

Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop

In case you've never read Alice in Wonderland, this is the advice the King gives to the White Rabbit. And whilst I may couch it in a rather more formal manner, this is exactly how I suggest you approach any design project in your practice.

In reality, the beginning should NOT be about design at all. Rather the question you should address and be clear about is this....'*where do I want to pitch my practice?*' To answer this truthfully you need to consider a number of key points such as your target market, the mood and ambience you want to create that will appeal to that market, your competitive stance (needs or desire driven dentistry), your branding and, of course, the kind of fees you will be charging. If you don't do this, and have in place a coherent plan, you will not be able to give your designer(s) a rational brief. Without this you're running the risk of paying too much for something that, in all likelihood, fails to fit the bill.

The basic principles of dental practice design

It may sound obvious but you should never ask anyone who does not understand how dental practices work to design your practice (and /or surgery). Keep in mind that design and functionality **must** work hand in hand and you literally cannot afford to sacrifice workflow on the altar of creative indulgence. A good designer will get the balance right. Whilst on this point, check out the credentials of your designers. Ask them awkward questions. Look at other practices they have designed. Talk to colleagues who have used them. Thoroughly check terms and conditions and payment schedules. However don't be tempted even to attempt project management; just be confident in the people you are using before you put pen to paper.

Having satisfied yourself that you have the right design team in place, you can then discuss in detail exactly how it will fulfil your brief. Because every practice is different, and every requirement unique, a 'one size fits all' solution is to be given short shrift. Nevertheless there are some 'rules' that apply to design projects whatever the size of practice and scale of work to be undertaken. I'll go through these briefly, but please keep in mind that in an article such as this we cannot be comprehensive.

Signing

Ensure directional signing is adequate and easy to follow (both internally and externally). You may be surprised how difficult it is even to find the entrance to some practices...and first impressions count!!

Branding

Your identity should be strongly displayed and coherent. Once again this applies both inside and outside your practice. Dental practices receive vast amounts of advertising and informatory material; be careful and selective about the way you display this material and be sure that it neither detracts nor diminishes your overall branding. Be sure too that promotional and information material is always up to date.

Reception

All too often a dental reception and those who staff it attempt to take on a wide range of tasks and, not surprisingly, they struggle to keep all the balls in the air. In our experience at Paradigm this is a common problem and one that is often, unnecessarily, resolved by taking on additional staff (and costs!!). We have developed an answer that addresses and solves all these issues without the need for additional staffing. Please contact me (details below) if you'd like to know more.

The patient journey

I do appreciate that this term has become a bit 'marketing speak'; but for any practice seeking to create and leave positive impressions with existing and new patients, the **total** patient experience cannot be ignored. Let's assume, for example, that your signing is good, your patient car parking equally so. Meet and greet at reception is pleasant and your patient is sitting comfortably in your well designed waiting room. So far, so good. On the way to your surgery, however, your patient passes your nurse who's carrying a tray of dirty instruments to your decontamination room. Result? I don't really need to spell it out. Just imagine how you would feel if you were walking along the corridor into a fine restaurant and a waiter passes you with dirty dishes from the last diner. What may be routine for you, doesn't mean it is for your patient!

Your surgery

Ultimately this is what says everything about you. However good you are at your chosen profession, if your surgery is untidy and your work surfaces cluttered, then the patient is likely to have doubts. We are not all naturally tidy, but once again a good designer will take this into account, positioning cabinetry and units so that they optimise the way you work. Decontamination facilities will be easily accessed from the surgery and there will be a place for everything. The bottom line is simple. Aim to exceed patient expectations and remember it's not going to be you they tell if they're not happy. It's their friends.

So keep your practice tidy and 'on message' if you truly want to compete in High Street for the consumer's disposable income.

Lighting

This is so important that it could really justify an article of its own. From an aesthetic point of view it will create the mood and atmosphere you want to create, but in addition modern, controllable LED lighting can, at the touch of a button:

- set the colour of lighting for shade taking
- be reduced in intensity to avoid premature setting of composites
- set to maximum brightness for optimum visibility and specific procedures including room cleaning
- set the scene or mood of the room to suit the season

To sum up

Whatever the size of your project, my advice is to avoid rushing or being rushed into making any decisions. Prepare a plan within which you define your objectives both short and long term. If you don't know where you're going, every road will take you there and there will be plenty of eager sales people happy to accompany you on your journey!

In contrast a well considered, sensibly priced and correctly funded investment in your practice will pay for itself time after time.

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