

Establishing A Private Dental Practice

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This article is the first part of two articles dealing with a topic which has gained increasing interest in Tanzania: how does one establish and run a private dental practice? These two articles are based on the presentations I have had an opportunity to give in the TDA Annual Meeting and the TDA Continuous Education Workshop in 1997 and 1998.

Tanzanian and western economic and legislative development are different. In western societies private dental practices commonly provide dental services, and one needs to be cautious when applying to Tanzania advice commonly encountered in western capitalistic societies. Furthermore, this presentation is based on literature available in the USA, Great Britain and Scandinavia, though I have tried to modify the information and exclude suggestions which, according to my knowledge and experience, are not applicable to the Tanzanian setting.

BEFORE YOU START, THINK TWICE, THRICE AND ...

Contact local authorities and seek legal advice. It is necessary to know national laws and regulations even before taking the first steps. We dentists are educated and trained to do clinical work, but we do not have enough knowledge of the legal system and its current changes. A legal advisor can guide us to avoid various legal pitfalls. Particularly in a country like Tanzania, where the economic situation has changed dramatically over the last decade, professional assistance is necessary. As in all countries where economic freedom is new, written laws are often instituted after actual practices have already been established. As a consequence, one may face overwhelming difficulties when taking actions which were thought acceptable, but in reality were not. In addition to actual law every nation is run according to various bureaucratic rules, many of which are written, though too many are not. Thus, it is advisable to contact the local authorities, with the help of a legal advisor, to make sure that the plans to establish a private practice, in a certain area for example, have no bureaucratic obstacles.

PREPARE YOUR LONG TERM STRATEGY

You will save an enormous amount of money and time in future if you have had the patience to create a long term strategy. A guiding principle is 'Where Do I Want My Practice To Go?' Your goal may be a small family clinic where one dentist works, probably with an ADO or DA. Alternatively, you may have the idea of later expansion, involving a larger unit with possibly several dentists (general practitioners and clinical specialists) forming a network of professionals working together. Once the idea is clear it is much easier to make further decisions about what is and is not needed for success.

CREATE AN ACTION PLAN

Much too often we base our actions on feelings and opinions and not on measurable facts. Creating an action plan will help keep track of where one is going. Is everything going well, or are improvements needed? The following six steps are a guide to effective planning.

Table 1. The Action Plan

- (1) Determine your strategy
- (2) Define your objectives
- (3) Select your tactics
- (4) Make your goals specific
- (5) Make your goals quantifiable
- (6) Make your goals measurable

After a long term strategy is defined, manageable short-term strategies should be developed. Each time period should include several strategies with clearly defined objectives. These

objectives should be written down and so unambiguously phased that by the end of the time period you can easily determine whether you have achieved your goals or not. And if not, where you failed to reach them.

Just as you can walk from one place to another by selecting alternative routes, you can reach your dental practice objectives by choosing between various ways of acting. If you do not select your tactics how to reach your objectives, you may end up making your decisions in a hurry and without good coordination. Like walking from one corner in a certain direction because it looks nice than doing the same at the next corner. This unplanned tactic will take you somewhere, but not necessarily where you originally intended. And it will always cost you both time and money. In order to avoid this waste, select your tactics and make your moves accordingly.

The more specific your goals are, the better track you can keep on your success. Specific goals also need to be quantifiable, not just statements which could be flexibly interpreted. Try to be hard on yourself and demand exactly what you have specified as your goals. It is all too common to see beautifully written prospectuses, but when the goals are scrutinized it is clear that they are not even measurable. In a dental practice, such a goal could be 'I will improve my social skills so that I am more empathic with my patients. This is a good idea as such, but it is hardly measurable. You should define for yourself how you will measure your goals.

All this may appear self-evident, though it is repeatedly the case that people tend to remember things very selectively and have difficulties in accepting criticism. This is particularly true, if we are compelled to admit that we have not succeeded. In the case of building a successful dental practice, which, of course, should be a profit-making organization, we need to be precise and we certainly need to follow up all our actions. Only in this way can we modify our actions accordingly and improve our functioning. Well made plans from the very beginning are a necessity in order to have a proper follow up and a planned future.

THE TACTICS FOR PUBLICITY

As mentioned earlier, a private dental practice is established to provide work for dental professionals. The practice has to be profit making in order to develop and survive, and to do that the practice needs to attract patients. The public, i.e. potential patients, need to receive information about the practice to know where the practice is located and what kind of services it provides. Even when open and direct advertising is not allowed, as is the case in Tanzania today, the practice can obtain positive publicity. In fact, positive publicity is far more effective than paid advertisements.

Table 2. Various ways to obtain positive publicity for your practice

- (1) Create an identity
- (2) Build patient relationships
- (3) Connect with your community

Access the media

Identity can be created in many ways. A practice should have a logo which is simple and easy to remember. This logo should be visible in each and every document, stationery, envelope, appointment card, etc. The more visible your logo is, and particularly for your first priority target audience, the better it works. Good examples of effective logos can be seen throughout Tanzania. Imagine how many times in a day one comes across either a Pepsi or a Coke logo. We remember these products as soon as we see the logos. Of course, a dental practice cannot even dream of the same publicity, but it shows how important and

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powerful a logo can be. If they did not work, Nike, Adidas, and so many others, would not push them in front of our eyes all the time.

Create practice brochures, business cards and stationery. Every time you approach someone, these will be practical means of increasing your visibility. Even when contacting administrators and bureaucrats it is better to have your own stationery. It gives a more reliable picture, and even bureaucrats have toothache from time to time and can be good paying customers!

Build patient relationships, for they are of paramount importance for your future practice. When building a caring image for your practice, different types of information and education materials in the waiting room can be of benefit. You do not need to prepare and print your own material. Using ready-made pictures and brochures can have the same effect with significantly smaller costs. On the waiting room table there could be a patient information folder giving dental information as well as information about yourself, your equipment, etc. Continuing care appointments for regular check ups are extremely rare in Tanzania today, but perhaps will not be in the near future. Mailed check up reminders have proved to be one of the most powerful means of creating good patient relationships. Vast evidence from international research has also shown that they are the most significant independent factor for improving practice revenue.

It is very advisable to connect with your community, because it can form a solid patient base for starting your practice. Charity organizations and community service forums can hardly provide all the patients you need to run a practice and, of course, not all

community members are willing and able to use your services. However, if you are already known by the community, it is easier for you to build patient relationships with them. Various public speaking platforms can be used to make contacts with different population segments. The more you are known as a person in any community, the easier it is to get new patients to visit your practice. We all know that dental treatment is always a pleasant experience. When people know the dentist as a person in some other connection, it is easier to take the first step to make an appointment.

Access the media in one way or another. If you have some special skills or equipment or you can otherwise bring some contribution to dental treatment or dental health education, the media is usually very willing to make it a news item. A one-column article, with your name printed as the source of the information immediately makes you an expert in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, one tiny article makes you known much more efficiently than a paid advertisement several times the size of the article.

Much of the advice given above may look strange, over-theoretical or inappropriate at the moment. My aim, however, was to give the basic working tools to create your own framework for developing your own practice, rather than a list of items which may have worked in some western societies. The approach given here will hopefully provide general ideas which can be applied to particular situations. However, Tanzanian society is changing so rapidly that any precise advice written today may be out of date by the time this article is printed.

YOUR NEXT SEXUAL
PARTNER COULD BE
THAT SPECIAL ONE
WHO GIVES YOU
AIDS



STICK TO ONE SEXUAL PARTNER