Growing your practice in a recession

Gary Bettis highlights five reasons why now is a good time to refurbish, expand or relocate your practice

We are experiencing a recession, but growth is important during all types of economic cycles. Those dental practices that continue with their efforts to generate new business during difficult times will be more adequately poised for growth when opportunity arises.

With all of the discussion in the media today, many dental practices are bracing themselves for the economic downturn. Most people would equate a downturn in the economy with bad timing for anything business-related. This is a dangerous approach considering your practice thrives on the age of your practice. Dental technology has evolved dramatically over the last 10 years. The use of digital radiography, lasers, and advanced aesthetic products can offer value added services. An advantage of relocating or a major refurbishment is the opportunity to upgrade equipment and introduce new systems that will aid efficiency, patient comfort, and promote your practice. In the current economy, these strategies to redesign your systems are more important now than ever.

1. Creating the right image
Highly successful practices today are realising that patient service is no longer simply about being nice. Patients expect clean, modern practice design and associate it with the highest standards in healthcare.

Relocation
You may find that you are unable to meet the demands of your patient base within your current premises or comply with new guidelines. Continuing success in many cases requires relocation to new premises. This gives you a fresh start, and allows you to choose a location that suits your business. But in the current economic climate dentists are reluctant to take on such a large financial commitment. However, if an expanding dental practice has the capital, there has never been a better time to invest in a property.

In the wake of the credit crunch, there is the situation where:
• The supply of office space within certain areas outweighs demand. Prospective tenants and buyers are able to negotiate favourable terms.
• Landlords and vendors are now more likely than ever to cut their rentals and vendors are anticipating selling commercial office space at much less than its previous worth.
• There are many office developments under construction, but the waiting lists for tenants have evaporated over recent months. The leak of more office space into the market will continue to force rental and investment prices down.
• There will be rising vacancy rates across the capital for the next year and a half.
• While dentists looking to buy can expect to snap up office space for much less than its previous market value, dentists looking to rent can look forward to a series of incentives to accompany low rentals, such as ‘grace’ periods.

1. Conforming to legislation
Major refurbishment or relocating gives you an opportunity to completely overhaul the image of your practice, which can help you attract potential patients and retain existing patients. This includes aspects such as the interior design of your practice, graphics, visibility, staff image and the facilities in your practice.

2. Updating old equipment
Dental technology has evolved dramatically over the last 10 years. The supply of office space within certain areas outweighs demand. Prospective tenants and buyers are able to negotiate favourable terms.

If you find yourself outgrowing your current premises but do not want to move you could consider the option of extending or expanding before looking for an alternative property. There may be opportunities to take on additional space such as a flat upstairs, or in the instance of a semi-detached house, the neighbouring property, particularly at a time when rental/purchase prices are low. There may also be the possibility of a rear or side extension, subject to the boundaries of the existing site and planning permission being granted.

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3. Streamlining the business
A well-designed workplace is more streamlined, productive and motivating – which maximises the output of your practice.

4. Conforming to legislation
You must ensure your practice conforms to all the necessary legal and statutory requirements, including the newly published HTM 01-05 documents and the Disability Discrimination Act.

Before refurbishment: The exterior of this building looked more like a house than a dental practice.

After refurbishment: The exterior of this building looks much more eye-catching.

Before refurbishment: The Waiting area looks dull and uninviting.

After refurbishment: The Waiting area is bright and comfortable.

Before refurbishment: The exterior of this building looked more like a house than a dental practice.

After refurbishment: The practice gives a positive first impression.

Before refurbishment: The Waiting area looks dull and uninviting.

After refurbishment: The Waiting area is bright and comfortable.
Refurbishing or moving into new premises provides you with the ideal opportunity to incorporate these facilities and prepare for the future.

**HTM 01-05**

Dental practices must incorporate a Decontamination facility to carry out procedures in accordance with the Department of Health document HTM 01-05.

By allowing a skilled designer, with experience within the dental industry and an understanding of HTM 01-05 to incorporate a Decontamination Area within your practice you will be adequately prepared for 2010. This is when all practices in the UK, both NHS & Private, will have to register with the ‘Care Quality Commission’. The HTM 01-05 gives the ‘CQC’ the right to inspect all practices and to see that they attain two standards: ‘essential’ and ‘best practice’.

Adhering to this document will mean that your practice will achieve high standards of infection control with streamlined surfaces and correct workflow.

The Disability Discrimination Act

The Disabled Discrimination Act 1995 is applicable to every dental practice in England and Wales. If you don’t provide access to your practice for people with disabilities, you risk prosecution. Your designer will guide you through the process of making sure your design proposal conforms to the requirements of the DDA well before builders commence work on site.

5. Negotiating a good price for building works

In a recession building companies look at ways of saving costs. How can you ensure that your project is not compromised in any way by builders cutting corners, re-designing the design scheme to their benefit or ‘down-specifying’ with inferior quality products?

‘Competitive tendering’ is the answer! It offers a financial transparency that ensures you receive the best value for money. Your designer will send your design scheme (in the form of drawings and written schedules) to a small number of experienced building companies inviting them to quote for the work. This is a formal process and is the best way to create competition between the tendering builders. It ensures you receive the most competitive bids without compromise.

We have recently noticed that builders are finding themselves short of work and the prices of building materials are falling too. As a result builders will be more willing to negotiate a price for the building works.

Moving into the future

The recession should not be seen as an obstacle for growth. Instead it should be welcomed as an opportunity for you to create the ultimate working environment for long term profitability. Taking advantages of the opportunities and continuing to move forward will give your current patients a feeling of stability. It will demonstrate to your community that you are stable, and still want to be a part of it.

**About the author**

Gary Bettis is the Architectural Director of DDPC Limited. Since 1970 his company has provided architectural and interior design services to the dental profession. He has a wealth of experience in designing dental practices, with expertise in resolving planning and building issues. He helps dentists set up from scratch, expand or relocate their premises. He provides advice on choosing the right property and ensures that your practice meets current legislation, including Health & Safety and the Disability Discrimination Act.

DDPC is not affiliated with any construction company and can therefore provide a totally competitive tender service enabling dentists to obtain the best value for money.

You can contact him on 020 8446 9946 and gbettis@ddpc.co.uk

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**Before refurbishment:** The WC of this practice looks old and drab.

**After refurbishment:** New sanitary-ware, better lighting and finishes improve the patient experience.

This practice was re-organised and extended. The new layout (on the right) has a better workflow. It incorporates new facilities: an external ramp, disabled WC, consultation room and separate sterilisation room.

**The Reception Area of this practice is simple, clean and efficient.**

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