

A designer dental practice

Is your dental reception more 1977 than 2007? Could it do with a designer makeover? Or perhaps you're opening a brand new practice... If so, you'll be interested in what **Paul Reilly**¹ has to say.

First impressions

What makes a well designed dental practice in the twenty-first century? My expertise in reception counter design has been greatly enhanced by the fact that I recently faced some major dental work in more than one practice, and have therefore studied the subject from both a professional and personal perspective. For me, the welcoming appeal is very important. Even some modern surgeries have used the clinical approach which, if not balanced with a hint of cosiness, can result in a sterile 'next on the slab' feeling! For many, just walking through the entrance door of the dentist is a daunting experience.

Put yourself in the patient's position. The first thing you usually see as you enter the practice is the reception desk. This is also what you might stare at with increasing impatience to get the whole episode over and done with. So, the reception desk is an important piece of furniture.

Firstly, it has to have a combination of heights and depths to cater for different types of clientele, for example the elderly, children, and Special Care patients. A standing height counter can create both a physical and

psychological barrier between the patient and the dental receptionist; it also prevents an easy sight line to the entrance and access to the rest of the practice – possibly compromising security, but also obstructing a welcoming smile.

Since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act these high counters could be considered to be illegal as they do not provide a wheelchair access point. Of course, disability comes in many forms, so the reception desk should in theory also incorporate a hearing loop, contrasting features or focus lighting to help guide the visually impaired and if money is exchanged, a tactile slope surface so that coins do not roll onto the floor. (If you're thinking that your practice does not comply with all these recommendations, don't panic: not many do!)

Multi-height counters are desirable because openness is created. A deeper work surface is useful at the lower desk height sections because it gives more space for both patient and receptionist while increasing security – ie increasing the reach distance between them. This can also be enhanced by adding fixed glass shelves at appropriate points.

¹ Paul Reilly is the CEO of Hands. Founded in 1906 by a skilled cabinet and chair maker, Hands designs and manufactures high-quality furniture. They are particularly renowned for their reception or 'front of house' environments, using sustainable materials. Web: www.hands.co.uk. Telephone: 01494 524222.



Clockwise from left: an example of a poorly-designed reception counter; an example of how it should be done; our cover girl browsing swatches; metal kick plates.

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Easy on the eye

‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ ... so the finish of the reception is to personal taste; however, there are certain ground rules. It is advisable to fit a wipe-clean floor such as a non-slip ceramic tile, and introducing interesting timber finishes will give the area visual warmth. From both staff and visitors’ perspectives wood is also warmer to the touch and creates an inviting environment. Children’s toys, soothing music and a good choice of magazines all provide welcome distraction for patients too.

From a refurbishment point of view you can refresh an ageing timber counter by sanding it down and repolishing it to whatever is in fashion at the time – impossible with cheap laminate offerings. If metal laminates are to be used they are best confined to base areas where they are practical as ‘kick plates’ (see photo, top of page).

Curves are good in the general design both because they are inviting and from a health and safety perspective – avoiding sharp corners. The Feng Shui (an ‘ancient Chinese practice of placement and arrangement of space to achieve harmony within the

environment’ – Wikipedia) also sends positive waves right into the treatment room, just where they’re needed!

Sitting pretty

From the receptionist’s angle the reception desk needs to be ergonomically sound. Most counters I have viewed recently provided pitifully little space, with the appointment book fighting for room with the keyboard, while the mouse had no chance.

The *Working with VDU* regulations set out in the early 1990s were qualified by the introduction of BS EN ISO 9241 Part 5 *Workstation layout and postural requirements* in 1999. This clearly states the statutory requirements which should be strictly followed in the reception counter design as a formal workstation. You must have sufficient space to work at the monitor at a comfortable (approximately 500–600 mm) viewing distance and it must be adjustable for height and tilt. The desk must also allow a flexible arrangement of all the other equipment.

The chair must also be fully adjustable, giving good lumbar support, which is particularly important if the receptionist role is

cover feature



Pictures of a clinic in London which Paul and his team have just finished working on.

shared. A foot stool must also be supplied if required by the operator.

I would make one big appeal: to please not buy cheap; it will show, it will be difficult to attract and keep good staff and, take it from me, it makes the patient wonder where else money has been saved ... even if this is not the case.

Security & finishing touches

In recent years the dental reception has also been made into a shop counter where payments are made for both services and goods. Security is once again paramount. A till or safe may have to be built into the counter in a convenient but at the same time discreet position. For all of these services and products (toothbrushes, mouthwash, etc) specific space must be made for point of sale material as well as the actual product. This could be in glass fronted cabinets built into the patient-facing side of the counter or more simply, on revolving desktop units.

Of course now that the price of LCD and plasma screen audio visual systems are more affordable they allow the potential of advertising as well as entertainment and therefore

'From both staff and visitors' perspectives wood creates a warm, inviting environment.'

must be strategically sited. Ultimately they are now a feature of many a modern, warm and welcoming dental reception. As long as they are switched on!

With thanks to the staff at Hands Innovation Centre where this issue's cover shoot took place, and to Anna, our cover girl.

To see more examples of receptions installed by Hands, visit their website at www.hands.co.uk.

COMPETITION



Has your dental practice recently had a makeover? Do you have before and after pics? If you fancy showing off your snazzy new interior to *Vital* readers, contact vitaleditorial@nature.com and be in with a chance of winning this Animal Toy Box for your surgery, donated by Admor (www.admor.co.uk telephone 01243 553078). Entries must be received by 1 May 2007.

