Here are eight actions you can take to enhance profitability, sustainability—even survivability—without sacrificing quality care or customer satisfaction.

Disclaimer: This is not a “Let’s make our administrator’s and manager’s and doctor’s lives easier” article (although I really prefer writing that kind of column). Nor is it a piece about how to rally staff morale, cheer up your vendors, or win an interior design award. This is a practical, back-to-basics piece for the interesting times we are in now and moving toward in the years ahead.

1. Save on housekeeping. If you have had to cut back on outside, after-hours services, ask staff to pitch in with continuous tidying efforts throughout the day (and make sure somebody is designated to patrol the office to ensure that the new habits stick). If you have to truly economize, spruce up the waiting/reception/dispensing area, letting the rest of the practice housekeeping slide a bit. Remove excess clutter, 20-year-old artificial plants, and other dust collectors.

2. Consider a “two for one.” Replace one overtaxed staff member who has full benefits and overtime with two part-time, job-sharing, low-
benefit staff members. You will reduce labor costs and gain more flexibility to handle your busy season and be able to trim hours during the slow months. You may also help reduce your vulnerability to the loss of one key staff member. This is especially useful if you have a smaller practice. Let’s say you have one billing clerk. Reducing this clerk’s hours to half-time, and adding a second half-time employee to cover the rest of billing, creates skills redundancy as well as cost-savings.

3. Extract more value from every staff member. Some bantering and socializing in the halls is laudable. It’s a sign that people like each other, and it takes the edge off for patients and staffers alike. But too much standing around (and every good supervisor has a feeling for where the line should be drawn) is a signal of waste and poor customer care.

If you have extra time but it’s too early to clock out because more patients are on the way, serve and socialize with patients instead of fellow staff members. Offer a magazine, a coffee refill, or help out of a chair. Escort patients, rather than pointing them down the hallway.

Conduct patient satisfaction phone surveys. This is a “two-fer”... you get information to help improve customer care, and the patients you reach will be impressed that you care enough to call.

Fan out into the community and perform screenings, give talks, drop off information and snacks to referral sources.

4. Extract more value from every provider. Call every post-op patient and every clinic patient who appears to be nervous, apprehensive, or skeptical about the care s/he received today.

Show up to clinic 10 minutes before your first appointment. Huddle with the staff and give them a few coaching points for the day (and listen to their advice to you).

Help the tech team work up the first bolus of patients. By doing all of this, you may find that you can see more patients with the same staffing levels. Remember that just three more patients a day brings about $100,000 to the bottom line per year. Or you may find that you can get by with one less staff member.

Use every spare minute in the office to do one of two things: either see patients or engage in promotional efforts to generate more patients (outreach, better/faster consult letters, screenings, lectures, etc.).

Pitch in and help the staff, even with the most mundane of chores. Not only will this lighten their load, but it will send a clear signal that you work hard and expect them to do the same. Create a culture that says, “We all work hard together until the job is done.”

5. Turn non-productive doctor offices into exam rooms. I have often been called into practices where the doctors were about to trade in what they felt to be just-adequate office space for an expensive new facility. All the while, each doctor had his own large office and private toilet. If you find yourself in the same situation, consider converting little-used private office space into productive exam rooms and putting all of the doctors into one oversized office with small individual cubicles. You’ll likely get a bonus in the form of more doctor-to-doctor interaction. Remember: Anything more than you need is wasted.

6. Do whatever it takes to trim costs, particularly if yours is an urban, general ophthalmology practice and you are spending more than 32% of cash flow on staffing costs (30% for suburban settings or 28% for rural practices). Your staffing cost levels are excessive, and the excessive costs are doing nothing to increase patient satisfaction and may be starving the practice of needed technology or facility upgrades. You have a few options, none of them very pleasant or easy if you have been lax in this area. You can cut hours, cut positions, or cut hourly pay. That’s it. If you are an administrator who has been on the job more than 10 years, it’s quite possible that all three of these are unaccustomed tactics. Welcome to your new world and responsibility.

7. Realize that we all work for love and money. If you can’t pay your staff any more—or worse, need to make across-the-board wage cuts as some of you have and more of you will—backfill their missing income with your attention, respect, training, involvement, strategic intimacy, and interest in their lives. When there is a lull in patients, make sure doctors give up one trip a day from the clinic floor to their private office, and drop in on the staff break room or the billing department or the front desk to say “Thanks.”

8. Do what financially thrifty restaurants do: Turn down the lights. This yields several benefits. You’ll use less electricity (and feel great about reducing your carbon footprint). Your dilated patients will be more comfortable. The tone of the office will be calmer and more serene. Waiting time will be more pleasant and somewhat camouflaged. And the carpet and furnishings that you should have replaced, repaired, or deep cleaned awhile back won’t look quite so shopworn. Far better you should turn the lights down a bit now than be forced one day to turn them off altogether.