Mrs Thatcher once famously remarked that the environment was a humdrum issue compared with the Falklands War, but it’s the everyday issues which, by their very definition, have the strongest impact on most people’s quality of life.

It’s widely acknowledged throughout industry that staff who enjoy superior working conditions and visually attractive surroundings are more productive, happier, and less likely to have itchy feet. This is especially true of the dental arena, where working in a familiar, confined space is a routine requirement of practice life for the entire dental team.

The quality of the practice environment also has an impact on the patients and any other visitors to the premises, and now that the element of competition has become a factor in retail dentistry so practice design, image and ambience have assumed even greater importance. The widespread publicity afforded to the many recent clinical advances has created a more discriminating and demanding clientele, and today’s practice environment must not only be efficient and hygiene-friendly but also reflect the standards of care which a more informed public now expects. Whenever a replacement or refurbishment is due, investing in the best, whether it’s a single product or a complete practice makeover, is the only sound policy.

Whatever the nature of the investment, it must represent value for money whilst also adding value to the business. While furniture and décor should be visually appealing and reflect contemporary taste and design, both must be fit for purpose and sufficiently durable to withstand intensive use. The rapidly expanding market for cosmetic treatments has resulted in a corresponding increase in specialist and referral practices, whose patient lists often reflect a more sophisticated demographic with more demanding ancillary expectations.

Practice principals are usually practicing clinicians, whether specialists or GDPs, whose expertise and time are dedicated to generating revenue within the surgery and for whom it is neither cost effective nor practical to commit time to the consideration of peripheral matters such as the colour of the waiting room furniture!

Delegating the responsibility of a practice overhaul to a reputable partner company which

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specialises in the refurbishment or refitting of healthcare premises represents the sensible option, as such a partner will possess not only the requisite experience of the market, but will also have existing relationships with specialist manufacturers and suppliers. For example, the sourcing and fitting of customised cabinetry, which must be aesthetically pleasing as well as ergonomic, is an exercise few clinicians would willingly embrace. From the design point of view, while a talented general architect may produce an outstanding aesthetic result, it could ultimately prove to be totally impractical for clinical purposes; only a specialist company will be aware of the alternatives while at the same time understanding the essential parameters which define a workable solution. Mistakes can be expensive!

A pre-requisite to entering such a partnership is clarity of vision in respect of the desired outcome. Practices are defined by their differences, in terms of both types of treatment offered, financial structure, and most importantly for refurbishment purposes, their physical size and characteristics. Products and designs must be selected which enhance the working space as well as maximising potential profitability. To achieve these goals, specialist expertise is vital.

A common concern is infection control. Many traditional high street dental practices are housed in converted domestic premises with limited space and irregular room shapes and sizes not easily adapted to accommodate modern decontamination equipment. A skilled designer is often able to "create" additional space, and so avoid potentially compromising staff and patient safety while at the same time easing stress for the dental team members responsible for adherence to stringent hygiene regulations. Specialist supply companies have access to customised cabinetry solutions which can exploit even the most unlikely corners for storage or archiving.

Initial discussions with the partner company should focus on a clear definition of the objectives, with quality and value for money paramount considerations. The end result must meet the current needs of the business while taking into account possible future expansion or policy changes; staff must be provided with a congenial working environment which enables all statutory requirements to be met or exceeded; disruption while work is in progress must be kept to a minimum and a dedicated site manager appointed to coordinate the different tradesmen and assume responsibility for adherence to a strict timetable; last but not least, the project must be completed within the agreed budget.

The best refurbishment companies pay careful attention to the individual client’s specific tastes and requirements, take account of the practice’s discrete logistics and avoid preconceptions which could potentially distort the outcome; they offer a comprehensive service, which includes preliminary advice and pre-project consultations to acknowledge the client’s personal preferences in terms of equipment, working methods, image and atmosphere. Their knowledge of the industry ensures that essentials, such as accommodating a central sterilisation facility in a multi-chair practice, are not omitted. Their service will also include the installation of clinical equipment even when this has been acquired independently, as well as providing after sales maintenance and support.

Dentistry is a lifetime career and forming a long term relationship with a strong, sympathetic and committed business partner has proven, ongoing benefits for principals, staff and patients alike.

About the author

Coming from a Facilities Management background within the Hotel & Restaurant industry, Pete Higson has been in the dental industry for 15 years. Age 40 and Married to Sue, he is a Financial Director within the Dental Industry, has two Children and Lives on Farm in Cheshire. Having previously worked in Capital Equipment Sales and Surgery design, Pete has been the Sales Director for Tavom UK for the last 4 years. To discover how Tavom can help you to take some or all of your existing facilities up to date, call Tavom UK on 0870 7521121.