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 working 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 materials 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.
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.

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

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

Process improvement

Invariably following this method of running a business, we end up looking more closely at processes. Even if you have set processes up in the past, what usually happens is that people eventually deviate from the set path and find “better” ways of doing the task. I find in many practices that what managers think is happening in terms of a process is not the same thing as what is currently being undertaken by team members and this is where error and waste creeps in.

Inefficient processes can attract unnecessary costs to a business and the only way to identify processes that are wrong is by the quality of the measurement you put in place.

Uncovering below standard performance or the inefficiency of a process is an opportunity to educate the team and to get their buy-in to raising the bar, for example, taking the business to another level. This can be a real motivational opportunity because they begin to understand the consequence of inefficiency in terms of business costs, customer dissatisfaction and poor 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 saviour 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 intertwined. 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.”

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

‘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 a 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 01944 275527.
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 £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 present 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 growth 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.

The Association of Specialist Providers to Dentists (ASPD)
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When you pause to take
stock of how technolo-
gical innovations
have benefited dentistry, it re-
ally is amazing. Dentists are
able to make the most of their
talents and offer a range of dif-
ferent treatments to meet the
needs of their patient base. How-
ever, without effective
communication, these needs
may not be met.

With many dentists investing
in GDP-friendly invisible ortho-
dontic solutions and services
such as tooth whitening and ve-
neers, 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 treat-
ment at your practice.

In an ideal world, dentists
would be able to spend as long as
necessary with each patient,
talking them through the numer-
ous treatment options and dis-
cussing their needs and con-
cerns, 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 broad-
band internet connection to keep
the information current and to in-
form patients about new treat-
ments as soon as they become
available in the practice.

The main benefit of such a
system is that it lets patients ac-
cess 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 tech-
nology, communication does not
end there. These new systems are
integrated easily into the practice’s
broadband internet connection,
enabling patients to request infor-
mation 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 de-
vice to effectively market the en-
tire treatment list, focusing on dif-
ferent treatments at different
times—for instance, increasing the
exposure of whitening treatments
in the run up to Christmas.
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 being in practice for them- selves and owning their own prac- tice. Usually after a few years as a corporate employee or an associ- ate gaining experience, the time seems right to make a move to- wards independence.

Clinical expertise, however, is no guarantee of business acumen or organisational skills. Having been there myself, and more re- cently offered advice to many oth- ers 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 princi- pals achieve their ideal scenario, the creation of their own practice from scratch. For many associ- ates, 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 ex- amine this option first.

Establishing your practice

Your own vision and determi- nation 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 trans- lating the mental image into reality demands total commitment as well as financial backing, and one of the first questions to con- sider is who to turn to for profes- sional guidance. Although most banks consider dentists a rela- tively safe risk, you’ll still need a buffer of working capital after you’ve opened for busi- ness.

It’s important to set targets, and to stick to them. Give yourself a realistic time-frame, say 12 to 18 months to be up and running, with achievable interim goals to keep you on track. To be success- ful working for yourself, you must be disciplined. Keeping things moving is no easy task when in all probability you are still working full time in someone else’s sur- gery. I know from my own experi- ence, the days are never long enough. Whether you’re convert- ing or building a new practice, a competent and experienced site manager is vital.

Even while you’re embroiled in the creative stress of building works, you need to look forward to the next phase. Your new practice will need to be adver- tised in advance and equipped and staffed from day one, or your investment will quickly cost more than it earns, which will not im- press the bank manager or your development partner. It’s a good idea to engage a receptionist a month before you open to start booking appointments; you won’t just hit the ground running, it will crystallise the mind in those last weeks and you’ll open on time!

You may have chosen the option of renting premises, of course, which may be less than ideal but will usually reduce your capital outlay, although many of the same strictures still apply.

New practice kit

A new practice means new equipment, which today offers a bewildering choice and purchasing errors can be ruinously ex- pensive 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 offer- ing. Better to stick within budget and look for kit, which can be up- graded 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 pa- tients 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 cap- ital after you’ve opened for busi- ness.

Many of the details involved in setting up a new practice, such as choice of equipment supplier, laboratory, management soft- ware, even opening hours, will depend on individual prefer- ences and circumstances, but there are still two more pieces of advice which are universally rele- vant; 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 has re- cently joined forces with Chris Bar- row to form a new business training and coaching company called Breathe Business. Simon can be con- tacted at The Breathe Business Group by emailing bonnie@now- breathe.co.uk, calling 01526 377078 or visiting www.nowbreathe.co.uk.
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 over-stating 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 usually the weaker individuals, the ones you are not unhappy to lose, who leave. The engaged 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 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 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 any more productive. Thus, staff turnover can be beneficial to a practice by keeping labour costs down or, if you can, lengthen them from rising, and indeed many business companies, including General Electric and Microsoft pursue an active ‘functional turnover strategy’ when they perceive established members of staff becoming too established.

Staff turnover, especially of more senior individuals, increases promotional opportunities 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 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@dentaltribuneuk.com 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 virulent rotter. This is because when she first presents, she does so as a poser. But as time goes by her canines lengthen, her curls straighten and shorten, and before you know it you are being savaged. The question is, how do you spot the rotter within the posse?

How can you pre-empt turning?

Sometimes people are difficult 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 talking to and observing the diggers before you get into any serious treatment. Sooner or later, they will give clues about who they really are. Ask why they left their last dentist. Inquire about their appreciation or otherwise of work done in the past. Note give-away cues such as ‘very expensive’, ‘...I didn’t listen to me’, ‘...I got the colour wrong’, ‘...had a difficult receptionist’, ‘she hurt me, so I never went back’, and the most obvious of all, ‘he was a butcher’. Beware racial/religious/age prejudice towards others, because it will not be long before it is towards you.

Do all dogs turn?

One simple solution is to assume a priori that every posse has the potential to turn. If you follow this philosophy, you must trust no one, get every patient to sign everything and indemnity document possible, and contact your indemnity insurers at the first sniff or nants bark. You must collect your fees in advance, because you will not be able to claim in arrears once the foam is on the mouth. Such a mentality will substantially diminish your ‘at risk’ profile, but unfortunately also proves unpalatable to the pooleled that are real pooleled. So, rather than preparing for confrontation, work to create co-operation.

The 10th dimension... the power of 10

Dealing with difficult patients