

How to... choose the perfect colour scheme

Gary Bettis talks about colour and how to incorporate it within your dental practice

Interior design is an invaluable asset for your business. The application of uplifting colour schemes, well-designed furnishings and furniture and the thoughtful manipulation of light and space can all make a real difference to how we feel about an environment. A practice that is inviting and stimulating will have the potential to draw in more patients, thereby increasing profits. At its most effective, it should increase the value of a practice.

Interior design will not only make a space look and function better, it can have a significant impact on mood and wellbeing, improving a dentist's occupational health and productivity.

Developing your colour scheme

At the start of your project you may have been asked to present colour images and magazine cut-outs that inspire you.

Your designer will use this information as a spring-board for the development of the concept scheme. You will be presented with sketched perspectives, finishes and colours. Colours applied to the sketches bring the scheme to life and create a mood. Do not worry if you are unsure about your colour preferences – your designer will take the lead and show you options for consideration.

The effects of colour

Responses to colour are personal, however, there are generalisations that can be made about the effects of different colours. Warm colours (i.e. red, orange and yellow) are stimulating and appear to advance or become larger. Cool colours (i.e. green, blue and violet) evoke feelings of rest and appear to recede or become smaller.

Colours can be classified as either 'chromatic' or 'achromatic'. Chroma is a quality combining hue and saturation and includes all colours except white, grey and black; these colours are achromatic, which means without chroma.

Monochromatic schemes create calm and use shades or tints of one colour. Polychromatic schemes create excitement and are combinations using one or more colours.

The perception of colour

Colours are contingent upon the perception of light wavelengths: the same colour can look completely dissimilar under different lighting situations. So although we are talking about colour in isolation, making sure that you have incorporated the right lighting is critical to the success of a colour scheme. Colour looks one way in a shop under



fluorescent light, another under daylight, and different still at home under incandescent light.

The height and angle of the sun affects how colour is perceived, which varies by time of day, season and geographic location. The cast of a colour may be more golden, bluish or drier depending on these and other factors, such as air quality.

So when deciding upon a colour scheme, your designer will be considering how the space will be lit as well as establishing whether the windows of the practice face north or south and how much light they let in. Interiors with north-facing windows may require bolder or brighter colour combinations to offset those long winter months.

Colour and light reflectance

The same colour can appear vastly dissimilar in different materials because light reflects off smooth surfaces differently than off rough ones. Smooth, shiny surfaces bounce light from a single incoming direction off into a single outgoing direction, sometimes causing glare. This is called specular reflection. In contrast, uneven, rough surfaces diffuse the reflection and send the incoming light off in multiple directions, giving the object a softer appearance. This is called diffuse reflection.

Because of how light is reflected, the colour of shiny materials appears brighter and more saturated than that of matte materials. Designers will play with varying degrees of light reflectance to jazz up a monochromatic colour scheme or to tone down a 'busy' colour scheme by choosing matte surfaces.

Colour balance using proportion

A designer recognises that colours have strength or weight. When compared to colours of the same saturation, red is the strongest and yellow is the weakest. This means that red can easily dominate a space if not balanced by another colour in either a greater proportion or higher saturation. The converse is true of yellow. Keeping this in mind, your designer will use any heavy or 'off' hues as accent colours in your interiors – a little goes a long way!

Your designer will think about the emotions related to your design theme and how these emotions relate to all the aspects of colour: hue, saturation, value (tint/shade), brightness and gloss. If you want to evoke feelings of serenity or calm, your designer will use harmonious colour schemes or pastel colours. They will play with materials that are somewhat similar in saturation and gloss, or use colours in one colour family.

A combined approach

There are other aspects of visual communication that require attention in order to gain the most benefit from a new fit out. Logo design, stationery, signage and websites, as well as the personal presentation of staff are just as important as the colour scheme and physical design of a practice. If these elements project a consistent image of a practice, combined they are a powerful tool in communicating the attention to detail and standard of services offered.

Your designer will research your existing 'brand identity', your closest competitors and your patient base. They may advise you that your current marketing is not as effective as it could be and suggest a rethink of your branding.

Final words

Many dentists choose to leave colour choices to the contractor, a friend or relative but doing so often leads to misunderstandings on types of design materials and could result in extra costs late in the process.

If you want to avoid such situations, you need to appoint a designer to create an interior decor scheme. This will help to make the necessary decisions in advance and communicate with your contractor what you want.

A designer recognises that you and your patients have your own independent colour associations. Researching your target patient base, they will predict the colour preferences and associations and what the desired response to the space should be – to be energised or relaxed. They will create a dynamic space that will transcend all fads by using a colour scheme that suits the space, and its intended users, rather than whatever colour scheme is in fashion.

Be patient and open-minded and don't be put off by radical ideas. It takes courage to innovate and create inspirational environments. A good colour scheme can all too often be compromised by a dentist 'playing safe' or pulling a scheme apart – diluting its true potential. Allow the designer to take the lead and have faith in their ability to deliver. The end result will be a practice that appeals to your patients and staff and will allow you to focus on delivering great patient care. **PD**

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Gary Bettis is architectural director of Designclinic. Since its formation in 1970, it has accumulated an extensive portfolio of work ranging from private housing, commercial, retail and healthcare. Visit www.designclinic.uk.com for further information.