

# Mouth



**Thriving dentists**  
Having a successful business

**Location, location**  
Considering all the options

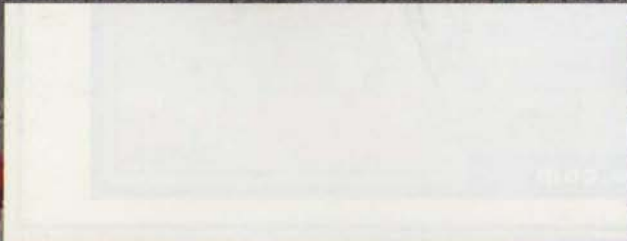
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**Building a dream  
practice**

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# Practices made perfect:

## Follow these tips for a successful dental office

by Jennifer Jones

It's no secret how stressful job interviews can be, especially when you're asked broad questions such as, "Where do you see yourself in 10 years?" The answer to this dreaded query is often hard to pin down for professionals in many industries. But ask a prospective dentist and you'll likely hear, "Running my own successful practice in [dream location here]."

For those who have identified and are striving for that goal, congrats! You're one step ahead of the game. But, like any good dental scout, have you prepared yourself for other questions that may need to be answered in order to reach that point? Give yourself the following "virtual job interview"—you may be surprised at the results.

### What kind of practice do you see yourself running and how do you plan to get it off the ground?

Whether you're studying to become a general dentist or a specialist, becoming an associate after finishing school is a great route to set you on the path to your own practice, says Dr. Jennifer Rens, a general dentist practicing in La Jolla, Calif. After graduating from Northwestern University Dental School, she worked as an associate for five years with her father, who has been practicing for almost 30 years. "The best way to learn right out of school is to associate with dentists who have been practicing for a long time because they've made all the mistakes already," Rens says.

By working as an associate, you not only have the advantage of learning by observing, but you can also glean whether running your own practice is



Front row (Left to Right): Sandra Moreno, Dr. Adri Moyano and Norma Pacheco. Back row (Left to Right): Margie Morales, Brenda Collazo, Damaris Rivera and Dr. Ted Siegel. Siegel encourages a relaxed atmosphere in his practice for his staff pictured above, as well as for the satisfaction of his patients.

something that suits you. Dr. Ted Siegel, a general dentist in Chicago, suggests that not every dentist will necessarily enjoy running his or her own practice. "I don't know that everyone is cut out to be the owner," he says. "Not everyone wants to hire and fire and set up and buy buildings and remodel. It's a lot of work, but some people love it. It depends where your personality falls and what works for you."

If starting your own practice is something you want to do right out of school, then there are many ways to do it successfully. Start by visiting other dentists in the area

and taking note of what has worked for them. See if any of them would be willing to act as a mentor to you in your early stages. Dr. Ace Goerig, an endodontic specialist in Olympia, Wash., strongly advocates associating yourself with a dentist whose business model you admire. "Look for a model that is profitable, runs well and in which everyone works together as a team," Goerig says.

After simulating that business model, decide on a vision for your office and put it on paper. It can be as simple as a paragraph stating your ethics and goals,



# a guide for students

or as complex as a full business plan with a lengthy personal and professional statement. Goerig says that vision will then act "as a magnet, which brings into your life what you want and gives you direction for where you're going." He should know: he's been on the professional lecture circuit for years and has effectively coached many dentists to prosperous business models. Goerig also recommends working with a practice management consultant who can help you identify systems for an efficient business.

Another consideration is cost. Most recent graduates are in debt and don't have the capital to get started. One viable option is to buy out a retiring dentist—this cuts down considerably on equipment costs and provides you with an existing patient base. Other avenues are available. Siegel started his practice primarily with public aid. Coupled with a desire to work with unwed moms and children, it was his way of "giving back to the community," he says, and his practice has flourished in a blue-collar, Hispanic Chicago neighborhood.

## Are you prepared to run the business side of your practice?

It's important to remember that dentistry is not only a profession and a craft, but also a business. When Goerig started a private practice after 20 years of military work, he didn't quite grasp the business aspect. After taking courses, bringing in a practice management consultant and visiting other practices, he was able to begin keeping track of the numbers, setting production goals on a daily basis and collecting from patients at the time of service. "Until you take the time to learn the business and you really become aware of the numbers, you're just working hard, not effectively," Goerig says.

Rens experienced similar challenges with her foray into private practice. Like many other students, dental school gave her the knowledge and skills needed to practice dentistry, but provided only basic education on actual day-to-day operations. She

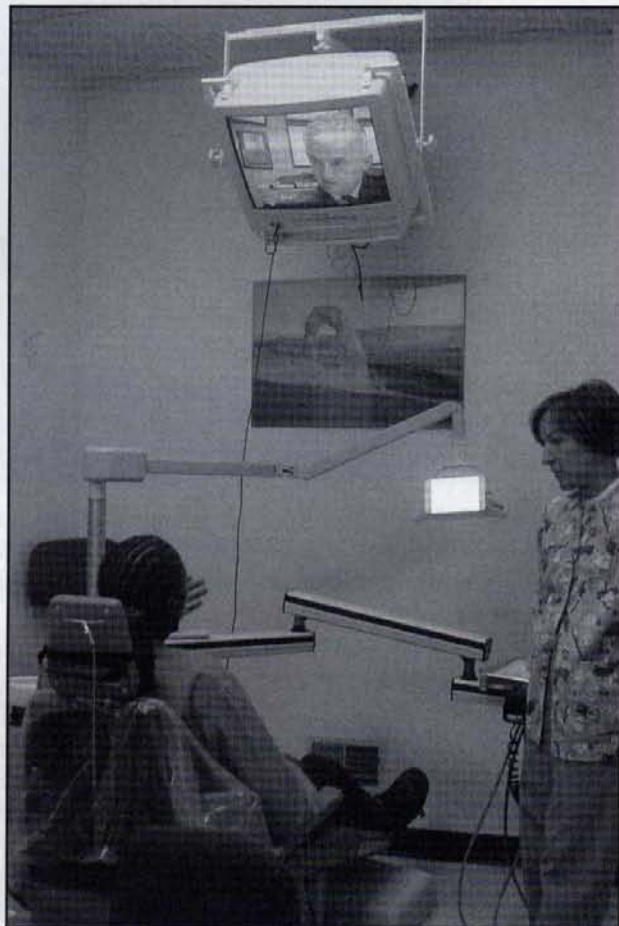
asserts that for many years, she was clinically oriented and focused on learning the most recent techniques to provide her patients with the best service possible. Highly admirable—but she soon learned that she needed to address the financial side to keep the practice running efficiently. "It's something you learn as you go, and it's very pivotal as you progress with your practice," Rens says.

## How will you stay up-to-date on new technology and industry progress?

Don't forget—your education doesn't end when you graduate from school. Continuing education is absolutely vital to a thriving practice, says Siegel. To learn how to manage his practice he took a business course, which helped. "It showed me what businesses are and how they run and it took out some of the mystery," Siegel says. "I definitely think anyone who feels they need more business knowledge should do that."

You can choose to continue your education through books, tapes, seminars, industry journals and by joining professional societies. The possibilities are endless and the rewards plentiful. "Those who want to be the best dentist that they can will continue to seek knowledge," Siegel says.

Also, take advantage of time while you are still in dental school, advises Rens. She suggests that students should focus on fundamentals. "These are the key to building on your continuing education in the future," she says. After all, when you truly understand the basics of dentistry, you'll be better able to understand new technologies as they emerge and how they apply. When you have a full grasp of the



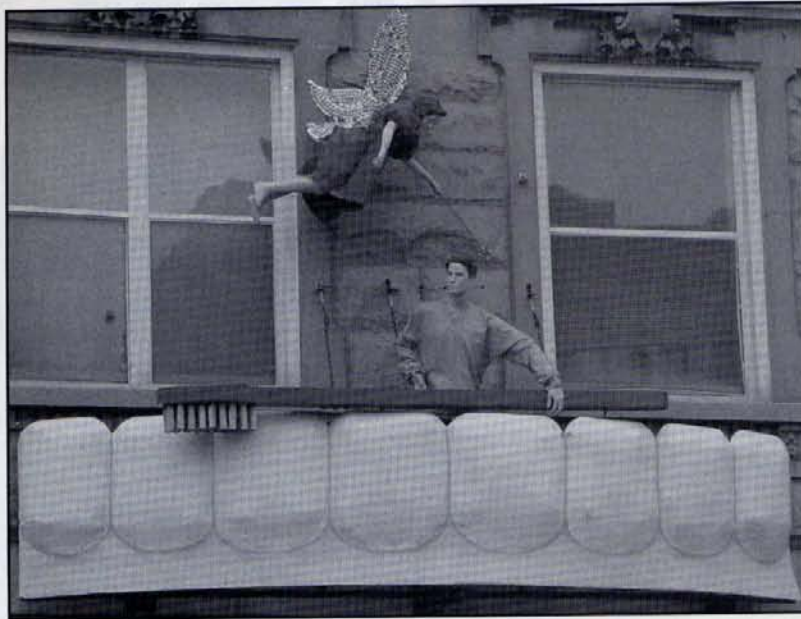
Dr. Adri Moyano chats with a patient at Dr. Ted Siegel's practice. Exam rooms feature TVs equipped with headphones, DVDs and massage chairs.

fundamentals, you'll reap the rewards. "It can be exciting to learn about new materials because you'll be able to see how they'll help better achieve the end result," Rens says.

## How can you market your practice effectively and attract patients?

As with most industries, marketing is a key element in making your practice known. Marketing differs for general dentists and specialists though. Specialists rarely practice traditional means of marketing such as advertising and word-of-mouth, says Goerig, who specializes in endodontics. "As a specialist, it's really how well you market to your referring doctors," he says. Because specialists mostly rely on referrals





Seigel remembers a giant sign catching his eye in the past, so he envisioned a similar marketing tool for his business. The tooth fairy is a recent addition to the piece hanging above the office door.

from local dentists, the smartest move is to introduce yourself to general dentists in the area and promote your services through them. Referring specialty work can be beneficial for general dentists, too. "I believe the general dentists who are the most profitable are those that send out almost all the specialty work and focus on only one area, which is usually good-quality restorative dentistry," Goerig says.

As for generalists, a broad range of marketing options applies, such as direct mail campaigns, yellow pages advertising and discounted services for first-time patients. Rens also suggests promoting your practice in "new neighbor" mailings that often are available to new area residents to attract patients.

Siegel is one dentist who seems to have found his marketing niche. Not only does the exterior of his office sport a can't-miss sculpture of an enormous mouth complete with a toothbrush, dentist and the tooth fairy, but his office is one-of-a-kind. Patients are treated to massage chairs and mounted TVs with headphones (and a choice of their favorite DVD from his sizable collection). He also offers personal

touches like before and after pictures for every patient he serves. These innovative measures go a long way for word-of-mouth and patient satisfaction. He also publishes a patient newsletter and is developing a Web site.

True marketing success depends on making your patients happy, Siegel has

learned. "The more you honestly care about the people you're working on, the more fun you will have with your work," he says. "Because you're getting to know these people, you want to do the best job that you can for them." Patients are the No. 1 factor in a thriving, positive practice. One of the main drawbacks of being a specialist is not having the chance to develop long-term relationships with patients, Goerig says. Of course, he continues to provide the best care that he can and believes having happy and stress-free staff and patients is a true measure of success.

### So now what?

You've answered many of the vital questions that will help you determine which type of practice will be most successful for you. Now that you've done your homework on how to run a thriving practice, knock 'em dead! **M**

*Jennifer Jones is a Chicago freelance writer.*

*Photos, including cover, by Julia O'Donnell, ASDA's associate editor.*



Located behind Siegel's practice, this new sign illuminates the neighborhood sky at night, a constant reminder of his presence in Chicago.