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The Thirteen Keys to Your Dream Practice

Fact: Every chiropractor worth their salt wants a busy, thriving practice. We feel our best when we're helping lots of people, having tons of fun, and making a good living.

Fact: The stakes are high. Failures are common, and practices that are new and small are most vulnerable. All the time and money you put into your education, plus your practice start-up costs and your future, are riding on how well you quickly build a strong, successful practice.

Fact: Most doctors will never realize the dreams that attracted them to chiropractic because they never got the training or mentoring they needed to break out of mediocrity and into success.

This book changes that.

While everything in this book is written to help you, this first chapter could be the most important guidance you've ever read. It contains the thirteen keys to your dream practice—selected success concepts, ideas, strategies, and tips for building a great practice in

less time than you ever thought possible. I'll unpack these ideas in subsequent chapters, as well as offer additional tips and advice learned through experience. But this chapter outlines the bottom line, and I'm giving it to you right up front.

Key #1: The Big Decision

This is a big one, so please read it carefully. I'm asking you to make the most important decision you can make to build your dream practice. In fact, very few doctors ever get there without making this decision.

I'm asking you to decide to love the process. Whatever it takes to build your dream practice, decide to love it.

I'm asking you to love it all: the struggles, the journeys, the work, the battles, the growth, the character building, the skill acquisition, and the endurance—as well as the wins, the accomplishments, and the people you will help along the way. Decide NOW that you'll love it.

This is what all successful people learn to do.

What you actually learn to love is the challenge of fighting and winning. And there's no way to win without this type of commitment.

The guy who was once overweight and now has six-pack abs didn't wake up one day to find a magically sleek midriff. He certainly didn't buy one of those crazy gimmick ab machines that promises to work if he does sit-ups for “ten minutes a day, three times a week.”

No, Mr. Abs decided he would do whatever it took, and he committed to (fell in love with) the process. In his case, that was probably a low-fat diet and a zillion ab crunches of every description, every day.

One committed weight lifter I know put it this way: “I now really love doing what I once really hated, and that's exercise.”

Every person who has built a dream practice in fewer than ninety days (or 180 days) worked like crazy, but they also never let it become drudgery, and it never felt like a job. A job is something you do for someone else's goals. Building your dream practice is something you do for your own goals.

When you fall in love with the process, it becomes your mission and your passion. You love what you're creating, because you made the decision to do whatever it took.

The decision comes first, so make that decision now. There is no real success without it.

Key #2: Lots and Lots of New Patients

If the first key (choosing to love the process) is the most important attitude, the second key is the most important action/skill set.

Learn how to produce new patients—lots and lots of new patients.

Every doctor who has a dream practice knows that getting new patients is key. No matter how well you set that atlas or adjust that lumbar, you have to know how to get new patients.

This is the truth: I've known great DCs who, sadly, now do other work because they couldn't market chiropractic, and I also know mediocre docs who have large practices because they have some natural marketing talent or learned some skills. You can't do anything about your gene pool, but 99 percent of you can acquire the skills needed to produce new patients... if you fall in love with the process.

Let me tell you just a few real-life stories about dream practice doctors. You'll get the idea.

I opened a clinic in a mall. We did spinal screenings that produced 161 new patients the first month. We hit 206 visits in our seventh week.

I showed a client how to do this same type of opening, and he set up a screening that got *more than 110 new patients the first month and 231 visits his fourth week*. All of this happened in a brand new practice.

Another client spent two days with me designing a marketing plan for the practice that he was opening in two months. After the opening, we spoke every week, and he reported on his marketing responsibilities: networking, screenings, business contacts, and professional contacts. This guy was so excited that every day he had a new story. He hit *more than 200 visits in less than 150 days*. He says that the whole process was fun, scary, and exciting, all at the same time.

Remember the part about learning to love the process?

Several new DC graduates have done apprenticeships with my clients using the Win-Win Associate Development systems, which I'll describe later in the book. They launched their own practices by starting business-to-business networking thirty days prior to opening. They followed that by offering screenings at festivals, block parties, community fairs, health fairs, and health clubs. Additionally, they met every dentist, general practitioner, attorney, and business owner in town. (If your clinic is still under construction, you have the time to do these things. If you're already in practice, you can set aside three to seven hours per week to be your own marketing director.)

Several clients managed to do well with newspaper advertising and literally produced so many new patients that they had people standing in a line across the back of the reception area filling out their paperwork. In one of my offices, we had twenty-two new patients in one day. It was hard work and a bit chaotic, of course, but very exciting! And think of all the people who heard the whole chiropractic story for the very first time at that standing-room-only New Patient Orientation class.

Maybe that doesn't sound ideal, but it's a better problem than wondering if your phone has been disconnected or someone has locked your front door.

If I get to choose my problems, give me that terrible "too many new patients" problem any day.

Every dream practice I've coached has a diversified marketing strategy where the doctor works at least three external marketing programs and three internal marketing programs simultaneously. One or two of those programs inevitably takes off like a rocket, a couple are steady and worth the effort, and some just don't fly and need to be swapped out.

Get too many new patients, and all your "problems" will be fun and exciting. Get too few new patients, and nothing is fun or exciting.

Key #3: A Strong Day One

How many times have you heard "You never get a second chance at a first impression?" Right or wrong, a patient's first impression of you is what they'll use to judge you. Why not make it a great one?

What impresses a new patient? What do they want from a new doctor? More than fancy surroundings, every patient wants to be cared for and led.

"If you don't care about me (put my interest above your own) I won't trust you. If you can't lead me, you're irrelevant."

Another axiom that applies here is that "people believe the message only after they believe the messenger." With this in mind, you need to have a strong (impressive) first day for new patients.

Here are some key points for Day One:

Polish up your office. Make sure it's clean, vacuumed, and dusted and has a nice fragrance. Have upbeat music playing. Get

rid of the dead plant and the clutter. Display chiropractic educational material on plasma screens and in testimony books. Paint one wall in the reception area a fresh new accent color. Then ask an honest friend to evaluate the office. Make more changes if needed.

Polish up your CA. Role-play with your CA to lock in a cheerful greeting for new patients when they enter your office. There's nothing more impressive than a friendly and enthusiastic CA who stands, smiles, and says, "You must be Mrs. Carlson. My name is Mandy. Welcome to our office."

Keep the initial paperwork to a minimum. People want to see the doctor ASAP. Trim their paperwork time to no more than ten minutes.

Practice your own clinical skills. Saying the right thing at the right time is important. Role-play and practice the best ways to take a history. Your exam process will vary according to philosophy and technique, but make sure you can do yours with skill and confidence.

When appropriate, insist on X-rays or other scans.

Give each new patient a home care sheet. This will launch your new patient's care and help them feel better.

Schedule a report of findings (ROF) for the next day. Take the time to analyze your patient's history, exam, and X-rays (when indicated) before you outline a care plan and start adjusting. The best clinical approach educates your patient on chiropractic, their specific problem, and your solution.

Key #4: A Strong Day Two

Good patient relationships are crafted or crushed in the first two days.

A strong Day One gives you the clinical information you need and the patient the confidence that they're in the right hands. A

strong Day Two can establish a doctor-patient relationship that lasts for a lifetime.

The following are important points to remember for a strong Day Two:

Tell all staff members to learn each new patient's name on Day One and be able to greet the patient by name on Day Two. This may seem trivial, but I assure you, it isn't. I have done more than a dozen patient focus groups, and this is the only thing common to all the groups: *Everyone liked being remembered by name.*

Don't make your patients wait. It may sound too simple, but patients shouldn't wait for more than five minutes.

Learn how to give a good report of findings. There are so few home runs in practice, but the ROF, when done well, definitely qualifies.

Your report of findings explains:

- How chiropractic works
- The seriousness of the patient's subluxation
- Your best care recommendations for their case

When making care recommendations, outline the care you truly think the patient needs. Don't under-recommend care.

You're now ready to start your patient's care. A good Day Two also teaches each patient how to be a successful patient in your office. I call this our office orientation.

By the end of Day Two, your new patient should know what to expect from their chiropractic care over the next few days, have their appointments scheduled in advance, and have had a financial consultation that puts their mind at rest regarding paying for their care.

They should feel comfortable with the process even if they are still in pain.

At the end of clinic hours, call all of your Day Two or first adjustments to make sure they are doing well. Your patients will appreciate the care and attention to detail.

Key # 5: Visit a Dream Practice Model

A picture is worth a thousand words. Never is that more true than the picture of the practice you would like to have. Make it a goal to find and visit the type of practice you want to grow: a place where they help a lot of people, have a lot of fun, and are financially successful. Try to see, hear, smell, touch, and even taste it. This will sharpen your vision, goals, and affirmations for where you want to end up.

Years ago, before I was a consultant, I flew to the San Francisco Bay area and just dropped in on the three biggest chiropractic practices in the country. I wanted to watch those practices quietly, from the shadows. Surprisingly, what I got instead was the red carpet treatment. They each showed me everything in their practice. I experienced a huge increase that year in my own practice due to having a much clearer vision.

I learned that day that when it's working correctly, successful doctors love to show others what they've learned and how beautiful their practices are.

Find out who uses your chiropractic technique and sees the patient volume you want to see. I showed up unannounced, but today that's too risky and too brash. Instead, give the doctor a call, and ask if you can visit their practice to watch for a couple of their busy hours. Offer to take them out to lunch or dinner and pick their brain.

Even if it's a four-hour drive, or a long train ride, or a flight away, the experience will be worth it. Can you take a three-day road trip to see three or four practices? You'll never be the same. I promise.

Key #6: Don't Go It Alone!

I bet you watched at least some of the recent Olympic Games, where world records went tumbling and new records were set.

The experts will debate what makes an Olympic athlete unique, but I know at least one thing they have in common with each other that's different from most of us: they each have a coach. They also have training partners. Olympic-caliber athletes are typically the best in the world, but they also know the power of staying in relationship with those who can help get them to where they want to go.

Birds of a feather do flock together.

Key #7: A New Practice Is Like a New Baby

A well-established practice has a strength and momentum that a new practice doesn't have.

Building your dream practice is like caring for a new baby. A new practice needs constant care and attention. That's not unique to chiropractic practices—every new business needs that type of care. It's why new parents and new business owners have to put in all the overtime. You're always feeding, tending, and changing.

Good doctors building their dream practice will do whatever is necessary to make sure their baby thrives. Please don't confuse this with a job. Your kids may be work, but they aren't a job, and neither is your dream practice.

You would not take a vacation and leave the baby at home. A new practice can't take that much neglect either. If you've been working like crazy to get the practice going and build momentum, and you've finally added one hundred visits to your weekly volume, this is not the time to overindulge in time off and holidays. This is the time to come in early, stay late, and work through lunch when needed.

Your first real holiday may not come for over a year in a new practice, and when it does, it may be just four days long. And even then, it's smart to hire a babysitter (a locum). Take Thursday through Sunday off for yourself, but hire a relief doctor for Friday afternoon, and book every patient in the shortest amount of time possible when you return.

Key #8: Keep Up the Marketing

This happens almost every time: a DC thinks that when their initial marketing push to launch a new clinic or double an existing practice ends, that's the end of their marketing efforts. But that's just the wrong way to think about it.

Where did all of your new patients come from initially? Marketing, right? Exactly, and that's where they will come from for quite a while. If you quit marketing, then you stop doing what made you successful, and things will crash. This isn't rocket science, but it seems to elude quite a few docs. The temptation to quit marketing too soon is almost irresistible.

That doesn't mean you won't get referrals. You will. But here's what I tell my associates: we will be doing some type of external marketing every day, even if it's only an hour. We will do that for days, weeks, and months, until we're so busy we can't leave the patients in the clinic to go meet more. Then we'll train assistants to do our marketing.

Remember, not enough new patients is the number one problem in chiropractic practices today. Learning how to attract new patients is the most valuable practice-building skill you can develop. Once you start the marketing engine, keep it going. I can't tell you how many doctors have lamented cutting back, so keep up the marketing.

Key #9: Watch Your Time

This key requires a short setup, but it's worth it, so here goes: Your clinic is like a computer. The facilities and equipment are the hardware, and the systems you use to take care of patients constitute the operating system—like a computer uses Windows 7 or Mac OS X. Your clinic's operating system will make seeing a high patient volume either smooth and easy, or rough and clumsy.

Since they don't teach "clinic operating system" in school, you learn it on your own when you start practicing. But there's a problem—that's also the time when you aren't very busy, and consequently, you could also be a little lonely. During this time, efficiency has little value.

With those bad habits in place, a clinic ends up topping out at 100, 80, even as few as 60 visits a week. The doctors tell us that everything feels as if they are running through wet concrete, and they are exhausted at the end of the week.

On the other hand, a doctor who has a good clinic operating system can see many times that number of patients in a relaxed manner.

So how do you install a new and more efficient clinic operating system?

It starts with watching your time. How long does it take to adjust your spouse? Probably not long. Why should it take longer to adjust other patients? I suggest you ask your CA to time you—not so you try to break any speed records, but so you know how much time you take with new patients, regular adjustments, re-examinations, re-X-rays, re-evaluations and re-reports. You're going to be surprised. If you're like most doctors, your perception of time and the real time it takes will be very different.

One way to win back time is to *just focus on chiropractic when you're with your patients*. Patients want to hear about themselves,

their care, and chiropractic. I'll talk about chiropractic philosophy, technique, testimonies, great moments, and great patients. But if they try to drag me into a personal conversation, or talk about rugby or football, I resist the temptation. Patients are much happier with doctors who focus on chiropractic.

You're either training your patients to burn up a lot of your emotional energy, or you're training them to focus on what gives both of you energy: chiropractic.

Do what the real pros do consistently: practice your procedures (Day One and Two, etc.) away from the practice, for critique and time. Get together with your DC buddy from across town and take them through a Day One. See how long it takes, and ask for their critique. Next week, do Day Two.

Key #10: Checklists and Templates

In order to keep things running smoothly and keep things as simple as possible, doctors who have dream practices create checklists and templates for each procedure.

Regrettably, many doctors never do the same thing the same way twice. That creates stress, producing rethinking and second guessing. No one knows what's going on from visit to visit when the doctor makes it up as they go along. That's inefficient and exhausting.

The dream practice way is to use checklists and templates: Do each procedure the right way every time, write it down the way you want it done, and practice.

A routine visit using checklists and templates may look like the following:

- CA(s) and DC(s) cheerfully greet the patient by their first name when the patient enters the clinic.

- Patient signs in, makes a payment, confirms their next appointment, and is informed about an upcoming reexam, all by the front desk CA.
- Patient escorts themselves back to the adjustment room or hot seats.
- Patient marks a subjective code sheet showing how they are responding to care.
- Patient moves to the adjusting table, completes preadjustment exercises, and studies the patient education for that day.
- Doctor greets the prepared patient and does an expert pre-check, adjustment, postcheck, chiropractic education, and chart note, then releases the patient to their next step.
- Patient goes to therapy or rest (when indicated) or is released.
- Patient's super-low-stress checkout is reduced to a wave as they leave the clinic and a "Good-bye, Anita. See you Wednesday!"

This well-choreographed "dance" has several steps and needs a choreographer. Once you know what you want to see (what you want done) in your office, the next step is to make a checklist of each desired dance step and template those steps into a sequence.

You can create a checklist and template for every job description, every procedure, and every patient connection. Then, instead of accidental greatness, you have a chance at purposeful perfection.

When you use checklists and templates you're working with the same concepts as recipes and formulas. If you want a great cake, follow a great recipe.

Does this sound too mechanical for you? It's the opposite. Once you know the dance steps, you teach your partners (associates, CAs, and patients), and then you all forget the mechanics and are free to just focus on chiropractic, the patient, and the moment.

Net result: high-volume, low-stress, easy-to-use, day-to-day clinic procedures.

Key #11: Specialize in Excellent Customer Service

Think about the places where you “do business” again and again: the coffee shop, dry cleaner, restaurant, you name it. I’m betting you’re treated well, and there are few frustrations. That’s good customer service.

Combine that thought with the fact that 67 percent of the people who decide never to frequent a business again do so because of poor customer service, and you see the need to work on great customer service.

Here’s my short list of customer service points to consider:

- An office presentation that’s not fancy but is clean, cheerful, and upbeat. People relate to their environments with all five senses, so freshen the paint, vacuum, dust, wash the windows, clean the bathroom, empty the trash, use scented candles, play appropriate upbeat music, and keep the temperature just right.
- Staff presentation that begins with clean uniforms or appropriate clothing, as well as practiced, enthusiastic greetings, quickly remembering the patient’s name.
- Convenient office hours that serve the community and make it easy to get care and refer friends.
- Staff who are quick to listen to patient problems and to say, “That’s terrible! Let me get that fixed right away.” This is the opposite response of the “tough luck” shrug. Staff should always take the patient’s side in their problem and find a solution that puts us all on the same side. Do not make it “us against them.”
- A commitment to follow up and get back to patients with details and answers to their questions. This often is a billing

issue and can be handled with prompt phone calls or Post-it notes attached to their files.

- Care and respect for the patient's time. Don't make them wait if at all possible, but if it happens, apologize for the inconvenience.
- Making personal phone calls. If a patient is going through a "rough patch," a phone call from the doctor expressing your personal concern is the very picture of customer service.

I have learned plenty more tips, both big and small, that make a huge difference in how patients bond to their doctors, offices, and chiropractic in general. Becoming a student of customer service has helped me experience huge benefits.

Key #12: Mentor Your Associate

When you've gone through this process of building your own dream practice, you will have acquired extremely valuable skills and information. Plus, you will need help taking care of all these lovely patients. That's when you want to find an associate to train and mentor.

Even though one chiropractor can see hundreds of visits a week, when you build a dream practice, you can multiply your efforts even more by finding, hiring, and developing top-notch associates. There are hundreds of doctors who would like to be mentored in just this type of associateship.

Here's how I like to think about it:

My purpose as a chiropractor is to teach people about innate intelligence and the healing power that is within the body. I do that by finding people who need chiropractic care and introducing them to the beautiful science, art, and philosophy of chiropractic, packaged in a wonderful little practice/business that runs like a Swiss watch.

As an analogy, chiropractic is like fine wine. The practice or business is the carefully crafted stemware. Without the goblet, the wine is just a mess on the tablecloth. Similarly, without the carefully crafted business systems that market, process, care for, and collect from those patients, we're out of business.

A successful chiropractor seeks to pass the philosophical, clinical, and business concepts on to associates. I want to build in others a love for people, chiropractic, and a keen appreciation for a very specialized business that is a practice.

I've done this for dozens of associates, and ten times I've launched my associates into their own practices, giving them the chance to own and prosper in their own clinics. I've made good money in this process, but it hasn't been just about the money.

A huge part of the payoff is that I became a teacher, mentor, coach, player, conductor, and producer. I passed on the knowledge to someone else and helped their journey.

Key #13: Never Give Up

Sheer determination is worth more than everything else. I love the Sir Winston Churchill quote, "Never, never, never, never give up."

He nailed it down even tighter when he said, "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense."

I believe that chiropractic and your dream practice are large, wonderful, and worthwhile. They are neither small nor petty. They are worth all you can give them.