A design for life

Dr Carol Somerville Roberts talks about seeing your vision evolve into a reality when it comes to updating your practice

A s I stand in the delightful reception area of Evolve Dentistry, remembering our successful launch on February 20 2009, I cannot help recalling the journey I took to get here.

As an associate, I attended various courses and seminars, hearing some great ideas but not being in a position to implement them. Over time, I started to feel a vision forming of my ideal practice, which gradually developed to encompass three distinct but interlinked concepts. These were:

• To create a workspace that the entire dental team would enjoy being in;
• To assemble a team that worked together happily and efficiently;
• To build a viable business that would provide me with the income I felt was appropriate.

Now, when it comes to striking out on your own, there will always be a debate between buying an existing practice and constructing a ‘new build’ from the ground up. From the outset, I knew that I would have to choose the second option, because only this would give me the opportunity to create exactly what I wanted (instead of being dictated to by an existing architectural design) and create an excellent team from scratch, rather than inherit one.

The ideal site

Truthfully, I did not choose the site; the site chose me. I knew that Portishead was the best place to open a new dental practice, since it had undergone such massive growth and redevelopment over the previous 10-12 years. Also, the population had grown by over 6,000, so would have a solid patient base.

After speaking to the planning office about suitable sites, I found my perfect spot. It was an easy choice, because as luck would have it, the site already had the appropriate planning to incorporate a medical or dental facility. With my vision in my head, and my site selected, there was nothing to hold me back.

Famous last words?

The biggest obstacle was of a financial nature. At the time, I did not really know how much the project would ultimately cost, or how the necessary finance would be secured. Of course, there was that other voice, asking me: what if I fail?

Help came out of the blue. Just four days after making the decision to open my own practice, I attended the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry Conference, and found myself at a seminar where Simon Hocken was launching Breathe Business. Having a wealth of experience in dentistry, including running practices of his own, Simon was keen to help dental professionals step up to a whole new level of excellence, with a range of innovative yet proven tools and strategies.

It had never occurred to me to work with a coach; in truth, I did not even know that they existed in dentistry. However, I had finally found someone who was talking my language. Achieving great results laid down, but in hindsight, this was a good thing.

One big issue for me was time. I was doing this alone, and juggling every aspect of developing a new practice as well as working as an associate. I was a wife and a mother, too. I had previously set four weeks in which to prepare myself for opening the practice. The delay meant that I had five months between finishing an associate in the old practice, and starting in the new one – I used every minute of it, emailing every morning and every night, and working on the project through the day. This hiccup turned out to be a blessing in disguise… anyone hoping to follow in my footsteps should definitely plan to have a few months off in between!

Breathing easy

Working with Breathe Business felt like being given the key to a door that had been previously locked. Simon helped me to understand what aspects of dental practice are most important, and where compromises simply cannot be made. Right from the outset, I saw how to measure the success of the practice, and how marketing would play a crucial role. I also started financial planning, realising that I would need a financial cushion to compensate for a drop in income.

Simon introduced me to Mike Hutchinson, who guided me through the process of creating a business plan, before presenting it to a bank with a sound understanding of the healthcare industry. The bank was familiar with Breathe Business, and felt that my association with Simon would provide me with excellent advice and support. The net result was that I got a great deal!

Achieving the ‘WOW!’ factor

I had to make sure that the skills of an architect, and Simon put me in touch with Chris Bateman, who specialised in dental practices. Chris recommended Aspects building firm, having worked with them on previous projects, and once the specification was agreed, the construction went ahead – and was completed on time, and within budget.

Regular meetings, phone calls and emails with Simon kept me on the right track, and made me aware of potential pitfalls. He provided advice when it was needed, and his advice ensured that I always got good deals. Whenever I felt that I was drowning, he helped me prioritise, delegate and retain control.

A design for life

When it came to interior design, I relied on my own instincts, I had a clear picture of how I wanted the reception area and treatment rooms to look, and I am so proud of the result. Every visitor to the practice is impressed, even those in the trade, who see great practices every day! I used my awareness of how patients feel when they enter a practice, to develop an interior that was welcoming. It really doesn’t feel like a dental practice. Our reception area has a lot of light, with natural wood floors, flowers and a drinks island where patients can enjoy tea, coffee and champagne. In the surgery, patients can watch DVDs during treatment.

My team is 100 per cent behind me, and the practice is thriving. Most of our patients sign up to our membership plan, so we have a very firm foundation on which to build.

Sweet success

The practice has taken over my life, but I love the challenge. The feeling of being in control of my own future is priceless. My working week is split over three days of clinical time in the practice, and two days managing the business; reviewing our marketing, bringing Health & Safety and fire regulations up to date, and helping my reception team maintain a high standard of customer care. I keep the practice moving forward, without having to give up my evenings!

My advice to anyone wanting to ‘go it alone’ in dentistry is to use a coach. Simon and his team have supported me throughout the process, and still continue to do so. I would also advise having a contingency fund, to cater for those sudden and unforeseeable expenses. To succeed, you need to be ambitious and creative, positive and confident, and you need passion. I would also say that an ‘exit strategy’ should be considered; I have created a brand that is not built around me, important when it comes to expanding or selling the practice.

Right now, I love coming to work here every day. In the bigger picture, I would like the second practice should the right location come up, but for now, I am simply enjoying being at Evolve Dentistry.

To contact Breathe Business or Dr Simon Hocken, call 0845 290 7209 or email info@nowbreathe.co.uk.

About the author

Carol Somerville Roberts graduated from Bristol University in 1996. In the following year she worked in Shepton Mallet, Bath and Bristol and most recently as an associate in private practice in Nailsea for eight years. In 2001, she gained her MDTs from Edinburgh and in the same year became a diplomate associate of the Faculty of Homeopathy. She is a full member of the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentists (BACD) and the Society for the Advancement of Anaesthesia in Dentistry (SAAD). In January 2009, she launched Evolve Dentistry, a wholly private practice in Portishead.