Sale in the sticks...

A relieved and retired orthodontist discusses the issues when selling a practice

I had been an expense sharing partner at an orthodontic practice in rural Wales for well over 20 years. Our practice took referrals from a very wide geographic area and had been established as an orthodontic practice for several years before I had arrived.

One autumn day in 2009, my partner, who was almost a decade older than I was, announced that he ‘couldn’t go on’. (It wasn’t quite that melodramatic, but you get the general idea!) My partner had made his decision and now I needed to make one. After some extensive delibera
tion and soul-searching, I decided that whilst not on the scrapheap at 58, the practice would benefit from some new blood to move it forward.

We decided to sell it at as a going concern.

It was at this point that we approached Frank Taylor and Associates to carry out a valuation of the practice. I found them to be very on the ball and they offered a detailed explanation of the whole process. My partner and I decided to proceed, with them acting as our agent. We knew from the start that our practice would offer a number of unique challenges:

- We were somewhat ‘in the sticks’ in Wales. This would appeal to some but certainly put a number of potential purchasers off. Perhaps it would suit a returning émigré?
- Welsh language. Although neither my partner nor I spoke Welsh, we were both aware that for the next generation this might be a problem
- Local contracts. These are through the Local Health Board (LHB) and ultimately administered via the Welsh Assembly

The practice was marketed throughout the summer of 2010 and it would be fair to say that we weren’t inundated with potential buyers – not that we expected to be. We had resigned ourselves to the process being on the lengthy side. However, we did receive three expressions of interest at this point. One of these was spoken to via phone and email but after good initial signs, decided not to pursue.

The second of the three, visited us and decided against it as although she had a special
cial interest in orthodontics, she wasn’t a specialist and we all felt that this would make things difficult. Then, at the beginning of autumn 2010, the eventual buyers approached us. They were both on specialist registers with the GDC and keen. After the cussions they put in a formal offer to purchase the practice during January 2011.

To-ing and fro-ing

We now approached the LHB as without a new contract from them any future sale would be dead in the water. We arranged a meeting which included my partner and me, the potential purchasers, and representatives from the LHB. At this point we became aware that the Welsh Assembly was carrying out an Orthodontic Services review for all contracts in Wales and had decided that it didn’t want to offer any new contracts over three years whilst this review was being undertaken. Un
til this point, a five year contract had been typical for us. This obviously made the practice less attractive to the buyers. After a great deal of to-ing and fro-ing with the LHB, in the spring of 2011 they agreed to offer a three-year contract to the potential purchasers along with a temporary exten
tion for us up until the end of October 2011. This would allow the purchasers’ time to get their finance arranged.

I began to feel that the buyers were eking the whole process out to gain financial advantage. I lost count of the amount of times that either Andy or Lis at Frank Taylor and Associates were in contact with the buyers and gee
ing them along. We reached October 2011 and the buyers had still not arranged their finance. This led to the LHB giving me a one month rolling contract that continued for position of not being able to lay hands on the money now meant that the contract on offer from the LHB was no longer three years, but two years and allowed the buyers to renegotiate the price. More negotiation fol
dowed and eventually the LHB agreed to give the buyers an additional six months on the contract.

Exchange and beyond

We exchanged contracts at the end of February 2012 and it was a happy day! I must advise anyone looking to sell a practice that the two key things that I have learnt from the process are that it will take longer than you expect and pay for an agent to act on your behalf. I did find parts of the sales process quite stressul but I am sure not nearly as stressful as our patients did. We were in the unfortunate position of not being able to give them a final answer as to when we would be leaving.

I am currently enjoying re
tirement and considering future options.