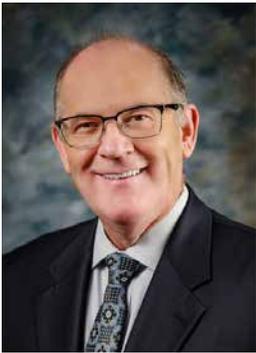


Making Invisalign treatment the leading modality reinvigorates small-town practice.

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Five years ago, Dr. Tom Hartsock was busy with a small-town, solo orthodontic practice. While he was beginning to look ahead to the next decade, when he hoped to sell his practice and retire, he also wanted more than business as usual. This desire, coupled with the need to create a transition plan for his business, drove a decision to reinvent both his career and his practice. How? By dramatically increasing Invisalign utilization and transforming his analog office into a sophisticated digital treatment center that could expand the demographic and geographical reach of his practice.

Dr. Hartsock discusses his professional journey and the decisions that have reinvigorated his career and his practice.

Q. While some orthodontists are content to coast into retirement, you chose a different path. Why did you decide to invest in Invisalign clear aligner training and change your treatment focus?

A. I've offered Invisalign treatment for a number of years, but for most of my time in practice, my primary focus was fixed appliances. I knew the day was coming when I would want to sell my practice to another doctor, but I didn't have enough patients in 2014 to expand beyond my solo practice. Because I'm not in a large community, I recognized that I would have to differentiate myself from competitors and geographically expand my patient base if I wanted to grow my practice to the point where I could bring in another orthodontist. I saw becoming an Invisalign practice as an opportunity to provide a

service that wasn't being offered. Even though I was at a later stage of my career, I was motivated to reinvent my practice and take it to the next level.

Q. How did the change come about?

A. In 2014, approximately 10 percent of my patients were in Invisalign treatment, but the potential to do more was significant. Because fewer appointments are needed for Invisalign treatment and emergency visits are infrequent, I believed that increasing Invisalign utilization would make it possible to significantly increase patient numbers without overtaxing my staff.

However, I needed to move beyond the limited, simple Class 1 cases I had been treating with Invisalign clear aligners if

I wanted to achieve these operational benefits. I needed to "go back to school." I reached out to a colleague of mine who was treating a larger percentage of his patients with Invisalign clear aligners. He allowed me to come to his practice in Michigan, where I spent several days observing him and gaining a better understanding of the changes I would need to make. I also invested in Align's continuing education courses and took advantage of the webinars and other resources available on the Align website.

Finally, on my colleague's advice, I invested in an iTero® digital scanner. That was truly a win-win decision. It transformed the patient experience in my office and it improved our diagnostic and treatment processes.

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Patient experience

Q. How has the evolution toward digital scanning and Invisalign treatment changed the kinds of patients you are seeing in your practice?

A. Through word of mouth and patient referrals, a wide range of people have heard they can come to our office to achieve beautiful smiles without braces. They recognize that we have a very modern digital practice and use the latest technology. As a result, we now have patients ranging in age from 8 to 80.

As we gained a reputation as the practice to go to for Invisalign treatment, we noticed that the patients who were walking in the door and asking for Invisalign were older than our traditional growing and teen patients. We saw busy young professionals who had seen Invisalign commercials on TV and become interested. We saw middle-aged and older adults who had always wanted straighter teeth but were unwilling to wear fixed appliances. We realized that there was an untapped market of consumers who hadn't had orthodontic treatment in the past but wanted to pursue it.

While teenagers had always been our practice's core patient base, I saw changes there too. Instead of asking for colors, more and more teens were asking for Invisalign treatment. Family members were saying, "I like this so much better than braces!" Kids

who had braces were telling their siblings they wished they could have had aligners. And young patients who had positive experiences with Invisalign treatment were telling their friends, "Hey, I had Invisalign treatment and it was great. You should try it." This feedback increased my confidence and excitement about moving forward.

Q. You practice in a relatively small town in a rural area. How have you continued to attract new patients?

A. Because appointments are scheduled 10 to 12 weeks apart with Invisalign treatment, patients living an hour or two away from our office found it easier to make orthodontic treatment work for them. The same was true for college students – we could see them when they were home for school breaks. I've even had patients move out of state and keep me as their orthodontist. Thanks to digital technology, I've been able to retain these cases instead of transferring them to another orthodontist.



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Hartsock Orthodontics:

Invisalign share of chair increases efficiency, patient conversion

As the percent of patients in Invisalign treatment has increased, so has employee efficiency and the rate of patient conversion.

Year	2014	2018 (projected)
Invisalign share of chair	10%	63%
Revenue/FTE	\$151,144	\$175,667
Conversion rate	68%	93%

Practice efficiency

Q. Even the most positive changes can still have challenges. What has been the most intimidating aspect of incorporating Invisalign treatment into your practice?

A. I think for many practitioners, the most significant fear factors are (1) Can I get the same finish and quality treatment with clear aligners that I can with fixed appliances? (2) How will I manage the cost components, especially the lab bill?

I addressed the clinical question by immersing myself in the Align world and getting all the clinical training I could. I didn't let the fact that I am in the later years of my career get in the way.

I handled the cost component by committing to making Invisalign treatment the primary course of treatment for almost all my cases. I also made the decision to adjust my fees so that I was offering Invisalign treatment and braces for the same cost. I knew that my volume goals – as well as my practice growth and profitability goals – would be realized over time. And as my Invisalign practice grew, I saw my lab bill decrease, thanks to volume discounts.

Q. How has the switch to being an Invisalign practice affected your day-to-day operations?

A. In spite of the fact that we have many more patients, we have a lot more flexibility in our schedules because patients have fewer, shorter appointments. Without all of the emergency appointments, we don't have the stress of people

calling in for last-minute appointments or of juggling the staff's workload to cover those appointments.

Meanwhile, thanks to digital scanning and Invisalign treatment, I have found that we are starting new patients much more quickly and more often. Our conversion rate has increased from 68 percent when we were primarily a braces practice to 93 percent today.

At the same time, our work environment has improved. I am able to spend more time with my family and away from the practice without having to worry about emergencies. I also have more time to speak to parents and build relationships with my patients.

Q. How do staff members feel about the decision to switch to Invisalign treatment as the primary modality?

A. Staff members need additional training to work in an Invisalign practice. If you have mature employees who are accustomed to working with fixed appliances, they need to believe in Invisalign treatment and adopt the right scripting so they can confidently answer patients' questions. It requires patience, because team members can get frustrated while they're learning new protocols. However, once they got past the learning curve, my staff members found the work environment to be more relaxed and less stressful. They also discovered that they suffered less physical strain when working with patients in Invisalign treatment. When working with patients in fixed appliances, they always had tired necks and shoulders.

I also highly recommend putting any staff member who needs orthodontic treatment into aligners. When our treatment coordinator was in Invisalign treatment, she became a great advocate for it. She could show patients what the aligners were like and talk about her experience.

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Financial growth

Q. Since Invisalign treatment became the primary modality at Hartsock Orthodontics, how has the decision affected the financial health of your practice?

A. Over time, as my Invisalign use increased, my total patient starts and conversion rates increased too. I experienced a 107 percent increase in patient starts and a 50 percent increase in new patient exams in just four years. Making the investment in becoming a digital practice differentiated us. Meanwhile, the boundaries of our practice area have expanded as we've moved beyond the immediate community and into more remote areas. We now have patients who live up to two hours away.

Q. Part of your goal in focusing on Invisalign treatment was to grow your practice and prepare it for an eventual transition. How is that plan working out?

A. I had a solo practice for many years. Since none of my four children wanted to become an orthodontist, I made a plan to bring in an associate doctor to whom I could eventually sell the practice. I identified a young man – actually, a former patient – who was interested in orthodontics as a career and I encouraged him to go to

dental school. In the meantime, I focused on growing my practice and attracting more patients through Invisalign utilization.

Today that transition plan has become a reality; my associate, Dr. Jacob Sword, joined the practice in 2018 and the practice continues to grow.

Q. What about treatment expenses – how has that been affected?

A. As we've increased Invisalign utilization, we're buying fewer supplies. And with no need for impressions, we've eliminated the need for PVS materials and the waste incurred with rejected impressions.

Q. How do you feel about the decision you made to focus your practice on Invisalign treatment? Has it helped you meet your financial and personal goals?

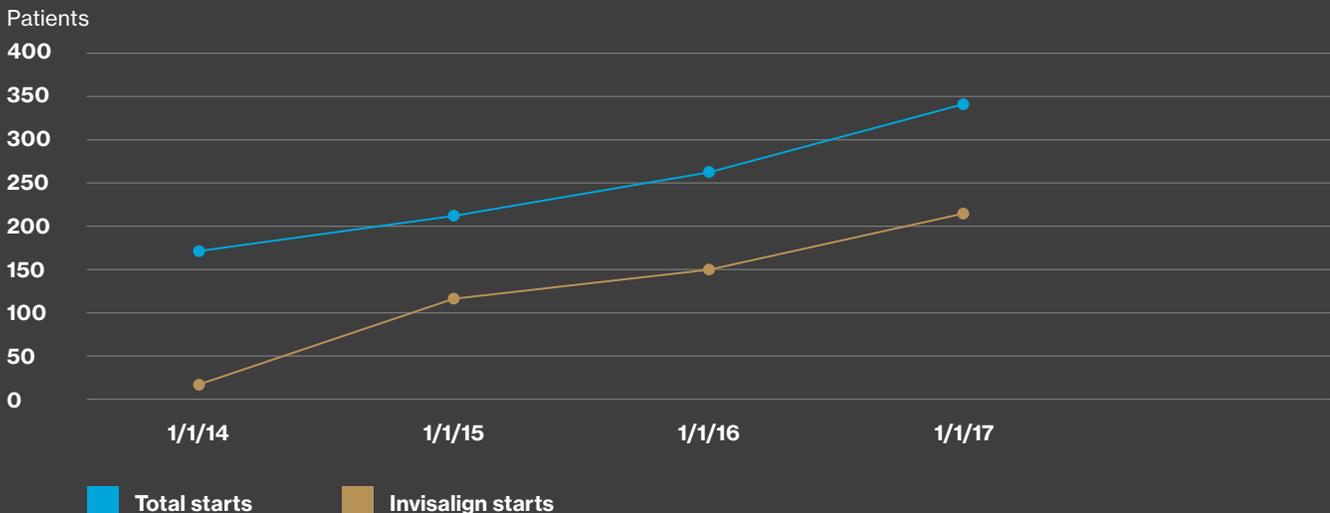
A. Where I used to offer Invisalign treatment, I now recommend it to a majority of my patients, and that change has reinvigorated my practice. I've been energized and excited by this change. I am not going to just fade into the sunset.



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Hartsock Orthodontics:
Invisalign focus fuels practice growth





Experiences, results and opinions in this article are those of the doctor in his orthodontic practice and not necessarily of Align Technology, Inc. The doctor was paid an honorarium by Align Technology, Inc. for his time to develop this article.

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