

ORTHODONTIC OFFICE DESIGN Survey of Orthodontic Students on Practice Facility Preferences

[WARREN HAMULA, DDS, MSD](#)

Most orthodontists who are considering selling their practices look toward recent graduates as the most likely buyers. In 2001, 260 residents graduated from U.S. orthodontic programs. Of these, however, only about 200 would probably become associates or buyers of private practices, because of the following circumstances:

- λ Many foreign students return to their homelands.
- λ Some students enter the educational field.
- λ Some enter military service.
- λ Some affiliate with management service organizations.
- λ Some enter practice with relatives or parents.
- λ Some choose to open their own private practices.

A poll of prospective orthodontic retirees indicated that 27% expected to sell their practices outright, while 66% planned to take the associate approach.¹ Therefore, of the estimated 259 orthodontists retiring in 2002,² as many as 93% (about 240) were competing for perhaps 200 graduates. Orthodontists contemplating retirement might well wonder what practice characteristics will attract a potential buyer and result in a sale.

A recent survey showed that 80% of graduating students want a highly profitable practice in a favorable location.³ But many other factors can have an impact on an orthodontist's ability to sell a practice, including the quality of the facility and working environment.⁴

With the cooperation of JCO and various orthodontic departments throughout the country, a student practice preference survey was conducted to determine the relative significance of these factors.

Survey Methodology

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 18 factors in practices they might consider buying (3 = very important, 2 = somewhat important, 1 = not important), assuming that financial arrangements and geographic locations were equivalent.

One hundred sixty-five students participated in the survey. Responses were tabulated and are shown as percentages and mean scores (Table 1) and in graph form (Fig. 1).

Discussion

Orthodontists nearing retirement should consider the importance of question No. 1. It is not unusual for established practices that are located in the downtown areas of large cities to move to suburban growth areas with future transition in mind.

The appearance of the office building was rated very important by 78% of the students (No. 2), but the most important factor in the survey seemed to be the ambiance projected by the reception room

and business area (No. 8). A modern, efficient working environment was also very important to 60% of the respondents (No. 3), as was a facility large enough to allow for future expansion (No. 4). The view from the operatory was considered less important (No. 11). These responses indicate that if a practice currently projects a less-than-average impression, remodeling might be needed to place the retiring orthodontist in a competitive situation.

A substantial number of high-income practices depend on satellite offices to provide enough patients for two doctors. Although some students thought it was important not to be involved in a satellite, most rated this factor as only moderately important (No. 5).

A long lease that would protect the buyer's occupancy was very important to three out of four respondents (No. 7). This would favor an orthodontist who owns the practice building or condominium. On the other hand, 59% of the students felt the opportunity to purchase the practice building was not very important (No. 6).

An operatory design allowing two doctors to work simultaneously during the mentorship did not appear to be a significant concern (No. 9), nor did the availability of space for the associate to have a private office (No. 12). These answers might imply that most graduates were not envisioning long-term associations.

Two-thirds of the students felt it was very important to have an efficient chairside delivery system and cabinetry (No. 10). Outdated operatory equipment is obviously a disadvantage for a seller, because a buyer does not want to invest money immediately to upgrade the most important area of production. Similarly, two-thirds of the respondents rated the exam/consultation area as very important (No. 14), although the students did not wholeheartedly endorse the one-appointment case presentation (No. 13).

Computerization did not seem to be a significant enticement to prospective practice buyers. A little more than half of the respondents felt a highly computerized practice was very important (No. 15), but a digital x-ray system was the least important factor in the survey (No. 16).

Amenities for patients and staff were rated only somewhat important by most respondents (Nos. 17 and 18). It may be that without having been in private practice, the students do not yet appreciate the significance of these two areas. In my experience, orthodontists building new offices or moving to larger facilities are quick to express their desire to provide extras for loyal parents and patients and for dedicated staff members.

Conclusion

The size of the response to this survey indicates that it may provide a reliable indication of what orthodontic graduates are looking for in their prospective practices. With financial and geographical considerations factored out, the questions concentrated on the importance of practice facilities. The answers demonstrated that students tend to set high standards in their evaluation process. Orthodontists who plan to sell their practices can use this information as a guide for upgrading their facilities to make them more attractive to potential buyers. •

FIGURES