

THE ROLE OF OFFICE DESIGN IN PRACTICE GROWTH



Practice building can take many forms. Sometimes it means updating an old website or practice management system to improve practice visibility and patient retention. Sometimes it means hiring an associate or investing in new technology or services. And sometimes it means literally building a new physical space in which to work. When your office starts to feel too small for your business, working with an experienced dental practice design team will help you make the most out of your current footprint or help you expand it into the office of your dreams.

CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Good office design, good practice health and good patient care go hand in hand. Tim King, lead designer with Patterson Dental, notes that what frequently inspires an office redesign is a desire or need to upgrade to new equipment. “As you’re replacing equipment, why not stop and say, ‘Am I current? Am I modern? Am I providing my patients with a comfortable space in which to be treated or to wait?’” he asked. He also points to post-pandemic trends, such as changing reception room sizes and layouts to ensure patient comfort and increasing the size of sterilization areas to accommodate equipment and provide adequate counter space.

Adding new services can call for some adjustments to floor space as well. For example, King cites the growing business in single-visit crowns as the driver of some evolutions in office design – treatment rooms with space to accommodate equipment carts and lab areas with space for milling units and glazing furnaces rather than working with plaster.

Such changes may not require adding overall square footage, but they do need careful analysis of the existing space and planning to minimize inconvenience or, worse, office downtime. “Downtime is a killer in a dental office,” King noted.



ENHANCED EFFICIENCY

Efficiency becomes the name of the game, not only during the redesign process, but also in the end result. A floor plan that prioritizes the smoothest workflow and the fewest steps helps keep the practice on time and at maximum capacity.

Sometimes, it's just a matter of tweaking what you already have. "Many times, a doctor says, 'I'm in the perfect location, I have a great room, or my building is paid for. But I need to go just a little bit further to be ready for new patients.' It may be as simple as taking a private office and putting a new treatment room there. Or you might have storage in three different locations, and consolidating it frees up some space," King said.

CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITIES

Patterson Dental offers a range of design services to support everything from updating an individual operatory to new builds. The team helps you map out your vision and works with you to determine the best path forward – from choosing locations to selecting the best floor plan and equipment. To learn more and gain some inspiration, view Patterson's gallery of office designs at pattersondental.com/services/office-design/inspiration.

This is where the talent of an experienced designer comes into play. "When we start working on a plan in an existing office, that's one of the things I love doing, because it's an extra challenge to keep everything working without making

too many changes in the existing space," King said. "The first thing we start looking at is any space they have that's not being utilized to its full potential. What can we work with to make the office more correct, more attractive and easier to work in?"

King highly recommends getting the input of the whole dental team during this process. "Nobody knows how a practice works better than a doctor and their staff," he said. "I would suggest that for any plan, the doctor includes the staff, because they know all the steps they go through with each patient and all the things that will make an office more efficient. They might say, 'Look how far you're making us go just to do this,' or 'You're taking us all the way around the building to take a panoramic X-ray and then bringing the patient back.' Hopefully, I've already eliminated those steps," he laughed. "But the staff knows how the office works. If you keep the staff involved in the design, you'll get good suggestions from them."

Then, when the "perfect whole" has been agreed on, King makes sure each phase of the redesign process is equally smooth. Using the location of the sterilization area as an example, he explained, "If we put it in a location that is great for phase one, but doesn't serve phase two, in the end it only serves half well. We can't have an assistant running all the way across the building for sterilization. When the final product is presented, sterilization has to work for both halves of the office."

STAFF APPRECIATION

At least as important as expanding your practice for growth is retaining your team, both during and after the process. If possible, King recommends building in dedicated staff space, such as a lounge, to improve the work environment and be a light at the end of the tunnel. He also knows the value of the personal touch to give everyone a feeling of ownership. “If I talk with a doctor, and they mention that their business manager’s name is Sharon, then when I put the business manager’s office on the plan, I’ll put her name on it: ‘Sharon’s office,’” he said. “And she can say, ‘Oh yeah, that’s where I’ll work.’”

READY FOR BUSINESS

But which comes first, the business or the space? For King, the answer comes from the question, “Where do you want to end up?”

“It’s easy to plan for the business you’re doing today,” he said. “But if you only think about what’s happening today, are you going to be outgrowing this office 5 or 10 years down the road? So part of it is in the initial planning. Then when you get to that point, you can say, ‘Okay, I knew this day was coming. And this is what I’m going to do.’”

Planning for future expansion can require some creative thinking. King acknowledged that real estate – especially if part of it may initially sit empty – isn’t cheap. “If you can take on an extra few hundred, maybe a couple of thousand, square feet into your total space knowing that one day you’re going to want to take on an associate or double your hygiene, you’re way ahead of the game,” he said. Frequently, however, the question is, “How small can the office be and still have what it needs?” In those situations, preparing for growth may involve anticipating the future ability to lease adjacent space. Then, he said, “It’s not a matter of ‘I’ve outgrown what I have,’ it’s ‘I’ve grown into what’s available.’”

For inspiration and guidance with regard to what has worked for other doctors, King suggested consulting colleagues who have been through a similar redesign process and also enlisting the help of your Patterson representative. “Your representative can provide you with some sample plans to review,” he said. Another great way to develop ideas is to tour other successfully designed offices. “Many times, the equipment specialist sets up office tours so that you can see what’s working for another

doctor,” King said. “If it’s working for them, chances are you can adapt it and make it work for you.”

“I love my job,” King said. “It’s really neat to start working with a doctor and then see the finished product and realize that I played a small part in creating the office of their dreams, because that’s where it all starts: Whatever the doctor’s dream might happen to be.”

Ready to get started? Talk with your Patterson representative today.

