

# Using Strategic Analysis to Improve Your Practice

By Alexa S. Chilcutt, PhD and Debbie Druey, MBA

**W**hat types of impressions are you making? When someone says “impression,” what comes to mind? To dental folks, it’s a completely different image from the average person. However, a perfect first impression of our practice is just as important as the perfect final impression for a crown.

Most of us understand instinctively that in order to attract new clients to our business we must create a pleasant and appealing first impression. In the real world, though, the deliberate actions and thoughts that go into making this a memorable and momentous occasion often get set aside as we go about our daily work routines.

## Why does it matter?

Communication, sociology, and public relations scholars are familiar with the theory of Impression Management. This theory simply states that there is a theatrical component to the impressions we make in front of our various audiences. In theatrical terms, think of the dental office as a stage where you and your team are performing for your audience, your patients. To pull off a great and lasting performance, you must first define the types of impressions you want to make (a friendly, efficient, and competent office, etc.), intentionally create the ways in which you will make those impressions (appearance, attitudes, processes, etc.), and finally maintain those impressions even in times of crisis. How can you begin to reevaluate the impressions you are currently making and recognize the ones you should be making?

## Brainstorming: SWOT Strategic Analysis

The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Strategic Analysis model has been used in business since the 1960s when it was introduced by a Stanford University professor. It is still used widely today by companies such as Coca-Cola and Dell and is taught in business schools for strategic business planning and marketing.

To help prioritize and differentiate the “important few” from the “trivial many,” the SWOT analysis model can be very revealing and is easily used as a standardized approach to identifying problems and solutions that impact our business.

SWOT begins as brainstorming and con-



cludes with strategic thinking. We encourage full team participation. Here’s an example:

### Team Discussion:

Complete a SWOT Analysis to find ways to improve our first impression with our new patients. Here is an example.

### **S–Strengths are internal characteristics of the practice and team.**

- When we answer the phone, our patients are impressed that we answer by the second ring and listen carefully to their concerns.
- When a new patient arrives in our office, they are pleased that we greet them by name, shake their hand, and introduce ourselves.
- Our facility and parking area is in top condition and we have an attractive and informative web site.

### **W–Weaknesses are our own internal challenges that we want to work on.**

- Distractions at the front desk often make it difficult to handle a quality phone call.
- We are sometimes too busy to have a dedicated person at the front desk prepared to greet each patient by name.
- New patients often comment that our office is difficult to find.
- Survey feedback shows that patients find our insurance policy confusing.

**O–Opportunities exist outside of the practice and represent possible avenues for solutions or untapped resources that we are not currently using.**

- Chartless office technologies offer the advantages of minimizing the check-in and check-out process.
- Patients are more web-savvy than ever. They seek information about dental procedures and read reviews about our practice online before they meet us.

**T–Threats are also outside of the office. They are the competitive and economic forces that exist in our business and marketing environment.**

- Today’s consumer must prioritize where they will spend their time and their money; many Americans are limited in both areas. As a result, we are seeing more new patients that call because they have a specific problem vs. wanting routine care.
- Service-based businesses such as non-urgent health care compete not only within their industry, but with other products and services. Consider what a cell phone plan costs vs. financing a crown. The monthly payment amounts are often similar.

At this point, we use this information we have uncovered to create strategies by combining our assertions and arriving at solutions:

**S/W/O** (Use strengths and opportunities to overcome weaknesses) – As a team, we can work together to post completed treatment from the operatory and schedule recall appointments to reduce the activity level at the front desk. Our goal is to create and maintain a welcoming presence for both callers and arriving patients.

**S/W/O** To assist our patients with finding our practice, we will post a customized map with local landmarks on our web site, and direct new patients to the site to download the map before their first visit.

## Practical Thinking

Using SWOT, logical solutions begin to present themselves with a little practice. Try this approach in different areas of your business, such as improving your patient recall

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## Tax Tips

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come out last. Unlike the 529 Plan, that money is taxable; but a college student will probably be in a very low tax bracket.

## Buy/Lease Your Business Car through the Practice

It is easier and cleaner to run the business car through the practice, and you often get more deductions. That is because you treat the entire costs of operating the car as a business expense, and then charge yourself for the personal use of the car.

So that the value of the personal use can be minimized, you have to drive the car at least 50% for business and the car can't be too expensive. The "over 50%" is important so the car qualifies for more favorable depreciation. Also, it is important to keep the price of the car reasonable due to artificial limits on annual depreciation. For expensive cars, a lease may make sense because the effective limits on depreciation are not as onerous for a leased car. The optimal decision is different for each person, but we can put you in touch with vehicle specialists who can help.

So, let me be the first to wish you a Happy Tax Planning Season!

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## Strategic Analysis

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system, your accounts receivable management, or to help understand your patients' goals by asking guided questions about their own perception of the SWOT of their own smile.

Finally, to quote our Social Media Specialist, Greg Welch, "A poor first impression = no second date." Part of branding our practice is shaping and projecting the "personality" of the business, and deciding how we want others to perceive us. Attracting customers can be much like dating; we all want to be well-liked and get that important "second date."



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