



Overcoming Sucktember

Strategic planning can help practices thrive during fall slump

BY JACLYN NONA

September arrives with a familiar challenge for practices in our field nationwide. While other industries celebrate back-to-school momentum, dental offices are facing their slowest month of the year. Families are juggling new schedules, school expenses have drained budgets, and patients who've exhausted their insurance benefits are postponing care until January. This phenomenon has earned September its notorious nickname: Sucktember.

I've watched practices completely flip their fall results by getting strategic about this predictable challenge. Instead of just surviving the month, use targeted planning to fill schedules and protect revenue. The difference comes down to preparation and understanding your patient patterns.

Sucktember happens for predictable reasons, which means we can address them proactively. Back-to-school chaos leaves families feeling overwhelmed, making dental

appointments feel like just another item on an already impossible to-do list. In addition, insurance benefits reset in January, so patients who maxed out their coverage by August often decide to wait.

Practices can offset these challenges with a variety of strategies.

Strategic scheduling: Power blocks and patient intelligence

September's success starts with intentional scheduling in your practice management system. Power blocks—those protected 1.5- to 2.5-hour slots for high-production appointments like comprehensive orthodontic treatments, surgical procedures or complex restorative work—become especially important during slower periods. Between these power blocks, schedule shorter appointments for consultations, adjustments or follow-up visits.

This approach protects your highest-revenue procedures even when overall appointment volume decreases. Rather than allowing September schedules to fill randomly with lower-production appointments, power blocks ensure profitable treatments maintain priority positioning.

Begin booking September power blocks during your busy summer months. Create marketing campaigns that encourage patients to “Reserve Your Fall Treatment,” and highlight the convenience of scheduling September appointments when children return to school. Consider offering scheduling incentives for patients willing to commit early, perhaps priority morning or end-of-day time slots or bundled treatment discounts for advance booking.

Your front desk team should document patient communication preferences during every scheduling interaction. Note whether patients prefer cell phones over work numbers, respond better to texts than calls, or have specific availability windows. Patient intelligence becomes the foundation for targeted marketing outreach and successful priority list campaigns.

Transforming insurance challenges into marketing opportunities

The insurance benefits reset creates both challenges and marketing opportunities. Launch a “Benefits Rescue Campaign” in late August targeting patients with unused annual benefits. Your practice management system can identify patients who haven't reached their maximum coverage, allowing you to create personalized email campaigns, targeted social media posts, and direct mail pieces emphasizing both the financial loss of unused benefits and the health advantages of consistent care.

Create countdown-style social media content: “Only four months left to use your 2025 benefits!” Post patient testimonials about completed treatments and share before-and-after photos with captions about maximizing insurance coverage.

For patients who've exhausted their benefits but need treatment, develop marketing campaigns around flexible payment solutions that bridge September through December. Create content about these payment options that positions your practice as understanding and accommodating while building long-term relationships.

Back-to-school marketing that converts

September offers unique opportunities to connect with parents who suddenly have dedicated hours available during school time. Launch targeted email campaigns and social media advertising focused on “Parent's Day Out” promotions for comprehensive consultations, treatment planning sessions or procedures that busy parents typically postpone. Create content that frames these appointments as an efficient use of newly available time rather than scheduling burdens.

Develop video content featuring parents talking about finally having time for their own care, and post behind-the-scenes content showing your team preparing for the “back-to-school rush.” Practices can also create targeted Facebook and Instagram ads reaching parents of existing patients for their own consultations or treatments while children are settled into school routines.

Execute themed marketing campaigns that align naturally with September activities:

- Teacher appreciation social media campaigns with special pricing, partnering with local schools for cross-promotion.
- Fall sports prep content marketing targeting student athletes requiring mouthguards, pre-sport physicals or orthodontic assessments.
- School pictures email campaigns and social media ads featuring quick aesthetic treatments before picture day, complete with countdown timers creating urgency.

The priority list: A better approach to last-minute scheduling

Traditional cancellation lists can make patients feel like backup options. A priority list approach transforms these interactions into positive experiences. This list includes patients scheduled farther out who would benefit from earlier appointments. When openings occur, these calls become opportunities to provide exceptional service.

Train your team to present these calls as exclusive opportunities: “Mrs. Jones, you won’t believe your luck! I was able to move some things around and can accommodate all three of your children tomorrow at 9 a.m. I thought of you first when this opening became available.” This approach makes patients feel valued rather than like they’re solving your scheduling problem.

Begin confirming appointments two to three days in advance rather than 24 hours prior. This extended timeline gives patients the flexibility to reschedule while providing maximum time to fill any gaps. Each confirmation should include appointment time, provider name, specific treatment planned and estimated duration—details that emphasize value and reduce no-shows.



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Social media posts can fill sudden openings: “Unexpected availability today at 2 p.m.—perfect timing to repair that chipped tooth before Homecoming photos!” These posts create urgency while positioning same-day availability as fortunate timing.

Every patient interaction presents opportunities for expanded care. Emergency visits can become comprehensive evaluations. Limited consultations can develop into full treatment-planning sessions. Use any scheduling downtime to contact patients from broken appointment lists—these reactivation efforts often generate immediate scheduling opportunities.

Create urgency and win back lost patients

September is the perfect time for proactive patient outreach campaigns. Pick up the phone and have genuine conversations with your patients. For general practices, look ahead in your schedule to identify retirees who have the flexibility and aren’t bound by insurance restrictions—call them personally to ask if they’d like to see their favorite hygienist earlier than scheduled. Personally follow up on consultations that haven’t converted to treatment, acknowledging that summer chaos may have delayed their decision-making.

These personal phone calls work because they acknowledge that summer travels and schedule disruptions often interrupt regular care routines. Train your team to use welcoming messaging that emphasizes the importance of consistent care without guilt-based language. Position the call as if you’re thinking of them and want to help, not as them being overdue.

Develop referral marketing campaigns specifically for September, using social media contests and email campaigns encouraging existing patients to recommend friends and family. Create shareable social media graphics and referral cards that offer mutual benefits for both referring patients and new referrals. Track referral sources to identify your most effective patient advocates and reward them accordingly.

The bottom line

Sucktember isn’t inevitable. While your competitors brace for the slowdown, you can implement these strategies to transform September from your most dreaded month into a competitive advantage. The practices that thrive during tough periods are the ones that refuse to accept limitations and create their own momentum instead.

Start implementing these strategies now, and watch September become the month that sets you apart from everyone still accepting Sucktember as an unchangeable reality. **DT**



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