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 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 assured 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 working 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.

It is vital that the company you select is able to present images, based on your discussions and the preliminary designs, of what the practice will look like when finished. That way, you can make changes during the early phases, rather than reach the conclusion of the project and get a nasty shock when the outcome is radically different to the way you originally envisaged.

The end result

The company should show you examples of what the completed project will look like, and also present you with samples of material and textures so you can get an accurate idea of where you are heading.

These examples let you look into the future, identifying issues that might arise. By being able to visualise the finished practice before the project is complete, you can make sure that the project is steered towards your unique vision, providing you with your dream practice.

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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.

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

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 practice achieves its annual goals and move it significantly towards the achievement of its vision? If you can answer with a resounding “yes” then you are on the right track but if you have doubts, you need to review how individual objectives are set. The solution is to ensure that the goals of the business and the goals of the team achieve overall success.

This is known as goal congruence, in layman’s terms, every one rowing in the same direction.

Working towards a common purpose

Often what I discover is that this fragmented way of managing is the result of 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.

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

Setting objectives is one thing, but delivering them is another. We need a system that keeps people on track, as ultimately keeping people on track means, if our planning is correct, that the business will be on track. Agree the objective, measure the performance, review the performance and take corrective action. It doesn’t take long, it sets clear boundaries, it gives team members focus and it is a highly motivational way of managing people.

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Caveat venditor!

From buyer beware to seller beware – a sign of the times?

A cautionary tale by Mike Hughes of the ASPD

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 £897,741, 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 pre-tax 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 £336,000 means that in effect the principal will receive only £144,000 for the goodwill.

‘Suddenly the deal is not looking quite so attractive’

A further issue emerged regarding the associates. If the deal was agreed the existing associate’s 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 fulfill 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.

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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.

Information while-you-wait

Touch-screen interaction systems can help cut the amount of time spent explaining to patients the treatments you offer, says Amy Rose.

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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
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 becoming a principal and 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 achieve their ideal scenario, 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. Imagine 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 one of the first questions to consider is who to turn to for professional guidance. Although most banks consider dentists a relatively safe risk, you will still need a business plan, and details of location, fitting out and equipment costs, profit projection and any other information the bank may require all at your fingertips to make a move to independence.

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.

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 will 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 – fellow professionals are usually delighted to show off how they work.

About the author
Simon Hocken BDS has owned two private practices and is an accredited coach. He recently joined forces with Chris Barrow to form a new business training and coaching company called Breathe Business. Simon can be contacted at The Breathe Business Group by emailing bonnie@nowbreathe.co.uk, calling 01326 377078, or visiting www.nowbreathe.co.uk.
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 eff ect 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 world, 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 eff ective. 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 understating 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 usu- ally the weaker individuals, the ones you are not 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 tak- ing 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 say 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 neces- sarily 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 any more productive. Thus, staff turnover can be beneficial to a practice by keeping labour costs down or it can harm them from rising, and indeed many business companies, including General Electric and Microsoft pursue an active ‘functional turnover strat- egy’ when they perceive established members of staff becom- ing too established.

Staff turnover, especially of more senior individuals, in- creases promotional opportuni- ties for others lower in the ranks that stay. 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 produc- tive, eff ective and eff ortless work- ers 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 no- tion that staff turnover can be benefi cial? Email jury@dentalt- rumbull.com and let us have your views.

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Are you for or against the notion that staff turnover can be beneficial? Email jury@dentalt-rumbull.com and let us have your views.

The 10th dimension... the power of 10

Dealing with difficult patients

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 claim- ing/ 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 rot- tiewller. This is because when she first presents, she doe s so as a pos- sible, but as time goes by her canines lengthen, her curls straighten and shorten, and before you know it you are being savaged. The ques- tion is, how do you spot the rot- tiewller within the poodle?

Do all dogs turn?

One simple solution is to as- sume a priori that every poodle has the potential to turn. If you fol- low this philosophy, you must trust no one, get every patient to sign a disclaimer and indemnity document possible, and contact your indemnity insurers at the first sniff or nasty bark. You must col- lect your fees in advance, because you will not be able to claim in ar- rears once the foam is on the mouth. Such a mentality will sub- stantially diminish your ‘at risk’ profile, but unfortunately also proves unpalatable to the poodles that are real poodles. So, rather than preparing for confrontation, work to create co-operation.

How can you pre-empt turning?

Sometimes people are diffi- cult when a situation is stressful for them, and it doesn’t get much more stressful than at the dentist. Rather than enhancing the fear factor, offer encouragement and reassurance to prevent a difficult person becoming more difficult.

One way is to spend time talk- ing to and observing the doggies before you get into any serious treatment. Sooner or later, they will give clues about who they re- ally are. Ask why they left their last dentist. Inquire about their appre- ciation 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 recep- tionist’, ‘she hurt me, so I never went back’, and the most obvious of all, ‘he was a butcher’. Beware racial/religious/age prejudice to- wards others, because it will not be long before it is towards you.

The 10 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 to- wards 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 ap- pears personal.
4. Remember at all times that the problem may lie more with what’s going on in your pa- tient’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 behav- iour and attitudes rather than trying to change those of your patients.
7. Respect the rights of others and be prepared to compro- mise 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.

Do you know how to deal with difficult people?

The Sceptic presents

The case for... and against Staff turnover