

Are you being left behind?

Designing your practice for business, comfort and the competitive edge

By Dr Phillip Palmer BDS

The standard of a service is perceived to usually relate directly to the standard of facility that it is provided in. As dentists this should mean that it is surely worth investing in the practice facility. But what should you invest **in**?

Throughout your career whether you like it or not you will be competing with other practices for patients and staff. Neither are likely to choose a practice that looks dated or behind the times and neither are likely to choose to stay with a practice that isn't a comfortable one for them.

When redesigning your practice a balance needs to be found between having maximum number of treatment rooms, and luxuriating in a facility built for comfort. Some practices install as many chairs as possible, whereas others seem to install too few and instead devote vast areas of the practice to non-clinical areas in order to maximise comfort, aesthetics and business administration (for example a kids play area, meeting rooms, associates' office, etc)..

Balancing the business and clinical areas of your practice requires thought and careful analysis of the trade-offs involved. Putting as many treatment rooms as possible into a practice floor-plan may seem like a good idea. After all, the more chairs that a practice has, the more capacity you would think it has for production. While this is logical, in practice it sometimes doesn't work that way.

If you don't allow for enough space per room and for wide-enough corridors, there will be a claustrophobic feeling to the practice and comfort levels will be low (there could even be 'collisions' between people walking around the practice as well as collisions between people and the equipment). This could have an impact on overall underlying morale in the practice and may impact on staff retention.

This isn't the only consideration though. A practice principal also has to consider the trade-off that they are making in the practice. A practice that maximises clinical areas may do so at the sake of areas without direct income potential. Areas like an associate's office, staff room or freshen up area for patients. How does one put a value on an area of the practice that is designed purely for reasons of comfort for you, staff and patients?

You may think that your practice can do without an associate's office. After all you could check your emails, pay bills etc. from home. However this may be underestimating the value to the practice principals of having a private place to:

- Retreat to in a hectic day for a few minutes in order to find some peace;
- Have one-on-one meetings with people (e.g Give feedback to staff);
- Catch up on record keeping and your own correspondence, banking and store your personal financials filing.

A freshen up area in the practice for patients may not seem to be a good use of limited space. However many patients will look and feel disheveled after spending time in the treatment room. Many female patients will want to fix their hair, reapply make up and make sure their clothes are sitting right before they go back out into the world. Providing an area with a good sized mirror will show empathy and go a long way to making patients feel comfortable about their overall experience at the practice.

Many practices also incorporate a consult room for review of treatment options with patients. Some dentists feel that they get a greater case acceptance if this is done outside a treatment room, while others report no such problems.

Frankly, case acceptance depends far more on the skills of the presenter than the geography of where it is being done. There doesn't appear to be any real correlation between acceptance of treatment plans in a dedicated consult room versus being done chairside. It merely boils down to a personal preference and comfort level of different practitioners.

However the same is not necessarily true of private payment areas. Many patients feel uncomfortable discussing payment terms and costs of treatment in a public area, within earshot of other patients. Having a dedicated private area for payment terms to be discussed with patients is a courtesy that many patients enjoy, and most design companies ensure is included in contemporary design plans.

There is no one answer for what and how to invest in your practice. It will be different for every practice and every practice owner. It will depend on such details like the number of practitioners, the number of staff, the number of active patients in the practice, The historical and potential growth of the practice, the number of years the principals have left to practice and of course the cost.

A dentist will need to look at the ROI (return on investment) each time they make an investment in their practice.

Equally though they need to recognize that sometimes this return will not be a direct dollar value but one of comfort and competitive edge. An assessment needs to be made on what the cost is having a facility that is **not** up to the standards of your competitors.

Is your practice being left behind?

{Published in Australasian Dental Practice Magazine, Late 2008}

