

MANAGEMENT & MARKETING

(Editor's Note: This quarterly JCO column is compiled by Contributing Editor Howard Iba. Every three months, Dr. Iba presents a successful approach or strategy for a particular aspect of practice management. Your suggestions for future topics or authors are welcome.)

Our guest columnist for this edition is Dr. Robert Fry from Olathe, Kansas. Together with his associate, Dr. Arlen Staab, he presents a new perspective on finding an associate. With the large number of orthodontists currently nearing retirement age, or at least a stage where they would like to slow down, this article is most pertinent.

I am always excited when someone takes a subject familiar to us all and is able to develop a new approach that is both practical and functional. In my opinion, Drs. Fry and Staab have done just that, and thereby have broadened our thinking and expanded our practice transition options. I think you will enjoy their ideas.

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Dr. Iba

The Perfect Associate

As an orthodontic practice matures, the doctor usually spends an increasing amount of time at the chair treating patients. Time formerly spent on management and marketing—not to mention family and vacations—tends to get short-changed.

Many orthodontists look to an associate for help. It's not easy to find the perfect associate, however, due to differences in treatment philosophies, competition between the doctors, money issues, and other factors. This article was written to share my positive experience.

Our New Associate

In 1993, after 32 years of orthodontic practice, Dr. Arlen Staab achieved his goal of financial independence and was about to sell his practice and retire. To ease the transition of his patients into our practice, Dr. Staab agreed to be present for each patient's initial appointment. We then decided to complete these patients' treatment together.

Dr. Staab says, "I enjoyed discussing each case and how best to accomplish the treatment goals with Dr. Fry. The staff members were highly trained and capable and, most important, warmly welcomed me and my patients. During the transfer process, I became aware of the feeling of anticipation and enthusiasm I was experiencing on the days I was going to the office. I wasn't tired of orthodontics; I was burned out on running an office. The excitement and challenge of treating patients was still present. I found serendipity when Dr. Fry suggested that I consider coming into the office on days he was

obligated elsewhere.”

What started as a simple transition from one practice to another blossomed into a win-win situation for both orthodontists. At first, Dr. Staab worked only one day per month. Within two years he was working six days a month, and now, by his choice, he works at least eight days a month. In the beginning we didn't schedule initial bonding appointments on days when Dr. Staab was in the office, but now those days are as productive as any others. In addition, since Dr. Staab is able to focus strictly on patient care, he now sees all our TMJ cases—both initial examinations and follow-up visits.

Advantages of an Older Associate

Management consultant Bud Schulman has long advised retired orthodontists to make themselves available to practices, whether for one extended period, as needed, or on an ongoing part-time basis. He says, “For retired orthodontists to continue in the ‘wet-fingers’ mode is most appealing. I have recommended this procedure to ever-so-many doctors I have helped move into retirement.”

Mr. Schulman adds, “I am aware of one retired orthodontist in Ohio who covered for orthodontists who wanted to take extended vacation—perhaps five to 10 weeks. It allows production to continue and employees to keep working, and there is no fear of the replacement doctor opening nearby to compete with the vacationing doctor. Almost always, the two doctors establish a relationship that includes exchange of treatment information and a friendship that lasts for many years.”

Here are the advantages we found in working with Dr. Staab:

- The owner-orthodontist has time to plan new systems, manage change, market the practice, and even enjoy some free time, which is essential to keeping a fresh outlook and avoiding burnout.
- An older associate is usually experienced and confident in dealing with treatment problems, and generally has excellent people skills. There are no concerns about the associate having ego



Drs. Fry and Staab

hang-ups, trying to change your practice philosophy, or leaving to set up a competing practice.

- Since the associate is not distracted by management issues, he or she is better able to focus on treatment alone and to provide exceptional patient care.
- The semiretired associate can often be flexible if an unexpected change in the schedule is required. Dr. Staab has repeatedly accommodated last-minute emergencies and illnesses.
- The staff may appreciate a change of pace from the owner-orthodontist's style, and will certainly gain additional training from the associate's many years of orthodontic experience.

Conclusion

Dr. Staab and I have formed a synergistic relationship that keeps him happy working part-time in a career he loves, while helping our practice become more productive than we ever could have hoped. In fact, we have seen so much growth that we are currently seeking out another “perfect associate”.

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