

Getting Back to (the new) Normal

By Rich Heiland

When Cleinman Performance Network facilitator and communications director Judith Lee and I wrote a white paper on how to deal with threats to your business (*When Disaster Strikes*) – from ill health, death, floods, fires, tornadoes and hurricanes – we were able to give pretty specific advice on what our members should or should not do if any of those things befell them.

What we did not foresee was what is now our daily reality – a pandemic sweeping the world, shutting down most levels of business and social life with varying impacts state by state, city by city.

When I was asked to share my thoughts on how to recover from the COVID-19 crisis, I admit I was stumped. How do you do that? If you lose your building to a fire, when it's rebuilt, you open it and go on life. It's not that simple, of course, but compared with what we face today it seems like it.

So, here are some thoughts, but with a very, very important caveat: Your situation most likely will vary widely from a doctor one state over, or even one town or county over. You will need to go through the reopening of your practice in sync with whatever directives and conditions are in place where you live and work.

Just as the response to containing, and hopefully at some point controlling, the virus is a patchwork quilt across the nation, so will be the reopening of our personal and professional lives.

What does “reopening” mean?

If you stop what you are doing right now and Google various combinations of “COVID,” “Virus,” “business” and “reopening” you won't find much. As I write this in early April all the effort, all the energy is going to containment, not reopening.

But, just as you have been coming to the Cleinman Performance Partners website to get our best information on what you should be doing during this crisis, you should be starting to focus on what you do when you can reopen.

And, maybe “reopen” is not an entirely accurate word. Will you find the same world you left behind? Will you be doing business the same way? Will you have controls on you from government you did not have before? Will you have access to all the goods and services you need to serve patients?

With that in mind, let's look at some things we can be thinking about now...

How will we open?

You will not go to sleep one night in a virus world and wake up in a virus-free world. There will be transitions.

- What do I need to be following in terms of my state and local government so that I know when and how I can reopen? Bottom line is that you do not want to run afoul of any local definitions of who can open and when, and other restrictions that might be on your business as we re-enter into some sort of “open for business” life.
- If I reopen and do not do the volume I need, how is my business interruption insurance impacted? I hope by now you have heeded advice elsewhere on the CPP site and met with your insurance agents, accountants and lawyers.
- What will “reopening” look like inside my practice?
 - Keep in mind that even as people want to get back to normal, there will be lingering fears about going out, about getting close to people? In fact, it’s likely this virus never will go away 100 percent (it could rebound) so how do you practice responsibly?
 - Consider opening up your schedule. Do not attempt to book as you did before the shutdown, even if patients are coming back. Put some air into your schedule so that distance can be maintained between patients in the waiting room and other parts of the practice.
 - Do have hand sanitizer located throughout the practice and consider wearing masks as a message to patients that you are being careful and respecting them.
 - Sanitize all equipment AFTER the patient is in the room so they can see you doing it.
- Do you have a marketing plan for reopening?
What do you want to tell your patients, and how do you want to tell them? How do you manage their fears?
A sound marketing plan should include:
 - The message you want to send about your reopening, any special conditions, restrictions that might exist.
 - Where do you market? Personal emails; social media; in the local newspaper, particularly if you have a well-read weekly community paper or small daily; radio; cable TV.
 - What graphics, productions qualities do you need to send and upbeat, professional and caring message?
 - When do you start external marketing and what are you doing now to keep in touch with patients? Are you sending them emails with eye care tips, general health advice?
- What about supply chains? Every business that supplies you is facing its own problems. Will work forces come back quickly enough to resupply you? Be in touch with your suppliers starting now. You will need to be able to give patients accurate information on when eyewear can be delivered through labs, contacts, any other goods and services you pass on to patients.

- What about vision plans? One of your concerns as you open back up will be cash flow. Will vision plans be ready to begin reimbursements from Day One of your reopening or will they be behind because of their own workforce drawdowns? Do you consider cash discounts for patients who will pay at time of service for, let's say, the first 60 days you are open?
- Will delivery systems – FedEx, UPS, USPS – be swamped as everyone tries to get into the supply chains are once? Much of this will be out of your control, but the expectations you give patients on goods and services will be under your control.
- Can I negotiate grace periods on payments to suppliers to help with my cash flow? Realize they will have their own cash flow and operational issues, but even if you could go to 60 days same as cash it could help you devote cash flow directly to staff and patient care. If that is possible, you need to be doing it now, not when you are on top of reopening. Never hurts to ask....
- What do I do about staff? Do I run limited hours to deal with fewer patients and keep costs down? What if I bring back staff, then have to cut their hours back? How might that impact their unemployment. Get answers to those kinds of questions now!
- Brainstorm with other docs – use Cleinman tools – as you consider all your options. Use the phone, ZOOM and other technologies to stay in touch with peers.

When it comes to recovery from this pandemic there will be no “one size fits all” kind of advice. We can share some general thoughts but you need to be prepared for the reality that your situation may be totally different than the next state or town over.

And, as always, Team Cleinman is here for you.

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