

Gavin Willis, Managing Director of Paradigm Design Solutions, has years of experience working with and for the Health Professions. Here he explains why good clinic design needs to take into account so much more than simply the way it is laid out.

I have been designing clinics and practices for the best part of my life. And I use the word 'best' advisedly.

But whilst I love the work I do, it brings with it problems we euphemistically call 'challenges'. Much of what I do has to reflect individual taste and preferences; those 'challenges' occur when tastes and preferences push me in the direction of having to try and build in ideas that I know will not work. What I want to do in this short article is to take you through some of the basic rules that, if you break them, can prove extremely costly and, on a positive note, give you some examples of ways in which you can profitably enhance the ambience and perception of your practice.

I'll take a deep breath and start by highlighting what is probably an understandable, but unforgivable, mistake. And that is to design a clinic in which the consultant is portrayed as 'the hero'. The real power lies with the consumer and the surroundings should emphasise the value of the total package, augmenting the skills of the consultant rather than seeking to glorify them. I do not make this point to demean the key importance of the consultant, but to make it clear that the 'brand' has to be bigger than the individual. Failing to do this will, in most instances, threaten the sustainability and viability of any business.

Let me explain why.

Branding is more than a logo and a clever strap line

There are many definitions, but essentially branding covers all the ways that you establish an image for your business in the eyes of your target market. It's how you communicate what you stand for, how you differentiate yourself from your competitors and how you build and retain loyalty. It reflects your standards and values in everything from your web site to the toiletries in your washroom, from the welcome in your reception to way you deal with your pricing,

And the real point is this.

Unless your branding runs consistently throughout your clinic it will send out conflicting messages, rather like serving a gourmet meal on a paper plate. Branding does not need to be overstated or in people's faces but it does need to be coherent and coordinated. It's no good having a reception area that gives the impression of being on a totally different planet from your treatment rooms and your consulting areas. The advice I give to my clients is to take seriously the detail. Designing a clinic is one thing, designing a clinic that works efficiently and optimises profit is something else.

Here's what we mean by 'the detail'

A great deal of the work I do is with clients with established businesses. And often, with 'established' automatically goes established working **procedures**, many of which are outmoded and inefficient. In the competitive environment in which we all operate it is critical regularly to reassess the ways you are presenting to and communicating with your clients.

So whether I am dealing with a new build, a renovation, a refurb or an extension, my detail check list is exhaustive. It may also be a little exhausting, but the effort is always (without exception) worthwhile, particularly on the ultimate impact on the bottom line. When you have a moment do please take a look at this 'mini' check list and ask yourselves how your business measures up.

1. How 'user friendly' and clear is the signing outside and inside the clinic?
2. Is the reception desk a barrier or a welcome greeting? Its height is one of the main clues here!
3. Is your reception desk multi-purpose or focused on its reception role? Which do you think is right?
4. How relevant is the reading material in the waiting/reception area to your clients? How up to date is it?
5. Are you completely happy with the tea/coffee/other drinks service you provide for your clients?
6. Make an honest assessment about the comfort and ambience of your waiting area(s). Do they really cut the mustard?
7. When did you last review your lighting? Are you using it creatively or doing little more than replace bulbs?
8. Look around your clinic and its treatment areas. Are they free from clutter? If not have you any plan to deal with the problem?
9. Are there areas within your clinic where patients can feel they speak in total confidentiality ? How would you rate the acoustics overall ?
10. How well are you using available space?
11. If you asked for an objective assessment of your business, do you feel it would be considered to be consistent in the messages it is getting over? Do you think it would be judged to be integrated or is there room for improvement?
12. With technology moving forward at the pace it is, two questions...how up to date is your business and secondly, to what extent are you future proofing it?

This list is by no means exhaustive. But I do hope it gets you thinking and is constructively helpful.

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