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# THE EDITOR'S CORNER

## Science and Practice Management

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the scientific method as “a method or procedure that has characterized natural science since the 17th century, consisting in systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses”. Application of the scientific method has resulted in dramatic progress in science, medicine, and dentistry over the 300 years since its development by Bacon, Descartes, and other great thinkers. I was struck by a key section in Wikipedia’s entry on the subject: “The chief characteristic which distinguishes the scientific method from other methods of acquiring knowledge is that scientists seek to let reality speak for itself, supporting a theory when a theory’s predictions are confirmed and challenging a theory when its predictions prove false. . . . Scientific researchers propose hypotheses as explanations of phenomena, and design experimental studies to test these hypotheses via predictions which can be derived from them.”

We orthodontists, by virtue of our pre-dental, dental, and specialty training, are firmly grounded in the scientific method. We tend to take for granted that our clinical materials and techniques have been repeatedly explored, tested, and scientifically validated. Evidence-based decision making is a logical extension of the scientific method and, when tempered in the forge of clinical experience, has become essential to the evaluation and improvement of the treatment we deliver to our patients.

While few of us would doubt the value of the scientific method in clinical dentistry and orthodontics, it’s surprising how many of us fail to implement that methodology in our business management. How many orthodontists record and scientifically or statistically analyze specific variables that can indicate the financial health and well being of their practices? The number who actually apply scientific principles to practice management—particularly their marketing strategies—is surprisingly low. In the 2011 JCO Orthodontic Practice Study, only 31.4% of the respondents reported using a “practice promotion plan”, and only 30.4% said they employed the more gen-

eral “in-depth analysis of practice activity”. Yet both management methods have consistently been associated with higher net income and numbers of case starts since the first Practice Studies were conducted in the early 1980s.

Over the next three issues of JCO, our Management & Marketing Editor, Dr. Robert Haeger, will present a series of articles that explain in detail how he has successfully used the scientific method to develop and implement a marketing strategy in his practice. He also draws on figures he has obtained from 125 high-performing members of the Schulman Study Group. This month's first installment shows how to create and monitor a strategic marketing plan; subsequent parts will deal with surveying patients and general dentists and will provide sample spreadsheets for setting up your own plan. I'm grateful to Dr. Haeger for sharing his remarkable insights in this area, and I'm sure that if you pay careful attention to his suggestions, those insights will prove profitable in your practice as well.

RGK

The **2013 JCO Orthodontic Practice Study** will be the first in which U.S. orthodontists will be able to enter their responses, securely and anonymously, via an online questionnaire. It will not only be easier to complete, but faster and more accurate to analyze. Watch your inbox and mailbox in the spring for instructions on how to complete the online form (or how to print out and mail a paper questionnaire); a link will also be provided on the JCO homepage at [www.jco-online.com](http://www.jco-online.com). Results will be published, as usual, in a series of JCO articles in the fall.