

Gavin Willis, Managing Director of Paradigm Design Solutions poses a leading question.

Are you earning enough?

I want to make it clear from the start that I love working with and for the dental profession. But, as with all jobs, it has its frustrations. And for me the greatest frustration is seeing practices failing to realise their full potential, when, with a little planning and a little more thinking outside the box they could achieve so much more.

Principally I design dental practices.....but design is not an end in itself. I tell all of my clients it is an opportunity to improve the way they work, increase practice efficiency, do better dentistry, enhance the patient experience and earn more money. Every practice and every dentist is, of course, different, but I have learnt not to make promises I cannot keep. Over the years I have been privileged to work alongside some truly excellent practitioners and some who (let us say) have been less than excellent. In short I know what works and importantly, I know what doesn't.

So let me share with you some of that experience and hopefully encourage you to ask yourself this question....

'Do I want to earn more from the dentistry I do and if so how can I do it?

Is it always good to be busy?

If it's stopping you having enough time to give quality thinking to growing your business then the answer is an emphatic 'no'. Being busy can become an addiction and you and your colleagues should not see a packed appointment schedule as some kind of badge of honour.

In so many practices that I visit there is an atmosphere of frenetic work overload. Patients, looking for peace and calm are confronted by tension (and believe me they pick up the vibes!). They find it hard to park, are greeted by a receptionist who's taking another call, wait ages in a tired waiting room and eventually end up in a cluttered surgery. This may be a slight exaggeration but it is certainly the case that most practices are underwhelming. Just imagine what they could achieve if they actually ***exceeded*** patients' expectations.

The point is this. If you do not step back and plan how to grow your business, you may simply work harder and harder and achieve less and less.

How do I break the mould?

Start by discussing and planning where you personally want to get to in your chosen profession. Set objectives and targets for yourself and your practice. And dare to dream a bit. I am frequently surprised how often Practice Principals are able to exceed their expectations once they broaden their horizons.

When you've done this consider 'the patient journey' in your practice and how, in very simple terms, you would like to improve it. Do this before you start thinking about investing large sums in your practice or you will be putting the cart before the horse. You need to have a clear idea in your head of the sort of patient you want to attract to your practice and their resultant 'journey' in order for it to be commensurate with your market positioning.

This is important. Many Principals commit to commissioning work on their practice without first having any strategy beyond the purely cosmetic. Any architect can draw up plans that impress at face value. But you should be looking beyond this and seeking to create an environment that boosts the confidence of you, your staff and your patients.

Now, too, is the time to recognise that you should stop thinking 'patient' and start thinking consumer. Keep firmly in your mind that you are competing for the consumer's disposable income, not just with other dentists, but with everyone else in High Street. So you need to up your game and start 'wowing' people.....day in, day out.

What exactly is 'the patient journey'?

It may sound odd to pose this question when I've suggested that your patients are now consumers; but in the context of your practice it's easier to talk of the patients who are your daily bread and butter.

The patient journey, for me, encompasses every aspect, direct and indirect, of the way they interact with you. Here are some points you may wish to consider as background to your planning:

- look at your web site and ensure it is both user friendly and truly representative of what you offer. Use real patients rather than models. Keep it up to date
- review your internal and external signing
- clearly define what you see as your target market
- think about the ways your practice uses consumer 'trigger points' to build its business. Marriage, unexpected windfalls, inheritance, new jobs and so on all provide opportunities to offer more of your services. Promote them!!
- employ a treatment coordinator....someone interested, empathetic and informed enough to explain treatments
- keep your reception as a reception.....not a cross between an accounts department and a call centre
- give patients a branded goody bag at each visit. It will cost you next to nothing yet have a high perceived value
- declutter throughout
- look at issues such as acoustics, lighting and decontamination procedures

Get these things right and your practice will flourish and continue to do so.

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