Look into the future
When you are having your dream surgery designed and built, Chris Davies says that seeing a visual draft of the finished article is crucial.

Many dentists are frustrated with the layout of their practices. With most UK practices housed in buildings originally designed for domestic purposes, it can prove difficult implementing the required infection-control protocols and adjusting to the new demands in the workplace. Spatial constraints can also prevent dentists from following their dreams and swooping on new opportunities. For example, if a competitor closes down, but the dentist does not have the room to increase the size of the reception area or set up an extra surgery, a chance to capitalise slips by. Such chances do not come along often.

Reasons to get involved
There are many reasons why a dentist might want to design his or her own practice. Experienced dentists will know what they need from their environment, and will have a good idea what sort of equipment they need, and how many patients they will expect in any given day. Having a bespoke practice that suits all of the individual dentist’s needs gives that dentist a tremendous edge. There is also the sense of pride and achievement a dentist feels when treating patients in their very own practice.

However, the construction of a tailor-made practice is an enormous job that requires real expertise and experience, and also an in-depth knowledge of the rules, regulations and assorted pressures at work on the modern dental industry. Fortunately there are companies that specialise in providing dentists with refurbishment, design and construction. When selecting one of these specialist companies, you need to bear certain things in mind.

Choose wisely
First of all, you need to make sure that the company you are engaging with will offer a comprehensive service that includes design, execution and completion. It is also crucial that the company has a track history of working to time and budget limits, and that the service is supported by testimonials from dentists. Make sure that the company is independent from any particular manufacturer, so that you are guaranteed to get the most suitable equipment and furniture to meet your vision, at the best cost and to the highest quality. The company should also assist with project management, to ensure that everything runs smoothly.

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THE P-WORD

Many crucial words in the business vocabulary start with ‘P’: product, price, profit, promotion, performance, process, planning and people. Here, Lina Craven looks at several important P-words regularly neglected by practices and how this impacts overall performance.

Performance management

When I work with practices, one of the most common inefficiencies I come across is the lack of joined-up thinking. What I mean by that is that the team is driven by specific tasks rather than a common purpose. Usually the fault stems from undefined organisational goals: the management team has not clearly defined its vision for the practice and supported the achievement of the vision with a specific plan of action. What results is a whole host of goals, objectives and activities that bear little resemblance to one another.

If the goals of the practice are not clearly defined, it is impossible to set meaningful objectives for members of the team. You will recognise if this scenario fits your practice by considering this illustration: if every member of the team achieves his/her annual objectives, will that guarantee that the goals of the business are being met? If not, why not? The answer is likely to be simply a lack of a robust business plan, which in effect clearly defines the focus of the business by breaking goals down into segments of the business, for example, what must be achieved in marketing, customer service and with team resources. Subsequently, these goals must become the focus of the team, requiring their personal objectives to be the subset of the business objectives. After all, if no one owns an objective, it’s not likely to be achieved.

Invariably following this method of running a business, we end up looking more closely at processes. Even if you have set processes up that work, as ultimately keep people on track, as ultimately keep working practice and they become more proactive in identifying areas of weaknesses and proposing solutions. In other words, they participate in the change process and take ownership of issues, which is a favour for managers.

So what constitutes a good process? Well in the main, it’s one that maintains a simple approach. Why do something in ten steps if the same outcome can be reached in five? One caveat, it must be legal and it must deliver superb customer satisfaction. In the main, customers are at the heart of what we do. Without them there is no business. That’s why so many of your processes must be customer driven; you should look at what you do and how you do it in terms of the customers’ experience. How does it feel to be a customer dealing with your processes? Are you easy to do business with? Other processes many of these P’s are interrelated. They are not discrete activities, they are all joined and the central joining point is people. No wonder the one time legendary CEO of Chrysler said, ‘There are many P’s in business but of them all people are the most important, because without them, you can’t do much about the rest.’

Process improvement

Setting objectives is one thing, but delivering them is another. We need a system that keeps people on track, as ultimately keeps people on track, as ultimately keeps things in the right way. It seems so simple, so why does it often seem so hard? When we get to the final chapter, we realise that likely to be achieved.

‘If no one owns an objective, it’s not likely to be achieved.’

‘The solution is to ensure that the goals of the business and the goals of the team achieve overall success’

‘Why do something in ten steps if the same outcome can be reached in five?’

‘The team is driven by specific tasks rather than a common purpose’

About the author

Lina Craven is the founder and director of Dynamic Perceptions. Over the past 25 years, she has assisted dental practices to realise their vision of success through the achievement of customer-driven culture that focuses on delivering an exceptional patient journey. Lina’s qualifications and experience as an orthodontic therapist, treatment co-ordinator and practice manager in the US have given her a unique insight into the day-to-day practical problems faced by dental practices. Visit www.orthodontic-management.com or call 01844 275527.
Long-established custom in commercial transactions has placed the onus on the buyer to ensure that the prospective purchase is what it appears to be and that the price is fair. But today’s sellers also need to be aware that the buyer may be a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

There is at present much activity in the dental practice transfer market, driven in part by the corporates’ determination to increase their market share, and many dentists are now encountering the professional negotiators employed by these corporate bodies. I was recently asked for an opinion, fortunately before the papers had been signed, on one such transaction.

A promising situation

At first glance, the figures seemed reasonable. The principal was keen to sell his mixed practice, operated by himself and three associates, which had a nominal turnover of £700,000. The initial offer of £420,000 was not overly generous in the current climate, but given the location of the practice and other limiting factors was at least worthy of consideration.

However, under the contract the initial price to be paid was only 80 per cent of the agreed total, for example, £336,000, with the remainder being paid in instalments over a three-year period subject to the practice achieving year-on-year growth of 11 per cent. Effectively, after three years of hard work by the principal, anticipated turnover would rise to £857,540, thus reducing the percentage paid for goodwill from 60 per cent of turnover to 45.8 per cent. Suddenly the deal is not looking quite so attractive.

Naturally the prospective purchaser promised high-powered management support and other assistance to develop the practice, but, as they say, ephemeral promises butter no parsnips. Even supposing the promises were kept, no one could guarantee the results.

Loss of earnings

Closer examination revealed that the principal’s personal earnings were a gross of £180,000 and the practice’s net profit was £140,000. At the end of the three years he would become an associate paid 45 per cent of his current earnings, or £81,000 before tax compared with the £145,000 current net profit within the business, representing a personal loss of earnings of £192,000. If the 11 per cent growth is not achieved, deducting £192,000 from £356,000 means that in effect the principal will receive only £144,000 for the goodwill.

A further issue emerged regarding the associates. If the deal was agreed the existing associates’ percentage of growth-related earnings would be reduced immediately the practice was sold. Our vendor and principal would have entered a commitment to achieve 11 per cent year on year growth in a practice where his trusted and experienced associates have arbitrarily suffered a pay cut, and will almost certainly leave. Although the purchaser would be responsible for finding replacements, in real terms the vendor could not possibly fulfil the earn-out provisions within the contract without continuous chair occupancy.

Appearances and first impressions can deceive. Whether buying or selling, study the small print, or risk getting caught in the strings that may be attached.

Ephemeral promises butter no parsnips

Your buyer may well be a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

‘Suddenly the deal is not looking quite so attractive’
When you pause to take stock of how technological innovations have benefited dentistry, it really is amazing. Dentists are able to make the most of their talents and offer a range of different treatments to meet the needs of their patient base. However, without effective communication, these needs may not be met. With many dentists investing in GDP-friendly invisible orthodontic solutions and services such as tooth whitening and veneers, communication is the key to selling these to patients. In short, if the patient is not aware that a treatment is available, the patient will not seek that treatment at your practice.

In an ideal world, dentists would be able to spend as long as necessary with each patient, talking them through the numerous treatment options and discussing their needs and concerns, before detailing every step of the procedures involved. In the busy modern practice, this is rarely possible.

Dreams a reality
New technological innovations have, in a sense, made this ideal scenario a reality. Systems are now available that integrate easily into waiting rooms, either as kiosks, wall-mounted or desktop units, and with touch-screen interaction these are easy to use for all patients. As an information resource, these systems are highly flexible, with regular nightly updates via broadband internet connection to keep the information current and to inform patients about new treatments as soon as they become available in the practice.

The main benefit of such a system is that it lets patients access information at their own pace while they wait to see the dentist. This means that when the patient sees the dentist, less time is required for explanation as the patient is already familiar with the basics of the procedures involved.

Easily integrated
When it comes to the latest technology, communication does not end there. These new systems are integrated easily into the practice’s broadband internet connection, enabling patients to request information by email so that they can go through it with friends and family in the comfort of their own home, and make informed decisions.

The dentist can also use the device to effectively market the entire treatment list, focusing on different treatments at different times—for instance, increasing the exposure of whitening treatments in the run up to Christmas.

About the author
Amy Rose
Amy has over six years experience in the dental profession, and currently heads up the design and marketing team at Dental Design Ltd. Visit www.touch-ed.co.uk to find out what the leading system offers, call 01202 677277 or email contact@touch-ed.co.uk.

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Independence day
In the first of a series of three articles, Simon Hocken of Breathe Business offers professional advice to dentists dreaming of future freedom.

Most dentists graduate with the intention of one day owning their own practice. Usually after a few years as a corporate employee or an associate gaining experience, the time seems right to make a move towards independence.

Clinical expertise, however, is no guarantee of business acumen or organisational skills. Having been there myself, and more recently offered advice to many others with similar ambitions, I’ve had ample opportunity to identify the pitfalls and devise methods to circumvent or overcome them.

After starting from scratch myself in 1989, I eventually sold my practices and in the last seven years as a business advisor, I have assisted a number of new principals establish their own practice, the creation of their own practice from scratch. For many associates, this represents the Holy Grail, to work in an environment they have designed and created themselves, pursuing the career path they always wanted. Let’s examine this option first.

Establishing your brand
Your own vision and determination are the key elements for successfully establishing a new business. You may have thought long and hard about where and how you want to work, but translating the mental image into reality demands total commitment as well as financial backing, and on of the first questions to consider is who to turn to for professional guidance. Although most banks consider dentists a relatively safe risk, you’ll still need a corporate employer or an associate gaining experience, the time seems right to make a move towards independence.

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Working in partnership
If the idea of new-build appeals, it’s worth remembering that a partnership solution may be possible; the continental pattern of clinicians joining forces with a specialist developer has now crossed the Channel, where the clinical partner(s) specifies the design of the facility and the developer builds and owns the finished premises, which are then leased to the clinicians. You, the dentist, have the advantages of security of tenure, and of working in a brand new practice you have designed and staffed from day one, or your investment will quickly cost more than it earns, which will not be resisted unless you really need the absolute, state of the art digital imaging system for the type of treatment you are offering.

Better to stick within budget and look for kit, which can be upgraded later if necessary, when a cashflow has been established and the costs can be offset against tax payments.

Don’t skimp on ‘front of house’ spending – reception and waiting spaces are not only the practice’s shop window, most patients will spend more time here than in the surgery and the more pleasant their experience the more likely they will be to return or tell their friends about you. With a little imagination the décor can reflect the practice’s brand image – use the same colours as those of your logo, for example. And remember, you’ll still need a buffer of working capital after you’ve opened for business.

Many of the details involved in setting up a new practice, such as choice of equipment supplier, laboratory, management software, even opening hours, will depend on individual preferences and circumstances, but there are still two more pieces of advice which are universally relevant; take some time to visit other practices and glean ideas from fellow professionals are usually delighted to show off how they work.

New practice kit
A new practice means new equipment, which today offers a bewildering choice and purchasing errors can be ruinously expensive for the unwary. The temptation to invest in the very best from the beginning should be resisted unless you really need the absolute, state of the art digital imaging system for the type of treatment you are offering. Better to stick within budget and look for kit, which can be upgraded later if necessary, when a cashflow has been established and the costs can be offset against tax payments.

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The Sceptic presents
The case for... and against Staff turnover

The case against
We all know how disruptive and expensive losing a member of staff can be. Patients feel more comfortable with someone they know and have come to trust; they often feel more aggrieved when a loved receptionist leaves than when a dentist does. From the employer’s perspective, think of the cost of advertising or employing the services of an agency. Think of the time spent conducting interviews. Consider the time spent on induction and training, and the slow-down in productivity while the new worker grows into the job. Work-flow gets disrupted; employer, employee and other employees get frustrated. Don’t forget the effect on other members of staff of acquiring a shadow and having to go through all the required routines yet again, procedures that can be extremely draining on team morale.

As a rule, established members of staff do not take kindly to a new kid on the block until that kid can prove its worth. Within the dental profession, it can take anything from two to four weeks for a new person, even one with experience, to become acquainted with practice policy and culture and the same time-span again to become efficient and effective. It has been estimated that almost 50 per cent of new employees leave their new job within the first month, the reasons ranging from poor selection to overstating the positive aspects of the job while underestimating the downsides.

The positive side
Yet there are positive aspects to staff turnover, providing the frequency is not excessive.

Job turnover tends to be self-selective, for example, it is usually the weaker individuals, the ones you are unhappy to lose, who leave. The stronger person stays in a job, the less they focus on being creative and flexible, preferring instead to do what they know well and what comes easiest to them; this is called taking the path of least resistance. What begins as an exciting job eventually ends up as just a job. Liberties begin to be taken, such as arriving a bit late or leaving early, or taking extended tea breaks or holding long phone conversations with non-patients. They have learned what they can get away with and will push this to the limit.

The longer a person stays in a job, the more annual leave they are entitled to; a new employee may be entitled to two or three weeks per annum, whereas a person who has been there for five years might feel entitled to five weeks. Wage increases are a similar issue: an employee would expect to have her salary increase annually at least in line with the rate of inflation, but without necessarily becoming more productive with the passage of time. It is not unusual for an employee with 10 or 15 years of experience to be earning 50 per cent to 100 per cent more than an individual with say two years of experience, yet not being anymore productive. Thus, staff turnover can be beneficial to a practice by keeping labour costs down or it can have the opposite effect, but as time goes by her canines shorten, and before you know it you are being savaged. The question is, how do you spot the rotten apple in the bunch?

Staff turnover, especially of more senior individuals, increases promotional opportunities for others lower in the ranks that say. For example, a nurse can become a receptionist, and a receptionist a practice manager.

In an ideal world, we would like to select successfully, train thoroughly and employ productive, efficient and effective workers who behave impeccably. But life is not like that; forest fires are necessary to clear away dead wood, and the best we can hope for is that new growth can take place quickly and with minimum cost to the forest.

Are you for or against the notion that staff turnover can be beneficial? Email jury@dentaltribune.co.uk and let us have your views.

Dogs can turn
An ancient intonation states ‘know thine enemy’. Problem is, they are not always easy to spot, and the worst are often the least expected. An example is a woman whom I know well has in recent years become a chronic claimant. In fact, she is addicted to claiming/suing since she found out that many individuals and groups would rather not charge or even give money back than deal with this beautiful but very vicious rotter. This is because when she first presents, she does so as a poodle. But astute goes by her canines, lengthens her curls straighten and shorten, and before you know it you are dealing with a dragon. The question is, how do you spot the rotter within the poodle?

Do all dogs turn?
One simple solution is to assume a priori that every poodle has the potential to turn. If you follow this philosophy, you must trust no one, get every patient to sign documentation or otherwise of work done in the past. Note give-away cues such as ‘very expensive’, ‘... didn’t listen to me’, ‘... got the colour wrong’, ‘... had a difficult receptionist’, ‘she hurt me, so I never went back’. Beware racial/religious/age prejudice towards others, because it will not be long before it is towards you.

Ten tips to achieve resolution without pain:
A sign of emotional maturity is the ability to create positive outcomes from negative situations by developing necessary and practical techniques. These will help you to anticipate problems and find the best solutions for challenging situations.

1. One must practice working from conflict and towards co-operation.
2. One must enlist one’s patients rather than enrage them.
3. One must learn to cope when conflict arises, and especially learn not to take every complaint personally, even if it appears personal.
4. Remember at all times that the problem may lie more with what’s going on in your patient’s head than in your hands.
5. Gather as much information as possible to try to analyse the conflict situation.
6. You may improve your results by modifying your own behaviour and attitudes rather than trying to change those of your patients.
7. Respect the rights of others and be prepared to compromise when appropriate.
8. Plan your approach, and use positive communication skills to negotiate the best outcome for all parties.
9. Try initially for co-operation rather than conflict by aiming at a solution that benefits you both equally.
10. But if this doesn’t appear to be working, bale out sooner rather than later and leave it to the professionals to resolve.