

ORTHODONTIC OFFICE DESIGN

Attracting Patients to Your Practice

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Orthodontists have always accepted the challenges of keeping abreast with advances in the profession and perfecting new techniques to better serve their patients. During the recent recession, they have faced the additional challenge of improving the business side of their practices. Many families consider orthodontics an elective decision, especially when budgets are tight. Even successful, established practices are now competing to attract patients from a smaller pool.

Parents are increasingly seeking second and third opinions about treatment. In some cases, the fee or fee arrangement will be the decisive factor. Still, many differences among practices, both subtle and obvious, can emerge during the patient's introduction to the office and initial examination, sometimes outweighing the fee issue. Orthodontists who are not selected for treatment should be more than curious about the reasons why at a time when case acceptance ratios are declining.

Professionally trained, dedicated doctors may find it difficult to accept that patients could doubt their advice or good will, but they should never rely merely on prospective patients' ability to judge their skill and quality of care. Attracting

patients is largely a matter of human nature. As the late Bud Schulman, the successful businessman and pioneer in orthodontic practice administration, once said, "There comes a time in a growing practice when the physical aspects of an office become a roadblock to future success, enjoyment of the practice, and increased income."¹ Simply put: in the patient's eyes, the quality of the office equals the quality of care.

There are three basic options for making major improvements to the image of an orthodontic office:

- Relocating the office
- Remodeling the current office (exterior or interior)
- Redecorating the current office (furniture and colors)

Before deciding on relocation, a demographic study of potential areas is critical. This should include growth predictions, present population age and income levels, and the presence of nearby schools (especially secondary), shopping centers, referring dentists, and hospitals.

Whether you decide to construct a new building or simply upgrade your present office, however, there are design details that can be incorporated to make your practice unique and attractive to potential patients. This article presents a number of special features that have worked for orthodontists around the country. Some of these ideas are adaptable to existing offices with only minimal alterations.

Building Design

Before the advent of dental advertising, it used to be said, "Your biggest legal sign is your



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Fig. 1 Lighting used to striking effect outside office of Dr. Mark Hatala in Johnson City, NY.



Fig. 2 Exceptional courtyard and landscaping enhance office of Dr. Jay Singer, Coral Springs, FL.



Fig. 3 Impressive exterior with interesting window features shown in architectural rendering of Dr. Jim Hannigan's office in Tomball, TX.

dental office building.” The building can still be a powerful external marketing vehicle, especially if it is attractive, well located, and clearly visible to drive-by traffic, with adequate on-site parking. Although many of these qualities can be found in a medical center or a rental property within a high-end shopping center, ownership of a freestanding building conveys complete control over the exterior appearance, landscaping, and signage.

Dr. Mark Hatala's office building in Johnson City, NY, has many features to attract potential patients' attention: outstanding visibility, curb appeal, and unique design (Fig. 1). The building placement takes advantage of the site's contours to allow two functional floors, including ground-level access on the lower floor (normally a basement). This design satisfies the requirements for accessibility of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Another eye-catching office is a freestanding building owned by Dr. Jay Singer of Coral Springs, FL (Fig. 2). Surrounded by extraordinary landscaping, palm trees, and foliage, it also has excellent signage in full view of passing traffic.

Figure 3 is an architectural rendering of Dr. Jim Hannigan's office building in Tomball, TX. It shows a striking exterior design with a metal roof, exceptional stonework, and well-placed window treatments. Western exposures are protected by overhangs that allow expansive views while protecting the interior from the Texas heat. These kinds of surroundings give patients and their families confidence in the quality of work being performed in the practice.

Interior Design

Whether a practice remains in its current location or relocates, internal changes are the simplest, quickest way to improve its image. Offices that present a welcoming, positive atmosphere in upbeat surroundings will be in the best position to build and sustain vigorous practices, even in troubling financial times. An exceptional reception area is of paramount importance, given that patients and parents form immediate impressions of the office as soon as they open the door.

A reception room was traditionally expected

to function only as a seating area, served by one secretary behind an appointment desk. Today, the term that better describes this part of the office is “reception/secretarial complex”, reflecting multiple changes in function and activities. Current practices are bigger, and daily patient loads have increased. The trend toward abandoning the on-deck area, which once accommodated four or more patients and parents in the operatory, now requires more seats in the reception room. Game rooms, formerly located in or adjacent to the operatory, are now part of the reception complex. A larger, attractive, open design provides enough room for two or more receptionists during busy times, thus avoiding backups of patients waiting for appointments.

Dr. Hatala’s spacious office design allocated a generous proportion of square footage to the reception/secretarial complex. An impressive reception desk greets patients and easily accommodates two or more secretaries as needed (Fig. 4). The central sign-in area can be used by disabled patients. The reception-area design imparts a welcoming tone, and the furniture makes it feel like a living room. Because the interior decorator had the luxury of space, individual cushioned seats and sofas could be used to help distinguish this reception room from that of an average doctor’s office.

How many “extras” will be feasible depends on the size of the office and the amount of space dedicated to the reception/secretarial complex. For example, a kiddie area might be included if it can be easily monitored by parents in comfortable seats nearby. Placing a game room adjacent to, but separate from, the main seating area is ideal, if space permits; this might include computer games and posters appealing to teenagers and other age groups (Fig. 5). In smaller offices, perimeter alcoves requiring less space can hold one or two games. Because many games come with sound-control devices, proper acoustical treatment of such an alcove minimizes any disturbance of the main seating area. Some children do compare orthodontic offices on the basis of game areas, and they can thus influence their parents’ choice of practices.

If the office is in a colder climate, a fireplace



Fig. 4 Reception desk for two or more assistants with central sign-in area in Dr. Hatala’s office.



Fig. 5 Large game room can accommodate several teenagers in Dr. Hatala’s office.



Fig. 6 Elegantly designed fireplace with comfortable seating in Dr. Hatala’s office.



Fig. 7 On-deck alcove in office of Dr. David Hamula, Monument, CO, where central island with skylight allows views of Rocky Mountains.



Fig. 8 “Hostess” office with view of reception room, front desk, and operatory traffic flow in Dr. Hamula’s office.

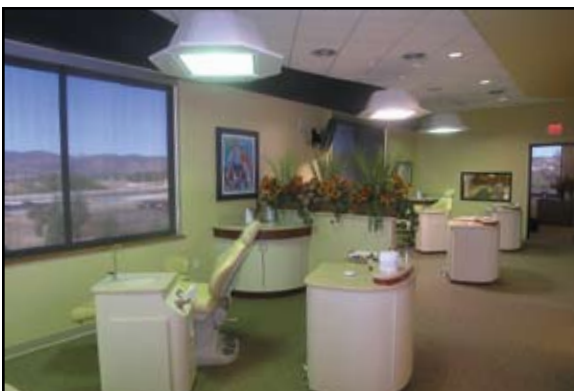


Fig. 9 Adult work station with rear-delivery cabinet system and side utility center in Dr. Hamula’s office.

can transmit a warm feeling throughout the entire room. Figure 6 shows an elegant fireplace surrounded by its own private seating area. A large television screen, mounted at a distance for privacy, and a second, similar fireplace are also located in the room.

Some doctors still use the on-deck concept and enjoy its advantages. After signing in and brushing, patients have the choice of going to a game room or directly to the on-deck area of the operatory. Parents can be provided with a comfortable seating area if they desire to observe treatment (Fig. 7). Some doctors have even designed chair-side seating for parents, based on the principle that an open-door policy contributes to better patient cooperation and parental communication, which results in more effective practice-building.²

The “Hostess Concept”

A host or hostess is usually introduced into either a growing practice that wants to grow faster or a larger, busy office that wants to protect its patient base and continue to grow by developing a warm, service-oriented environment.³ This special way of introducing patients to the office at the critical examination visit builds patient confidence and thus a higher acceptance rate.

A friendly reminder call by the host the day before an appointment can promote a reassuring first impression. Consider the pleasant surprise when a mother is met in the reception room by a smiling staff person, greeted by name, and escorted to the front desk. She is then taken to a pleasant, private room and assisted in filling out the health history in an unhurried atmosphere. Contrast this with the common routine of parents finding the front desk on their own and being handed a clipboard full of papers to be filled out in the reception room—a cold introduction for such an important appointment.

The host should be one of the most adept, experienced staff members in the practice and should work closely with the treatment coordinator, who will appreciate the help in a busy practice. The host should have a separate office that allows full view of the reception room, front desk, and

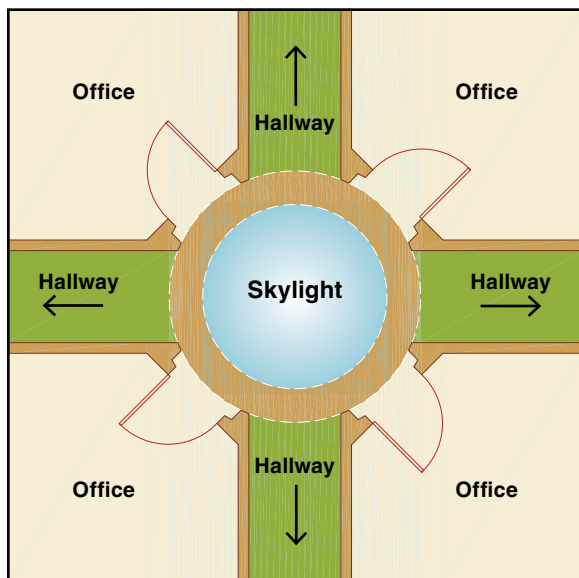


Fig. 10 Octagonal rotunda makes hallways more interesting and functional.

traffic to and from the operatory (Fig. 8). If examinations are to be done in that room, of course, the host's office needs to be larger.

Catering to Adults

Dr. Eugene L. Gottlieb, founder of JCO, was one of the first to recognize the potential of adult treatment. As early as 1986, he criticized the opinion of most orthodontists that "adult patients are no different from child patients", suggesting that standard operatory design was geared toward treating the younger set.⁴ He suggested that every orthodontist should make adults feel a special part of the practice.⁵

Today, in many offices, adults are an important demographic segment that is no longer overlooked. Because adults prefer not to brush in open view of children, for example, orthodontists sensitive to this and other differences now provide more privacy. Adults are often seated in the reception room, greeted by a host or assistant, and escorted to a chair in the adult area of the operatory.

Figure 9 shows a decorative divider between a teen bay and a two-chair adult bay. The adult area is equipped with the latest cabinetry systems and its own corner brushing and sink area. Other confidence builders for adults, who are keenly aware of their surroundings, might include:

- Sterilization techniques performed in full view of the operatory.
- Scrupulous use of gloves by all staff at all times.
- Avoidance of old dental equipment with hoses and plumbing connections cluttering up the floor.

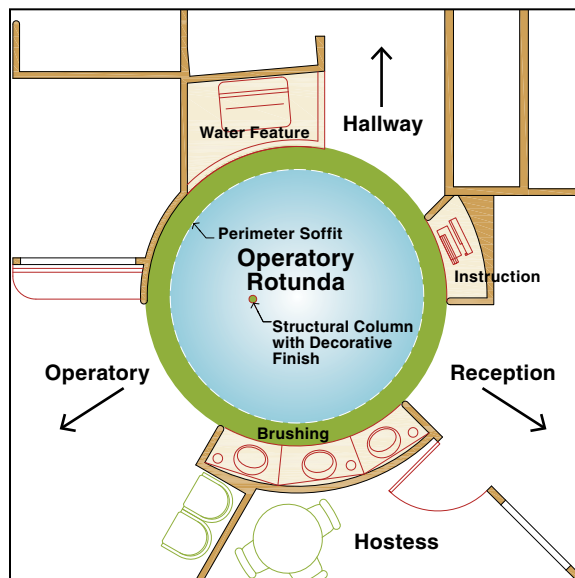


Fig. 11 Spacious rotunda with skylight, controlling three traffic avenues to operatory in office of Dr. David Hamula.

- A chairside utility center with clean cups, a water dispenser, a tissue dispenser, a rinsing bowl, and a trash dispenser.

Perks for adults are easier to design into new facilities or existing offices with ample space. With some imagination, however, many of these recommendations can be implemented even in small spaces to give adults a more positive office experience.

Rotunda Design

A rotunda can be an exceptional feature to incorporate when remodeling any size office. Even in a smaller building, when properly placed, it creates a feeling of space, especially at hallway intersections. It can also break up the boring appearance of long, narrow hallways and enhance traffic flow throughout the office.

The size of a rotunda depends on its function. Figure 10 shows a rotunda of appropriate diameter for use primarily as a continuation of hallway traffic. The octagon is a typical shape when four hallways intersect. With 4'-wide hallways, the angulated perimeter walls are wide enough to allow access into adjacent rooms if necessary. A rotunda can also contribute to an interesting ceiling treatment. Space permitting, the ceiling can be elevated, and covered fluorescent lighting can simulate the look of a skylight.

Dr. David Hamula of Monument, CO, created a spacious circular rotunda that helps control three major traffic arteries in a 4,500-square-foot office (Fig. 11). Although it is placed along the



Fig. 12 Dr. Hamula's esthetic rotunda has perimeter space for waterfall, brushing area, and stand-up consultation area.



Fig. 13 Dr. Singer's reception room simulates art gallery with painting reproductions, skylight, spotlighting, and indirect soffit lighting.



Fig. 14 Surfboard on-deck bench with mural helps create three-dimensional shoreline scene in Dr. Singer's office.

main patient route to the operatory, it is roomy enough to incorporate a toothbrushing area, a stand-up consultation enclosure, and a decorative waterfall on its perimeter (Fig. 12). A challenge arose during construction when an unmovable support column for the roof was discovered within the planned rotunda space. The solution was to paint the column as an aspen tree with branches stretching upward into the rotunda skylight. A circular soffit with uplighting now accents a blue-painted sky, complete with clouds. Because the column did not interfere with the patient traffic pattern, a potential problem was solved with an interesting effect.

Decorative Themes

Pediatric dentists have had some success in designing their offices around decorative themes because they work with a limited age group. For an orthodontist, it can be almost impossible to develop a common theme that all ages can enjoy.

Dr. Singer's office represents a blend of two themes, both unique artistic expressions. In the reception room and surrounding area, the walls are adorned with well-known paintings reproduced by Dr. Singer himself (Fig. 13). With its spotlighting and soffit lighting, this section takes on the appearance of an art gallery—which fits well with the practice's slogan, "Creative Smiles Are a Work of Art".

At the operatory entrance is an on-deck bench that is actually a large surfboard (Fig. 14). Imaginative, three-dimensional murals depict a fishing village on a bay, making the bench appear to be outside. This illusion is created by a pelican placed about 18" in front of the mural wall and in line with the arch above. The open-bay operatory contains many more 3D applications, creating a feeling of space and making it an exciting room in which to work.⁶ In the operatory, called the "Ocean Terrace", patients seated in the chairs and looking through the arches feel as if they are looking down at the bay in the distance, even though the operatory is actually on the same level as the rest of the office (Fig. 15). Downlighting to enhance this 3D terrace effect is housed in soffits behind the arch-

es. Televisions are mounted on a decorative soffit that is part of the archway system encircling the operatory. During construction, the doctor took the operatory ceiling height to its maximum to develop a dramatic ceiling of sky and clouds that can be enjoyed throughout the operatory. Uplighting from perimeter soffits makes the design even more stunning and supplies ambient light for the operatory (Fig. 16).

Conclusion

Patients' and parents' decisions on selection of an orthodontist are influenced by both external and internal impressions of the office. Office relocation may be necessary if a practice is to achieve a new level of success, but many of the features shown in this article can be added with minimal remodeling. Physical improvements can go only so far, however; the first three to four minutes of any personal relationship are the key to its success. Everyday application of this three-to-four-minute test in a well-designed office will bring gratifying results to both orthodontist and patients.

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Fig. 15 Dr. Singer's operatory presents illusion of looking at ocean from terrace.



Fig. 16 Decorative soffit encircling Dr. Singer's operatory accommodates chairside televisions, with painted sky and clouds above.