If you are thinking of taking the plunge, and are keen to start and run your own practice, business guru and life coach Simon Hocken offers tips for success

I n 1989, at the beginning of the last recession, I started a private squat practice in a small Devon town. I had no idea what I was doing and I succeeded in growing my business through a mixture of fear, naive determination, a little charm and some inherent skills in selling private dentistry!

I had spent the previous 10 years, as an associate, improving my clinical skills but the only business skill I had acquired was that of negotiating my percentage with my principals. My new practice diary was filling up (the only way I had of judging success) and in the spirit of, if one new practice is a good thing, then two must be even better, I opened a second private squat practice in Exeter in 1994, with two colleagues.

Learning the ropes

I still hadn’t covered much about how to run a business except that the banks were willing to lend dentists money. Despite my ignorance I found myself with two growing private practices, two business partners, three associates and three hygienists.

My two practices consumed all of my time, my thyroid, my marriage, my hairline and most of the joy in owning my own businesses. I appeared to be making some money, but every year the Inland Revenue surprised me by how much of it they wanted.

I’m not ashamed to admit that I ran my practices like a lot of principals I meet who come to Breathe Business for guidance. Like me, at this time, they:

- Have little in the way of a vision for their professional or personal life and who have lost the energy they once had when they started or joined their practice.
- Feel exhausted and overwhelmed by having to run their practice as well as having to be the main fee earner.
- Simply do not have the time or energy to run their business effectively or give their professional or personal lives enough attention.
- Only have a vague idea of the day-to-day financial health of their practice, relying on their bank statements to monitor and control their practice finances.
- Make poor financial decisions, worry about the financial health of their practice, and provide unprofitable treatment options, increasing their personal and professional debt.
- Have a twice-yearly struggle to pay their tax bills.
- Have no plan in place of how to exit their practice and insufficient retirement planning.

A better way?

In the last five years of owning my practices, I realised that there must be a better way of doing things. I began to seek out gurus and mentors to ask the right questions about running a business. Having worked closely with a lot of dentists in the last seven years who are buying a practice or starting one from scratch, I now know the right questions to ask and I have a hard-drive full of solutions that have been shown to work. There are few books on this subject, only hard won experience. So, if you are thinking of taking the plunge, and lots of younger dentists I meet seem to be very keen on running their own practice, here’s a 20 point checklist:

- What sort of practice do you want? (Your vision?)
- Who should you ask for professional advice? (Property finders, solicitors, accountants, business coach/mentor?)
- Location (Why here/in town/out of town?)
- What sort of property? (Leasehold/freehold planning/getting consent)
- Designers? (Architect, interior designer?)
- How much? (Set-up costs/assessing and budgeting for)
- Business model (How will the practice perform in the first three years?)
- Financing/investment (How to finance the capital costs and the working capital costs)
- Construction/conversion/project management?
- Choosing the right kit.
- Dental fit-out. (Managing the suppliers.)
- Branding?
- Marketing?
- Office systems?
- Clinical systems?
- Sales systems?
- How to recruit your team.
- Compliance and regulations.
- Key Performance Indicators.
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Support is key

As you can see from my list, it’s a lot to consider, decide on and plan on the kitchen table at weekends, (while in most cases holding down a full-time associate job). My advice is to get help. I know, I know, I would say that wouldn’t I? But even in the absence of hiring a good business coach here are five suggestions:

1. Find a friend or colleague who has done what you are planning to do and ask them about what it was for them and what they would do differently.
2. Go visit some practices. You can learn a lot from those you like and those you don’t! Dentists generally love showing off their practices to colleagues.
3. Remember that the two commonest limiting factors are planning permission and raising enough money. (Don’t forget the working capital element of any monies needed to start/run a practice.)
4. Set yourself a realistic time scale. Twelve to 18 months to consult about need, six months to find a practice to buy and six months to buy and set up.
5. Remember that the key attribute of an entrepreneur is to take great care of your confidence. So be wary of the doom and gloom merchants!

About the author

Simon Hocken BDS has owned two private practices and is an accredited coach. He runs a business training company, Breathe Business with Chris Barrow. Experienced analysts from the Breathe Team facilitate Breathe Breakthrough group meetings for dentists who are wishing to develop their business skills. The group concentrates on the six key areas of setting up and managing a successful practice. To find out more, email bonnie@breathe.co.uk, call 01526 577078 or visit www.now.breathe.co.uk.