Enhance Your Practice Through Effective Office Design

A good design can bring new life to an office and reinforce the professionalism of the practice.
A common observation is that dermatology is a highly “visual” field. While a variety of essential lab tests exists for certain diagnoses, technology supports dermatologists giving an accurate analysis and treatment plan based solely on their observation of a patient’s skin. Yet, for a specialty so dependent on visuals, some dermatology offices are anything but eye-catching. Whether they are cluttered or cramped, some offices simply fail to make patients feel welcome and comfortable. Although such design flaws may not prove detrimental to the success of a strictly medical practice, poor visuals can lead to failure when a practice ventures into cosmetic services and product dispensing.

Over the last 16 years, our national office design company, Eye Designs, LLC, has become a leader in planning and executing retail space in ophthalmology practices. I believe the lessons I have learned working in this other “visual” specialty can translate directly to dermatology offices. Based on my experience transforming offices into comfortable clinical areas and enticing retail spaces, I will outline some basic principles of office design.

Recognizing that dermatology practices differ in the extent of their retailing, as some do not sell products at all, I will outline general principles that can improve any office space while providing advice for those involved in product retail sales.

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Strike a Balance

The cornerstone of any effective office design is striking the right balance. While “balance” is an important design concept, here it refers to a more philosophical sense that is crucial to initial considerations. First, keep in mind the attitude of the practice. What is the role of dispensing in the practice and how does it balance and complement patient care? Next is the business philosophy. How can the practice balance its various interests, energies, and resources to maximize profitability? Finally, consider the physical space. Does the environment balance the professionalism of a medical practice with the magnetism of a retail venue? Most importantly, is the retail space warm and inviting but not overbearing?

Done properly, the office design will preserve and enhance the professionalism of the practice. The “right” balance will be different from practice to practice, and it is imperative that the physician(s) and staff understand and adhere to the particular philosophy of their practice. Much has been written about the role of ethical dispensing in dermatology practices. Multiple factors influence if, when, and why a practice incorporates dispensing, but the most critical component is the desire to augment care and patient services. Dispensing effective, quality products through your office is one way to ensure that patients receive beneficial products, superior service, extensive education, and convenience.

Know the Benefits

There are, of course, benefits to a practice offering product sales. In the optical field, 50 and sometimes more than 60 percent of a practice’s profits can come from eyewear dispensing. While cosmetic product dispensing may not match these figures, sales revenues can significantly augment those from traditional patient care. A practice dedicated to dispensing success will experience a worthwhile return on their investment.

Dispensing products makes sense from a business standpoint. Most medical procedures or services fetch a flat fee. The reimbursement may vary based on insurance coverage and other key considerations, but there is a cap built into every medical patient encounter. Although cosmetic services typically yield comparatively higher reimbursements per service, they also tend to require a greater time investment by the physician and other staff, starting with the initial consultation through the administration of therapy and follow-up.

Finally, regardless of the service provided (medical, cosmetic, or both), patients will only offer the practice a finite number of billable visits in a given period. Some patients will go months or even years between visits—if they return at all. Dispensing is a much more open-ended endeavor. Inherent is the opportunity to develop long-term patient relationships and loyalty. Unlike a patient exam with its fixed reimbursement, revenue from dis-
Dispensing is limitless. No insurance regulations or natural disease course limits the number of times a patient will visit the practice to purchase new products. Every patient uses some sort of skin care product, from cleansers, moisturizers, and sunscreens to more sophisticated wrinkle creams. Dispensing is a way to serve patients’ needs. If they receive effective, high quality products, good service, and a fair price, patients will return on a regular basis to replenish their supply of skin care products.

This regular interaction with the practice has cyclical benefits. Patients who return to the practice for additional purchases may be more aware of new cosmetic services and procedures offered and may be more diligent in scheduling and attending regular check-ups, skin cancer screenings, and other appointments.

Aside from the monetary costs of building the dispensary and purchasing inventory, day-to-day operations require minimal investment. Directing a patient to an appropriate product to meet his or her specific concerns requires no more time from the dermatologist than writing a prescription. In turn, it will not significantly add to the duration of the patient visits, and therefore you are not sacrificing daily patient time and associated billings. The nuts and bolts of dispensing—from patient education and consultation to sales—can fall to an aesthetician or other appropriate individual already on staff.

The return on investment can certainly justify office updates. A typical ophthalmic practice tends to see a minimum ROI or increase in business of 15%, yet many well exceed that. This is attributed to a better selling environment with regard to location within the practice, inviting, rich colors and finishes for their furnishings, and finally better lighting design which enhances the product.

Finally, dispensing is a potential marketing tool in itself. The service can create a “buzz” for your practice. Patients will praise the one-stop convenience and quality service of your practice and generate priceless word-of-mouth marketing. Minimal investment of time and staff resources will yield significant increases in per patient revenues.

Wait and See

If you are convinced of the patient and practice benefits of dispensing, it is time to get started with a serious dispensing initiative. Every practice involved in retail must dedicate a dispensing area. For those just starting out or those determined to carry just one or two product lines, a small display area may prove sufficient. Practices that truly embrace dispensing should select an area with ample space to accommodate a range of products and allow for customer interaction with both the products and your staff. Even if you only carry one or two lines, do not make the mistake of displaying products in an inconspicuous spot, such as the end of a long hall, behind the reception desk, in a single exam room, or in a private office. Patients may never see the products and certainly will not be encouraged to investigate them.

Establish a dedicated display and dispensing area that is separate from but adjacent to and visible from the patient waiting area. The dispensary must be accessible from the waiting room. An attractive, inviting display area visible from the waiting room will entice patients to wander in and look at the various products. Offering worthwhile skin care advice, such as sunscreen use, is one more way the dispensary can serve patients’ needs.

Place an entrance to the dispensary near the reception or
check-out desk to further entice patients to enter. Importantly, patients should never feel directly or indirectly pressured by the practice to purchase any products. Everything from the behavior of the staff to the design and placement of the dispensary should reflect this no-pressure philosophy.

Make the area interactive and educational. In addition to the products, display pamphlets and posters that will teach patients about general skin care as well as about the products. Patients in the waiting area are a “captive audience,” and an enticing dispensary will lead them to browse while they wait for the doctor.

Ideally, a staff member will be posted in the dispensary to assist patients. If not, someone should be available to answer questions or to take orders and provide service as needed.

The Basics
A workable dispensing operation requires an absolute minimum of 100 square feet, but a more comfortable lower limit is about 200 square feet. Styles, colors, display types, and other elements will depend on the existing design as well as the character of the office, its physicians, and its patients. Above all, the ultimate goal is a clean, organized, professional “look.”

Lighting is one of the most critical and frequently overlooked elements of office design. The importance of lighting is not limited to dispensaries. Waiting areas also require appropriate lighting. Proper lighting can help set a tone that is warm, comfortable, and inviting. Improper lighting will create an uncomfortable, unwelcoming space.

If space permits, a private consultation area is helpful. A separate room is ideal, but is not always possible. Nonetheless, planners can use furniture, fixtures, and architecture to help create a private area where the staff can discuss products, demonstrate their use, and otherwise interact with customers.

Pay attention to office traffic flow. As noted, the entrance to the dispensary should be near the reception desk and adjacent to the waiting area. When planning these spaces and the exam rooms, focus on the flow of patients and staff through the space. What makes most sense for the patient? What makes most sense for the staff? As much as possible, minimize steps for physicians and nursing staff.

Don’t let the design get stale. A typical ophthalmic practice remodels about every 10 years. As with any retail venue, things need to look fresh and “with the times.” The condition of your interior is a direct reflection of the quality of products and services that the practice offers.

Finally, consider HIPAA and its requirements as they affect dispensing.

Getting Started
A dermatology practice interested in establishing a professional dispensary to enhance medical care should begin by identifying short- and long-term goals for the practice in general and for dispensing specifically. If goals are truly viable, consult a professional medical design firm to identify possibilities. Choose a person or company with a proven track record who understands how the practice works and will consult closely with key players to establish a design that truly fits practice needs. Do not settle for a cookie-cutter design. Keep the possibility of growth in mind and be sure the design will accommodate it.

A practice dedicated to maintaining the highest levels of professionalism will find that every aspect of their dispensing program—from philosophy of sales to design of the dispensary—successfully reflects this balance and leads to satisfaction for patients and physicians.

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Benefits for the Patient
- Access to high-quality, effective products
- Individualized skin care advice
- Guidance in product selection
- Education regarding product use and application
- Convenience
- Excellent service
- Competitive pricing
- Unique product selection

Benefits for the Practice
- Enhanced patient satisfaction
- Higher per patient revenues
- Greater patient loyalty
- Increased patient exposure to the practice
- Word-of-mouth marketing

Tips for Physicians
- Evaluate products for effectiveness and quality
- Choose products not available via mass marketers
- Offer lines that match your patients’ needs
- Investigate and evaluate opportunities frequently
- Research and seek advice on all aspects of dispensing