



Renovation Time

A systematic approach to makeovers

By Carrie Rossenfeld

Most physicians and practice managers don't notice how worn down or out of date their offices become, but their patients notice. It's more than mere aesthetics; you could potentially lose patients over a poorly kept office. After all, if your place of business doesn't look well attended to, patients may develop a negative perception regarding the quality of care they're about to receive.

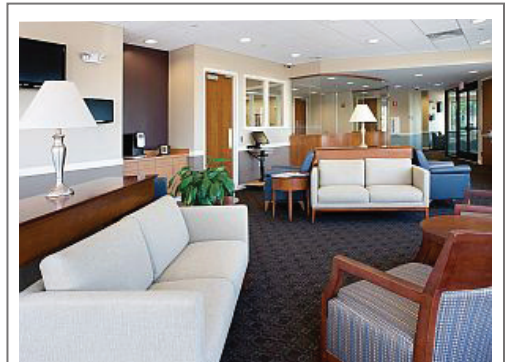
Every medical office needs periodic updating and overhauling to keep it looking fresh, contemporary and in line with the practice's personality and purpose. Creating a schedule and budget for maintaining your office's appearance will help you stay on track with this important piece of housekeeping.

Painting, carpeting, furniture, lighting—each of these elements contributes to your office's total image. Over time, any one of these elements needs to be updated or replaced in order to maintain the look and feel you want to project. Periodically, it makes sense to do an assessment of each element as well as any other decorative items, and how each contributes to the whole.

While you'll want to make sure (on an ongoing basis) that lighting is working properly, broken furniture or doors are repaired or replaced (or at least removed) immediately, and obvious carpet or wall stains are dealt with promptly, you'll probably want to do a complete appearance assessment at least once a year—more often if you have an especially busy, bustling office.

Since you may overlook what you see every day, this means looking at your office through different eyes. Start from the doorway and work your way in and through space. How does each section of the office look, smell, feel? Are the chairs uncomfortable? Does anything make an unpleasant noise? Does anything look dirty or old? Does the office connote a sense of caring and welcome, or carelessness? Decide what requires changing immediately and what can wait another six months or longer.

"I look at the office as if I were the patient," says Mary Anne Casalino, a practice manager for University Physicians Group in Staten Island, N.Y., which consists of more than 40 physicians in addition to the five rheumatologists for whom she works.



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Every morning, Casalino checks to see if the cleaning service has done its job in the waiting room and how the carpeting looks. At least once a week, she checks to see if the tiles and linoleum are cracked, if the floorboards are okay, and if the walls need repair.

"It's a regular part of my job to assure that the place looks pleasing," Casalino says.

Interior paint usually needs to be refreshed about every three to seven years. High-quality, washable, satin-finish paint will last longer and won't need retouching as often, (although it costs a bit more), Casalino comments.

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Duggan says carpeting and wallcoverings are replaced no more often than every seven years, unless they suffer extreme wear and tear. "There's a natural life span for many of these finishes," he explains.

Furniture should be replaced whenever it looks worn, scratched or outdated. Depending on your office traffic, this could be every time you paint or more or less frequently.

Lighting should be updated when it no longer suits its purpose or adds to the overall aesthetics of the office. Ten years ago the pattern was to illuminate everything evenly, whereas now the trend is toward more focused, energy-efficient systems and fixtures, as well as skylights where applicable, according to Marc Margulies, AIA, LEED AP, and a principal at Margulies Perruzzi Architects in Boston.

Nothing is Timeless

Office looks go out of fashion, new trends replace them and practices are left scrambling to keep up. Staying up to date on trends in aesthetics and style is as important as keeping current on medical procedures because it affects the image your office projects, says Duggan.

"Despite any of our best efforts to make our designs timeless, styles change from time to time," Margulies says. "Designs and fabrics from the mid-'80s (that were timeless then) were only timeless for the mid-'80s."

As the medical field become more attuned to how patients feel and how this affects their reaction to treatment, more and more medical offices have transitioned from a stark, sterile, clinical look to one that's more colorful, appealing to the senses and promotes healing. This change may affect the direction your renovating plan takes.



“When I first started with this practice 15 years ago, we had a putty gray and white motif, but it's nicer now,” says Casalino. “We use a paint shade called ‘healing aloe green,’ and the carpet is green tweed. The infusion suite has green chairs and a large-screen TV. We mimicked Sloan Kettering a bit because we wanted to make the office very comfortable for patients.”

With technology allowing doctors to show patients health information on a screen, changes in medical-office seating and lighting are also occurring to accommodate this technology. “The whole atmosphere has to be different,” says Duggan. “This comprehension has to be part of the thought process when considering a renovation or updating.”

Creating a Budget

Margulies points out that, despite certain style commonalities, each practice has different objectives for how it want patients, clients and staff to perceive the facilities, so no one look will fit all practices.

Figuring out how to manage a renovating budget first depends on the size of your practice and the extent of repairs needed. Smaller practices consider standard renovations to be simply a part of regular operating expenses, while larger offices or multi-office practices use a separate capital-expenditures budget to pay for the updates. Still, no matter what your size, it's smart to budget for yearly updating and unexpected repairs.

“Every year, depending on capital availability, we're spending several hundred thousand dollars on face-lifting our sites,” says Duggan.

You may also want to sock some money away for a rainy day when you realize your office's furniture style is out of date, you want to add a skylight or you want to replace linoleum with laminate or wood flooring.

Naturally, you want your office to look nice, but in this age of cost-awareness and going green, experts advise you to beware of it looking too posh.

“It's fair to say that you don't need a facility to look like it's brand new, and you certainly don't want people to feel that your healthcare provider has overspent on luxuries, but you do want them to think it is well maintained and cared for,” says Duggan. “It's a careful balancing act.”

Duggan concludes: “We want to create an environment that's welcoming, inviting and comfortable as opposed to clinical, modern or some other kind of aesthetic statement. We want a look that people who come here, regardless of their age, will find warm and welcoming.”

Carrie Rossenfeld is a California-based writer.