changed and how many of those changes have made orthodontic practice more challenging. Many conclude that the "golden age" of orthodontics has passed. I, personally, view these concerns with skepticism, for there is reason to be optimistic about our future and excited about what contemporary practice has to offer our patients in improving their oral health, as well as enhancing our lifestyles.[13]

In fact, in the United States, Orthodontics has been ranked by media as the best job in the 100 Best Jobs list for 2015.[14] The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that this profession will grow by 18% from 2014 to 2024, resulting in about 1500 new job openings. The BLS suspects that this growth will be driven by an increasing desire for this specialized dental care. The overall score was calculated from seven component measures, and for each measure, jobs receive a score between 0 and 10. The component measures and their weights in computing the overall score were Median Salary (30%), Employment Rate (20%), 10-Year Growth Volume (15%), 10-Year Growth Percentage (15%), Job Prospects (10%), Stress Level (5%), and Work–Life Balance (5%). The Latest JCO Practice survey also states that respondents to the 2015 survey recorded the highest median income since 1981.[2]

In these "pop the champagne" times for the profession, as we crystal gaze into the future, we are noticing an important change. A change that slowly but surely will alter the delivery of care to our patients. The two tiers of orthodontic patients in the private sector are defined by demographics, economics, and an orthodontic bias.[15] The most popular form of orthodontic care delivery is the *"fee-for-service"* or the "free enterprise model" that operates out of an orthodontic office. The other is the "corporate care" model which has defined parameters, is low cost at times; or it is sometimes orthodontic care at a dentists office and involves a split in the orthodontist-dentist fee. In some regions, this is probably the best example of *"managed care."* Ask an experienced orthodontist and he or she will vouch vehemently that the traditional or former "fee-for-service" method is right for the patient and creates the highest quality of care, but of what use is this care if we cannot get the patients through the front door of our practices, a trend that is sadly becoming a reality in many parts of the world today.[13]

Many orthodontists will stay fee-for-service because their economic environment and ability might allow them to do so. My belief is in the fact that a lot of orthodontists will probably create such a "value" in orthodontic therapy (coupled with efforts from Professional Bodies), and that will keep this model afloat. However, a lot of our brethren will succumb to "managed care" because that is what their competitive, social, and economic environment will permit. We live in an environment of free enterprise, and that is the business model that drives economies globally. In this scenario, market forces will fill the void of need.[15] "Managed care" is a problem for the future of orthodontics. If we critically analyze forces that are changing the orthodontic terrain and apply ourselves to changes needed, we might augment the survival of "fee-for-service model." Understanding *"Business Fundamental Driven Practice Protocols and Global Trends"* is perhaps the first step in this journey.

In 2005, Daniel Pink wrote his book "A Whole New Mind," where he introduces the term "The Conceptual Age" to readers. The conceptual age is the new era of work where the current economic demand calls for workers who are skilled in areas guided by the right hemisphere of the brain. The orthodontic world is at a critical inflection point, and to compete in tomorrow's global arena, orthodontists must demonstrate more than just knowledge or technical expertise. Tomorrow's professionals will need to take a creative thinking approach to the practice terrain, thereby bridging the gap between analytical left-brain functions and creative right-brain capabilities.[16] This issue of *Seminars in Orthodontics* is an attempt at providing resource material to the "Whole Brain Professional" of tomorrow! The world today is converging on a common ground on most technological advances. Business protocols and marketing policies also follow suit. Whether it is Manhattan, Morocco, Mumbai, or Madagascar…the fundamentals for "minding our businesses" successfully, just do not change!

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