A design for life

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

As 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 I 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 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 layed, 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 running my existing one. 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 offered a loan which would provide me with excellent advice and support. The net result was that I got a great deal!

Achieving the ‘WOW!’ factor

I had no idea how much the project would come to cost, but when it did, I found that I had five months between financial planning, so we have a very firm

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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.

Sweet success

The new 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 into 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.

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About the author

Carol Somerville Roberts graduated from Bristol University in 1996. In the following years she worked in Shepton Mallet, Bath and Bristol and most recently as an associate in a private practice in Nailsea for eight years. In 2001, she gained her MDS from Edinburgh and in the same year became a fellow 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 Anesthesia in Dentistry (SAAD). In January 2009, she launched Evolve Dentistry, a wholly private practice in Portishead.