Y our practice's stationery is an essential element in the shop window you present to your patients, and its quality and design should convey an impression of the calibre of the work you do and the importance you attach to good patient communications. David Mills, General Manager of Admor, reflects on how to maximise the benefits of a vital business tool which many clinicians take for granted.

With dentistry today more competitive and offering a wider range of services than ever before, to attract new patients means presenting your practice in the best possible light to both the local business community and the public at large.

At the same time, preserving the loyalty of your existing patients, whose regular attendance forms the core of your practice's viability, must not be overlooked. It's often remarked, in many different business contexts, that 'the devil is in the detail,' and paying careful attention to the image projected by the practice's stationery is one strand among the many which persuade your present patients they have made the right choice.

Printing is an industry with a long history, and over the years it has developed a vocabulary all of its own. This can be both daunting and confusing to outsiders, but if you approach a specialist firm with experience in the health care sector, understanding is quickly established, and a sympathetic printer will be able to suggest the best way to achieve your objectives.

Your printer should impress you as a business partner committed to your interests who is happy to devote time to discussing your needs and presenting the options to you. You may be guided to a particular firm by personal recommendation, but you should in any event be sure that your choice is well established and is trading in good standing within the local business community.

The printer is in business to make money, as are we all, and the first suggestion is likely to be the optimum option. It's up to you to have a pre-determined budget and negotiate a solution which the practice can afford. If the printer baulks at a more economic compromise, be prepared to seek an alternative supplier. That said, most printers will be keen to accept the commission in anticipation of further orders.

While the printer will possess the technical knowledge, it's your ideas which count and you should have a clear conception of your requirements from the outset. The printer will interpret your needs into a range of print solutions, and analysing the different responses ('mix n' match') may well save you money.

It's vital that proofs are read and re-read with scrupulous care, both before the initial submission and before printing. Dentistry is rife with terminological which may be alien to the printer, and nowadays electronic submission has become the norm. Copy submitted as a Word file, a widely accepted industry standard, eliminates the need for retying with its notorious potential for error, and also expedites completion.

Printing is not a 'one-size-fits-all' product, and agreeing the copy is only the precursor to other decisions.

The impression made by the finished article will depend on both its appearance and tactile qualities. How many colours will the content require for the optimum impact? If you have a coloured logo, and the text will be black, which itself counts as one colour, then monochrome is obviously not an option. A maximum of four colours is possible, allowing for the reproduction of photographs, but the costs will rise accordingly. This is why newspapers, and even some magazines, do not print every page in full colour.

Selecting the media, or paper type, is another decision. Coated media has a gloss, as opposed to a matt, finish which enhances print definition and durability, but is not suitable for writing on and so would be inappropriate for forms when later additions need to be made. Uncoated media would be the usual choice for patient documentation and appointment cards, for example.

The printer needs to know how each item will be used in order to offer informed advice, and you may have to compromise on the appearance of a particular document in the interests of practicability.

The thickness or weight of the media, normally expressed as grams per square meter (gsm), must now be considered. Reducing weight can be important when postage costs form part of the equation, but heavier media, although more expensive, do convey an impression of quality, and the ultimate destination of the document may become the determining factor. Inspecting samples, and weighing the benefits against the increased costs in each case, is part of the process.

Almost any size is possible, but the size of conventional sizes is adequate for most purposes. The generally accepted size for appointment cards matches that for credit cards, while reminder notices are usually the same size, being easy to handle and fit into envelopes. Where text or images are involved, in notices or brochures for example, the amount of information to be conveyed and the font size will decide the issue. Skipping on the size to reduce costs may shrink the lettering to a point where it becomes difficult to read for some patients, which will not enhance the practice's image and gives the impression of miserliness.

Order quantity (the 'print run') will decide the unit cost, as much of what you pay will cover the printer's setting up costs. It makes sense to commit to as large an order as possible, in the interests of ultimate economy, but bear in mind that over time the printed details may need to be changed and you do not want to be left with obsolete printed stock. Assessing the weekly usage of everyday items before ordering will help you to arrive at an appropriate figure.

Artwork, such as the inclusion of your logo, may involve an additional charge which needs to be negotiated separately, although some printers will include it in your general invoice.

You will be presented with a finished proof to 'sign off' before the printer undertakes your order. Your approval transfers the responsibility for any mistakes to you, and it is worth reiterating how carefully each item should be scrutinised. Beware that your eye doesn't see what it expects to see rather than what is actually on the paper – it's worth having the final proof checked by more than one person before giving the printer the authority to proceed. All too often an error slips through the net, to be noticed only when the order is delivered, perhaps by sharpened patients who are less than impressed.

A sympathetic printer may be prepared to run a corrected reprint for a reduced fee, but this is by no means standard practice. As with every other aspect of dentistry, the buck stops with the practice principal!

Contact Admor at print@admor.co.uk or by calling 01243 555078.