A design for life

Dr Carol Somerville Roberts talks about seeing your vision evolve into a reality when it comes to updating your practice

As I stand in the delightful reception area of Evolve Dentistry, remembering our successful launch on February 20 2009, I cannot help recalling the journey I took to get here.

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Famous last words?

The biggest obstacle was of a financial nature. At the time, I did not really know how much the project would ultimately cost, or how the necessary finance would be secured. Of course, there was that other voice, asking me: what if I fail?

One big issue for me was time. I was doing this alone, and juggling every aspect of developing a new practice as well as working as an associate. I was a wife and a mother, too. I had previously set four weeks in which to prepare myself for opening the practice. The delay meant that I had five months between finishing as an associate to the old practice and starting in the new one - I used one minute of it, emailing every morning and every night, and working on the project through the day. This hiccup turned out to be a blessing in disguise... anyone hoping to follow in my footsteps should definitely plan to have a few months off in between!

Help came out of the blue. Just four days after making the decision to open my own practice, I attended the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry Conference, and found myself at a seminar where Simon Hocken was launching Breathe Business. Having a wealth of experience in dentistry, including running practices of his own, Simon was keen to help dental professionals step up to a whole new level of expertise, with a range of innovative yet proven toolkits and strategies.

It had never occurred to me to work with a coach; in truth, I did not even know that they existed in dentistry. However, I had finally found someone who was talking my language. Achieving great results is about being given the key to a door that had been previously locked. Simon helped me to understand what aspects of dental practice are most important, and where compromises simply cannot be made. Right from the outset, I saw how to measure the success of the practice, and how marketing would play a crucial role. I also started financial planning, realising that I would need a financial cushion to compensate for a drop in income.

Breathing easy

Working with Breathe Business felt like being given the key to a door that had been previously locked. Simon helped me to understand what aspects of dental practice are most important, and where compromises simply cannot be made. Right from the outset, I saw how to measure the success of the practice, and how marketing would play a crucial role. I also started financial planning, realising that I would need a financial cushion to compensate for a drop in income.

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Regular meetings, phone calls and emails with Simon kept me on the right track, and made me aware of potential pitfalls. He provided me with contacts whenever I needed them, and his advice ensured that I always got good deals. Whenever I felt that I was drowning, he helped me prioritise, delegate and retain control.

A design for life

When it came to interior design, I relied on my own instincts. I had a clear picture of how I wanted the reception area and treatment rooms to look, and I am so proud of the result. Every visitor to the practice is impressed, even those in the trade, who see great practices every day! I used my awareness of how patients feel when they enter a practice, to develop an interior that was welcoming. It really doesn’t feel like a dental practice. Our reception area has a lot of light, with natural wood floors, flowers and a drinks island where patients can enjoy tea, coffee and champagne. In the surgery, patients can watch DVDs during treatment.

My working week is split between three days of clinical time in the practice, and two days managing the business; reviewing our marketing, bringing Health & Safety and fire regulations up to date, and helping my reception team maintain a high standard of customer care. I keep the practice moving forward, without having to give up my evenings!

My advice to anyone wanting to ‘go it alone’ in dentistry is to use a coach. Simon and his team have supported me throughout the process, and still continue to do so. I would also advise having a contingency fund, to cater for those sudden and unforeseeable expenses. To succeed, you need to be ambitious, creative and positive, and you need passion. I would also say that an ‘exit strategy’ should be considered; I have created a brand that is not built around me, important when it comes to expanding or selling the practice.

Right now, I love coming to work here every day. In the bigger picture, I would love to be my own boss. In the short term, my second practice should right the local area come up, but for now, I am simply enjoying being at Evolve Dentistry.

To contact Breath Business or Dr Simon Hocken, call 0845 209 7209 or email info@nowbreathe.co.uk.

About the author

Carol Somerville Roberts graduated from Bristol University in 1996. In the following year she worked in Shepton Mallet, Bath and Bristol and most recently as an associate in a private practice in Nailsea for eight years. In 2001, she gained her MFDS from Edinburgh and in the same year became a sildenafil associate of the Faculty of Homeopathy. She is a full member of the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentists (RACD) and the Society for the Advancement of Anaesthesia in Dentistry (SAAD). In January 2009, she launched Evolve Dentistry, a wholly private practice in Portishead.