

What you need to know about building or up-fitting your new dental office

By Steven Peedin and Will Marshburn

The shortage of dentists in North Carolina has become a serious concern. According to the N.C. Institute of Medicine, North Carolina ranks 47th in the country for its supply of dentists, and 79 of our 100 counties qualify as dental health shortage areas. Our state has an estimated total population of nearly nine million, with only 3,900 licensed and practicing dentists to serve that population. With dentists primarily located in urban areas, the shortage of dental services is especially dire in rural parts of the state.

The good news is that small business grants are available to help dentists establish new practices. Whether you are a recent graduate from dental school or branching off on your own, there are many aspects to consider when starting your own practice. These helpful tips will ensure the successful construction of your new dental office or fit-up.

1. Location: The first thing you should consider is where you want to be located. This is both a lifestyle and business decision

that involves the town or city in which you will establish your practice, the patient demographics of that area, and where within the town your practice will be located.

2. Demographics: What patients are you trying to target? Do you want to help low-income families or work in an urban, high-income area? This may very well impact your patient volume, and therefore, your building needs.

3. New Free-Standing Building vs. Fit-Up: Building an entirely new office building is a luxury that has the potential to provide for a prime location complete with ample parking, choices of

architectural styles, and customization of amenities.

However, the fit-up option may be more realistic when practicing dentists go out on their own after apprenticing. A fit-up refers to constructing an office within an existing building or modifying an existing space to accommodate the unique needs of a dental practice.

4. Chairs: How many dentists will you have practicing in your

games in the reception areas and TV/DVD monitors at the chairs.

8. Equipment Supplier: Selecting a supplier is something you should do very early in the process. Once the space needs are planned, the dental equipment should be specified early so that any adjustments can be made in the design and building of the space. Your equipment supplier can also advise you on specialty lighting requirements. A very close relationship between the architect, general contractor, and equipment supplier is vital to the overall success of the project.

9. Communication Data: Paper files are being eliminated in dental practices. Technology is growing rapidly with patient records and x-rays stored and backed up electronically. Therefore, closet areas for paper file storage are being replaced with efficient storage space for network servers and cabling. It is important to consider your technological needs early in the process, with your IT/communications consultant being a part of the team

10. Cabinetry: This is a huge consideration that affects the design and construction of your new practice. Everything from the amount of overall storage, to the accessibility of frequently used equipment, to cabinet orientation should be planned up front. Think of a dental office as functioning like a big machine; equipment should be within easy reach. The office will operate much more efficiently with well-planned cabinetry.

Your new space is crucial to the success of your practice and to the overall dental care you provide. When selecting your project team, look for a company that is competent and experienced in designing and building dental offices. A design-build contractor will take single-source responsibility for the project, including planning, design, equipment supplier and IT vendor coordination, building permits, construction, and interior design. This integrated approach allows you to avoid the pitfalls that often come with having multiple consultants to coordinate.

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office? This determines how many chairs you will need.

5. Parking: Chairs and staff determine the number of patients you can see, and this of course determines your parking needs. Adequate parking is important for your patients' convenience. Be sure to fully investigate parking availability before choosing a location.

6. Space Requirements: Some factors to consider when selecting space include the configuration of that space and any existing infrastructure that remains from a previous tenant. Consider your needs for reception area, number of bathrooms, and support areas – including x-ray lab, consultation room, training area, and break room. A new trend is dentists opting for an open operatory setting vs. traditional private patient rooms. Based on your preference, look for space with wide open rooms for easy access to multiple patients or individual operatories for patient privacy.

7. Environment: Another consideration is the office atmosphere and interior theme. Some popular trends include skylights and windows for abundant natural light and aquariums for a soothing environment. These elements set the mood of your office and produce a calming effect for your patients. Video games and other entertainment are also offered in many new practices. Kids and adults alike are enjoying video

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