

Safeguarding Your Sleep Lab in a Downturn

The current economic downturn is affecting all industries and sleep medicine is no exception. Along with increased layoffs and companies struggling to survive, employee medical benefits will be cut back, forcing many individuals with sleep disorders to go untested and untreated.

While the U.S. economy continues to falter and its stock market remains highly unstable, sleep laboratories and clinics will likely manifest adverse side-effects of their own. While long-term planning is nearly impossible in such turbulent times, those sleep labs that can boldly commit to savvy business decisions might just be the ones who ride the downturn out unscathed.

Smart businesses know that there are always opportunities for growth, even during tough economic times. There are various ways to make your sleep lab more competitive and efficient while keeping costs under control. Strategies such as straight cost cutting, modifications to internal operations and the reorganization of staff schedules will be essential to survival. Let's take a closer look at some of those possibilities.

Retaining, Cutting and Freezing Staff

As the economy declines, our view of the aging workforce might have to change. Long-term retention of experienced employees is more critical than ever. Holding onto the right staff to maintain the smooth running of your sleep facility could be a decisive factor in assuring your sleep laboratory's success and survival. Unexpected departures could cause productivity levels to drop or quality in patient care to deteriorate.

At the same time, an excessive number of employees in any business can be crippling, not only because of the wages involved, but their benefits, pensions and unforeseen expenses as well. Nobody likes putting people out of work—however—an over-staffed facility will negatively affect the company's bottom line. It's therefore critical to reevaluate each position and verify that it is in fact necessary for the overall good of the organization.

In some cases, it may be possible to consolidate certain jobs. This can eliminate extra employees and keep current ones well occupied. Still, make sure to cut only the jobs that are truly unnecessary so as to ensure that patient care is never sacrificed. The cutting of too many or the wrong jobs is likely to create problems instead of solving them.

Finding qualified staff has always been a challenge for hospitals and sleep laboratories. During these difficult times it actually makes more sense to spend recruitment dollars and human resource efforts on other cost cutting initiatives such as sleep record outsourcing or temporary staff.

New Strategies for Sleep Scoring Services

Cost reduction is the primary force driving healthcare reform. To survive and thrive, sleep laboratories must adapt by implementing new business strategies.

More frequently, sleep laboratories are joining forces with scoring services to increase efficiency and improve their quality of patient care. There has been an upsurge in outsourcing during the ongoing economic slump because it can often save companies significant dollars, reduce fixed payments and yield greater operational flexibility.

Saving money has always been one of the chief motivators for turning to outsourcing. Until recently though, it has usually fallen behind other strategic considerations, such as focusing on core competencies or freeing internal staff to take part in different initiatives. But now, in a new economic reality, a lot of companies are turning to outsourcing in order to help curtail and control their operating costs.

As budgets tighten across the sleep industry, outsourcing will become the single most important business practice to embrace for anyone seeking to reduce expenses, overhead and excessive employee benefits. For example, a scoring service allows one to pay only for those studies that need scoring. During months of low volume in patient demand, an outsourced service could prove invaluable since it can be contracted on an ad hoc basis.

Within the business of sleep medicine, analyzing patient studies is definitely the most time consuming and intensive activity. Finding registered and qualified sleep techs can be difficult. Hence, employing a reputable and industry recognized scoring service is an excellent way to gain access to experts. Now's the time to seek out a well-established sleep scoring service that hires only RPSGTs.

Keep Marketing

As mentioned, we are experiencing an unfamiliar marketplace. Faced with uncertainty, it might be tempting to slash marketing budgets. But while it may seem like a logical first measure, it's one that will most certainly hinder future prospects.

Traditionally, advertising is one of the first services to get hit by an impending downturn. Many companies feel that this is an easy expense to trim down on when money is tight. Quite to the contrary though, if rivals decide to pull back on marketing expenses, astute sleep labs could seize a golden opportunity to gain market share. Indeed, this is an ideal time to work harder on promoting one's image, thereby compensating for any decrease in a potential client base.

What might be advisable in terms of reassessing marketing strategies is a reanalysis of messaging. Consider the relevance of your current positioning in a market that is perhaps unrecognizable compared to that of one year ago. Ask yourself whether aspects of your business can be pitched in a new way to appeal to a suddenly cautious audience.

Do not forget that physician referrals are indispensable. Highlighting unique features of your business can make you stand out from your competitors. Inform potential customers that all of your studies are manually scored solely by registered technologists. Hold open houses, information sessions, anything

to cement your value added features to clients and stakeholders. When others are cutting back on advertising, you may stand to increase your market share by being proactive about it.

There really might be no better time to take advantage of your niche within the industry than during the present economic downslide. Since most organizations will act hastily to jettison marketing, they'll also unwittingly foster perfect conditions for others to drill their message home and obtain valuable referrals.

Cutting Costs

This is a good time to review your business expense policies. Reassess and update your business' insurance coverage while you are at it. Also spend time sifting through comparison websites and evaluating multiple vendors before buying anything new—from PCs to desktop software there's money to be saved. Shop around for services such as linen providers and miscellaneous utilities. Remember, every dollar counts.

In periods of recession, it's more important than ever for businesses to exercise tighter control over expenditures. Seemingly minute cost cutting strategies—like buying in bulk—will help maximize every dollar spent. Put a moratorium on the purchase of all but the most essential supplies.

Conserving energy saves both money and resources. Make sure that employees turn off lights, computers and air conditioners whenever they leave the office. Even small changes like switching to energy-efficient light bulbs are advisable. Print on both sides of the paper for internal documents. In short, do whatever it takes to make your operations lean. Small expenditures add up—make sure they do so in your favour.

Bottom Line

A challenging economic environment forces unpleasant choices on everyone. Consider all your options carefully before making any big decisions. The most important objective should be the survival of your sleep laboratory until the fiscal storm subsides. Adopting new business practices and smart techniques to save money will ensure that your sleep laboratory remains both profitable and efficient.

Since healthcare in the United States is often slow to embrace progressive management concepts, sleep laboratory cost-restructuring has rarely occurred until now. For years, sleep labs were thought of as a very lucrative commercial venture and many entrepreneurs rushed to open or expand their own facilities. However, throughout this unpredictable period it has become imperative to instruct both laboratory managers and staff on how to recognize needless waste and inefficient workflow—as well as opportunities that may improve the overall quality of services being offered.

Many hospital sleep labs are being asked to cut costs within their current operations. In today's global market it's more important than ever to find methods that improve the bottom line while still maintaining the highest possible standards.

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Looking at Bringing on a Sleep Scoring Service?

5 Questions You Need to Ask Potential Vendors

Sleep scoring services are becoming commonplace in sleep laboratories across the country as a way to cut costs. Sleep laboratories are turning to outside help to assist with their increased backlogs, employee shortages, expansion and operational cutbacks. The five key questions below will help you narrow down your search for what could be your next best business decision.

Do You Have Registered Polysomnography Technologists and Do they Perform Manual Scoring?

For top-quality sleep scoring services, look for a company that hires only registered polysomnography technologists (RPS-GT). Ask for the BRPT certification credentials for every technologist scoring on your account. Verify that the company is not using unregistered techs for any part of the process when it comes to scoring your sleep studies. For the best accuracy, insist on sleep studies that have been scored manually by a registered technologist—scoring conducted via software is not nearly as accurate.

Do You Have a Quality Assurance Department?

The scoring company should have a designated Quality Assurance department so as to safeguard quality control and address concerns. In turn, that department should have an internal quality program that routinely reviews all scoring technologists. Quality processes normally include internal reviews along with inter-rater reliability and audit reviews. Any reputable company will also have a policy for re-scoring studies if they guarantee the quality of their results.

Do You Have Liability as well as Errors & Omissions Insurance?

The sleep-scoring company should carry the same level of insurance that your sleep laboratory does. This must include general liability and errors and omissions insurance. Ask to examine their certificate of insurance before moving forward and sending studies.

Can You Explain your Management Structure?

The company should have an experienced management team and assigned service representatives to manage your account and answer any and all questions. Be sure that the person scoring your studies is not the same person who manages your account.

Do You Provide Customer References?

Look for long-term references from well-established sleep facilities. A scoring company that is working with hospital-based

sleep facilities will likely have had to go through a stringent quality assessment. Request to speak with the medical director to discuss the quality and consistency of the scoring. If a scoring service is offering “rock bottom” pricing chances are it is too good to be true – remember aligning yourself with the wrong scoring service could prove to be drastic to your business and reputation. Ensure that your sleep studies are not being shipped overseas to be scored by unregistered technologists and that the company you choose is considered highly regarded within the sleep medicine industry.

Applying due diligence when selecting a scoring service will secure your success. Aligning your business with a company that is recognized within the industry and places quality as its number one priority will allow your sleep laboratory to prosper even during phases of economic instability.

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