The right agent

If you're selling your practice, using the Internet to find an agent you can trust is a tough business. Ian Stead shows you what to look out for.

Dental practice owners seeking to sell up, usually ask an agent how to do it quickly, while maximising the value of their asset. With the Internet now a major part of all our lives, Google is often the first port of call for practice vendors.

However, as many of us have learned from experience, when you use the Internet, it's good to exercise a little caution. Instituting a Google search for a specific company or product generates a list of names or 'sponsored links' on the right side of the screen, each with some relevance to the search. These advertisers have to pay Google every time a user clicks on them, and they also 'bid' for places on the list, so those willing to pay the most are placed at the top.

To prevent companies bidding on thousands of key words and intruding their names into irrelevant searches on the off-chance they'll find a customer, Google drops advertisements which fail to attract sufficient clicks, effectively making such advertisements for rival companies whose only purpose is to include their name in your key-words is to take advantage of our reputation.

At present, this is perfectly legal and Google is under no obligation to prevent it. A spokesperson for Google's Trademark Complaint Procedure, says: 'From May 2008 we will no longer review a term corresponding to the trademarked term as a keyword trigger. When we receive a complaint from a trademark owner, we will only investigate the use of the trademark in ad text.' In other words, as long as the text which appears on the screen does not include the injured company's name, Google will take no action.

Choosing wisely

For most dentists, buying or selling a practice is a pivotal moment in their lives, and peace of mind depends on complete confidence in their agent's integrity and competence. Even with the benefit of a recommendation, before making a commitment, vendors should satisfy themselves their choice meets the criteria to provide a professional and efficient service.

Experience within the retail dental sector is vital. Even compared with other healthcare businesses, dental practices have unique characteristics and requirements for success. Among the many factors, which influence a final valuation, your agent must understand such matters as catchment areas, local demographics, goodwill and the transfer of patient confidence to a new incumbent.

Although your agent is working for you, their valuation must be independent and without bias. Expect it to be based on visits to the practice to review not merely its physical assets – premises and equipment – but also its current financial status, potential for expansion and how it compares with other local practices, which have recently come to the market. There may also be specific factors in particular cases that only an experienced agent will identify. Some principals invite a number of valuations, but while an inflated figure may be flattering it will not achieve a satisfactory result.

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Reaching a common goal

Building a great team can be quite a challenge but when achieved, it is hugely rewarding. Vikki Harper, BDPMA marketing co-ordinator offers some advice

Humans are naturally social animals; we don't like spending our lives alone yet ironically we often struggle with the dynamics of maintaining a positive team environment. There is widespread belief that teams deliver more than the sum of their parts and therefore generate greater achievement and value than a bunch of individuals. Teams can create a collective culture that allows individuals to feel part of something, where ideas can be shared and support can be found, but they can also be highly divisive things that are more trouble than they are worth! So how can you build and maintain a team to be proud of?

Is your team effective?

A real team is a living, dynamic force in which a number of people come together to work towards a common goal. In your practice, how crystal clear is that common goal? If each member of your team was asked to state the common goal of the practice, would there be a cohesive, compelling, articulate sound? If you get lots of different answers you know where your work must begin.

Each team member has something to contribute to the team and must therefore be given the opportunity to do so. It’s not always the loudest or the brightest who has the winning idea. It is important to realise that sometimes it is the quiet person, who is averse to speaking up, who may have the solution you have been seeking.

Good leaders know how to get their team members to generate ideas. In your practice, how often do team members come to you with their ideas and when they do, how long has it been since you put one into action? If your team members don’t bring ideas to the table you may need to consider why and do something about it. Maybe they gave up when none of their ideas was ever acted upon!

An effective team

No football team would succeed if everyone wanted to be the striker. A good balance is required to ensure that the team has the correct blend of skills necessary to deliver its objectives. Those skills will vary upon the nature and purpose of the team.

A good leader

It all starts with leadership because great teams don’t just happen. They are created by leaders with very clear plans for how their organisations should operate, deliver services, interact with stakeholders and meet specific targets. Problems within teams usually result with unclear and/or unspecific goals. Communicating clear goals and objectives is a must along with providing measurable progress towards those goals through regular updates (1:2:1s). Do you have 1:2:1s with your team members and if so, are they regular enough to keep them focused? Are the meetings fulfilling the needs of both parties; have you ever checked to see?

Clarity of function

A team must contain the necessary blend of skills to meet the demands and aspirations of the practice and there should be sufficient resources in the long term to ensure that undue pressure is not placed on them. Team members should be clear about their specific role and what tasks form the basis of their functions. If you have individuals complaining that other team members have encroached on their duties, then roles and responsibilities are not clear enough.

Team members should know each other well enough to recognise and accept each others’ strengths and weaknesses and to work to maximise these strengths and compensate to overcome any weaknesses by covering for each other. They should be willing to share responsibility. If you have individuals who complain that others are not ‘pulling their weight’ then perhaps you should pull everyone together to talk about how they can be more supportive of one another.

Established ground rules

Great teams usually have established ground rules for working together (team charter). They have developed agreed working practices and processes to get things done, and support each other by listening and responding supportively and constructively. They recognise and celebrate individual and team successes, handle conflict constructively and openly, and when they agree a course of action, they collectively buy-in.

Do you have a team charter?

If not, perhaps at your next team meeting you can seek your team’s input by asking them to put forward their top three suggestions for team ‘rules’. Draw up a charter, circulate it, seek feedback, and finalise it. The rules of the charter cannot be handed down by one person; they must be agreed among the team. By participating in the development of their charter, team members sign up to behave in a self-determined way. They can, not at some future point, plead ignorance or excuse anti-social behaviour. Remember that once you have agreed your charter every team member must sign up to it.

The charter should become part of your recruitment process too. Whenever you interview a potential new team member you should explain what the charter is, what each point means and you should ask the candidate if he or she could work within the rules you have defined.

Like everything else, there will be times when members of the team will behave in ways that are inconsistent with the charter. It is the team leader’s job to point out to the person the implications of their actions and to get them back working consistently within the framework of the charter.

The characteristics of failing teams

Failing teams usually show symptoms and the most common ones are:

- Unclear goals and objectives
- Non-measurable goals
- Ill-defined boundaries and responsibilities
- Inappropriate members, creating a skills gap
- Lack of training in teamwork
- Rivalry and divisions in the group
- Ineffective meetings
- Lack of understanding and lack of willingness to recognise and compensate for weaknesses
- Resistance and politics
- Team members who do not want to be part of the team
- Team charter ‘lip service’

Any one of these points will undermine the strength of the team and should therefore be overcome. You may recognise one or more of these symptoms being characteristic of a team you belong to now or have been a part of in the past. But don’t be deterred, recognition is the first step towards remedy.

A positive experience

All teams, no matter how long they have been together, and no matter how successful they have been, will go through peaks and troughs as dynamics change with new starters and leavers, external business and personal pressures, changes to roles and responsibilities and any one of a hundred other reasons. They are dynamic beasts. Even if you can boast a great team there is no resting on your laurels. Great leaders constantly seek to keep their team united, focused, challenged, developed, motivated, involved, on target...

Building a great team can be quite a challenge but when achieved, it is hugely rewarding. It won’t happen overnight and it is an evolutionary process, so above all, don’t forget to celebrate successes at each stage of the process.

The BDPMA represents a national ‘team of dental practice managers who share good practice and pursue continual professional development through events like the autumn Management Development Seminars that focus on Finance. For details of the seminars and to join the BDPMA visit www.bdpma.org.uk, email dsimpson@bdpma.org.uk or call 01452 880564.