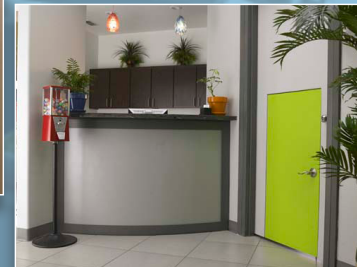
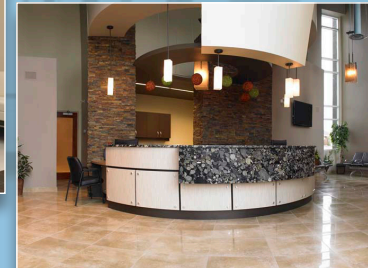
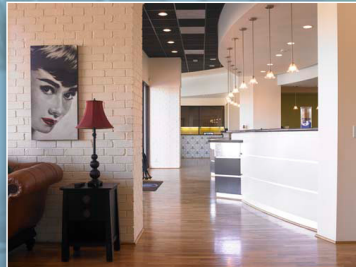


Defining *Your* Practice IDENTITY THROUGH OFFICE DESIGN



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The decision to build or redesign your dental practice is one of the most important decisions — and biggest investments — of your career. It will affect your efficiency, productivity, patient relations and your enjoyment of a prosperous and healthy dental career. Undertaking this project is a major endeavor.

Mark Tholen, DDS, MBA, is a leading expert on dental office design and a respected clinician and educator with more than 30 years of experience.

DPR spoke with Dr. Tholen, to find out what clinician's need to know to start the office design process.

Look the Part to be the Part

Here's an ugly truth: Looks matter. In marketing surveys in which patients were asked to judge quality of care based on practices' physical condition, no facility scored higher than 50 percent.

Regardless of your ability, your success does not depend solely on your dental diagnostic and treatment skills, but rather on your perceived competence as viewed from your patients' perspective.

"It's difficult to believe you can win the Indianapolis 500 if you show up in a Beetle, even if you have an unbelievable engine under the hood," says Dr. Tholen. "Many doctors are well-trained and capable but don't have an office that reflects that."

Patients, especially patients new to the practice, base their opinions on the level of care they will receive by assessing the quality of the office environment.

"Patients need to trust you're capable of care," says Dr. Tholen. "If providers' dress or the physical space looks rundown, patients will question if you can take care of them."

It takes patients about 90 seconds to size up your practice, and that first impression is difficult to change.

The appearance of your staff and the facility — including your signage, exterior and waiting room — must be consistent and convey quality care.

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Your Dream Office to Propel Your Success

Dentists interested in building or remodeling an office should devote their dollars to these categories, according to Tholen.

1. Lighting: This cost-effective design offers the most return on investment. Like in art galleries, lighting systems need to be designed to create the best effect; tap an architect to build a lighting plan to suit your space.

2. Furniture and fixtures: Dental offices put stress on materials, so make sure you choose pieces that last, from the wall coverings and floors to decorative flowers and art.

3. Equipment and technology: Invest in technology that maximizes efficiency and minimizes labor — the largest expense of any practice, consuming 25 percent of the operating budget. Design the sterilization area for maximum efficiency and create an efficient, ergonomic operatory with flexible rear delivery and four-handed dentistry.

4. The consultation room: Surgeons shouldn't have conversations with patients on the operating table, and the same goes for dentists in operatories. Create a comfortable space for patients that inspires confidence and trust.

Right Size Your Office

Indeed, size matters. But often doctors will say they want a new, larger office without examining — or articulating — why.

“People tell me they need more space so they can earn more money,” says Dr. Tholen. “But that can mean different things, depending on the dentist.”

For instance, some providers want to perform more complex dentistry, while others have design challenges that cause inefficiencies, like a small waiting room or a front desk that causes bottlenecks.

Additionally, dentists should plan for a facility that can handle growth. Providers often don't think about the number of operatories they'll for 20 years, which is the average lifespan of an office.

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“Most doctors undersize their new facility, and it’s mostly out of fear,” Dr. Tholen says. “Doctors will want a new office, but don’t want to spend the money. It’s like buying a suit at a great price but it’s too small.”

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR SPACE

Providers with limited space, particularly those in urban locations, can maximize their office space by minimizing certain areas.

Consider a smaller private office (built-in desks work wonders) or creating a smaller, coffee bar-style staff lounge.

Another tip? Go paperless. The front desk area can be much smaller without files and cabinets.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

For startups, location is an important consideration, but not as much for established practices, says Dr. Tholen. He recommends established practices that move offices remain within a 7-mile radius of their existing practice.



Why Function and Image Should Drive Design (Not Money)

There are two fundamental design criteria that should be foremost in your mind as you begin: Office function and office image.

Function refers to how the office works; image refers to how your office feels. Both are critical. A very simple formula that is critical to your success involves this equation: Functional dollars plus image dollars equals the degree of success you have in reaching your goals.

A common misconception is that a well-appointed office costs a great deal more than a relatively plain, simple office. In fact, it is just plain costly to build any technologically driven diagnostic and therapeutic dental office.

You are going to make an investment in your professional office because you expect a return on an investment.

If properly designed and constructed in an acceptable location your office will probably yield more financial return than any other investment you will make.

Estimate Your Cost Before You Build

Dental offices are far more costly to construct than almost any other type of office. First of all, there are many rooms confined to a relative space. There is much more framing, sheet rock, outlets and extensive plumbing.

Before the appearance of the office is considered, you have already invested a considerable amount. To create a minimally acceptable appearance for the office, Tholen says you will need to spend \$10 to \$15/sq. ft. for interior finishes such as carpet, furniture, and art.

But if you were to invest \$25 to \$30 per square foot, you will enjoy an office that portrays a strong statement concerning the quality of care.

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General design tips for a simple office update:

Update finishes: Reupholster waiting room furniture

Choose durable pieces: Opt for medical grade carpet and durable wall coverings.

Update lighting: Tap an architect to create the perfect lighting plan.

Upgrade wall art: Invest in expensive framing, even if the art is simply cheap prints.

Design Tips for a New Practice:

Visibility: Pick a location where your practice can be seen.

Quality signage: A visible sign is worth the investment.

Lighting: Patients visit after dark so make sure your signage and waiting room are lighted .

Keep a cushion: Working capital should equal to six months of practice expenses.

Design tips for an office renovation:

Keep the essentials: If you plan to practice during the remodel

the waiting room, front desk, restroom, central radiology, lab, mechanical room and bulk storage must remain functional.

Minimize practice downtime: Have an architect develop a construction-phasing plan.

Double down: Double the number of operatories and the square footage of the office if you plan to work during the reno.

Plan ahead: Whatever the project cost estimate, add 30% for loss of production during construction.

Design tip for an established practice new build:

Keep close: Stay within 7 miles from your existing office to prevent loss of patients.

Plan ahead: The average office lifespan is 17.5 years, so build the number of operatories you'll need for the future.

Estimate the cost: Once the project is completely planned, it can be completely priced out.

Ask the experts: An architect or civil engineer should evaluate the site before you purchase the space.

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Once the project is completely planned, it can be completely priced out.

To get an idea if you can fund the project, you'll need an understanding of capital and noncapital costs, costs of land of a full building and an idea of what equipment and furnishing costs, collect those costs and see what total cost will be.

Don't Do The Project Yourself: How to Assemble an Office Design Team

How do you put together your team? After stating your expectations and goals, you will be able to gauge the amount of assistance you will require, the amount of work you will do on your own, the financial commitment you will make and how much time you are willing to commit.

Your involvement can range from total immersion in the project to completely delegating the design of the office to a staff member, or, more appropriately, designer or architect. Delegation is ideal for a doctor who wants to devote minimal time and effort to the process, but remember that you are the one practicing in the facility for, on average, the next 17.5 years.

Regardless of how you delegate, there are four stages at which you must be involved. Request that the designer or architect confer directly with you at the following key decision points:

1. Your definition of the size and components of the office, which is expressed through the use of a design program questionnaire supplied by the designer.
2. Your final approval of the floor plan.
3. Your characterization of the elements of the interior design.
4. Your acceptance of the final detailed design drawings.

Dr. Tholen is the former CEO of T.H.E. Design with over 3,000 offices designed and built during his career. He is the author of "A Guide to Designing the Elegant Dental or Medical Office...The Largest Marketing Tool of Your Career" which is available on Amazon.com. Additionally, watch for his new release this summer which will be a book of 100 award winning floor plans with photographs; his firm's design have won the Dental Economics' office of the year award many times over the past two decades.