



Creating the Right Design Aesthetic for Your Practice

By Carrie Rossenfeld

When you think about the way you want your office to look, what do you see in your mind's eye? The images that spring up translate into the feeling you want to convey through design elements, also known as your design aesthetic.

It's important to think about your design aesthetic in order to express the right image for your practice. The right aesthetic will help you attract and appeal to patients, as well as reflect what you aim to achieve. In other words, your design aesthetic is an intrinsic part of your whole business plan.

"The right design aesthetic is important because it is the face of your practice and the first impression your patients and employees have when they walk through the door," says Karen Edmundson, a furniture sales executive for Business Interiors by Staples. "Medical care, services and the physical office environment are all interconnected, as they impact the overall patient experience."

Design can also help put patients at ease during what can be a stressful experience. "Aesthetics are important to create a sense of calm, well-being and security, as patients often need reassurance entering a medical facility," says Dr. Gil Epstein of the Fort Lauderdale Eye Institute in Plantation, Fla.

Here, *MOT* offer some tips for creating a design aesthetic that matches your practice, stays within your budget and pleases patients.

Think of your patient demographics

Aside from your practice's personality, consider the type of patient you're looking to attract and what would appeal to them. (See *MOT*'s story on [Designing for Patient Demographics](#)) Older patients may appreciate soft colors, brighter lighting and better signage and way-finding, while a pediatric population may prefer brighter colors and a variety of textures, suggests Edmundson.

In addition to age, consider the income level and other significant traits such as special needs, celebrity status or terminally ill patients. Your design should reflect the needs and tastes of those demographics as well, suggests Leslie Markman-Stern, a Chicago-based interior designer.

For example, for Dr. Evan Lipkis' concierge medicine practice in Chicago, he desired a space that was welcoming, non-threatening and comforting for the practice's suburban clientele. Interior designer Alan Mack of Proteus Group used plush, contemporary furnishings and spa-type touches (fresh flowers and contemporary artwork) in procedure rooms and restrooms to create an intimate setting for patients.

"Understand the type of experience you want your patients to have when they walk through your front door," sums up Karen Mandel, a designer in Northbrook, Ill.

Be aware of building architecture and surroundings

The style of the building in which you're located and the neighborhood in which it's situated should inform many of your design choices.

"If the building is contemporary, then the interiors should be contemporary to complement the design," says Indiana-based interior designer Susan El-Naggar. "The same with a classic style: if the building is a 1920s Renaissance revival, then the interiors should complement the building. Otherwise, the design style would be out of context with the surroundings."

Create a spacious feel

You don't want your patients to feel claustrophobic, so no matter how small your office is, make it feel big. Use light colors that create an open, airy feeling, and be careful not to include furniture or artwork that's too big, heavy or busy-looking for the space.

Be aware of consistency, lack of clutter and color agreement throughout the office, and make sure any advertisements and collateral materials don't class with your interior design, Epstein suggests. A messy, cluttered office can be very disturbing to patients.

For example, Dr. John Koutsoyiannis, a cosmetic dentist with *sohosmile* in New York City, wanted to create an atmosphere that inspired relaxation, enjoyment and serenity in a stress-inducing city during a procedure that is often stressful for patients.

The reception area features a three-story waterfall ending in a rock-filled fountain, and ultra-high ceilings give the former art gallery an uncharacteristically spacious feeling for a city-based dental office. His exam and procedure rooms offer plush black leather reclining chairs that massage the body and large flat-screen TVs that offer a choice from 1,000 DVDs.

Budget for the most important items

Many practices overlook the most important things such as plumbing and instead focus exclusively on décor elements such as furnishings and art work. While these things are important, you should make sure to budget for "must-have" elements.

"Privacy and plumbing both carry a hefty price tag, so carefully consider these needs first and build from there," says Kim Marks, a principal at *ai Design Group Inc.* in Charlotte, N.C. "Consider utilizing color as a design element in lieu of expensive materials."

Use your personal taste judiciously



This exam room at this Chicago-based concierge-medicine practice achieved a design aesthetic of non-clinical comfort with plush furnishings and spa-like touches from designer Alan Mack of Proteus Group. Photo credit: @dimitre.com-2011

One of the most common mistakes physicians make when creating a design aesthetic is allowing their personal taste to become the driving force in a commercial space, Marks contends. For example, a sofa that would work in your living is not necessarily best choice for a waiting room that sees a lot of traffic and dirt.

To avoid this mistake, invite others into the discussion and weigh their opinions fairly. You may also want to work with a design firm or professional. (See *MOT's* story: [Five Tips for Choosing the Right Design Firm](#))

"The key to a successful design is true collaboration between the physician group and design team where both listen and respect each individual point of view," says Vince Della Donna, senior healthcare architect for RLF, a design firm in Winter Park, Fla.

In the end, create a design aesthetic that's pleasing to you and your staff. "You spend five days a week in your work environment, and being in an inviting, comfortable and beautiful space absolutely enhances one's life," Koutsoyiannis asserts. "Being happy in your work environment absolutely impacts your performance and your enthusiasm for the job."