



# You've Graduated, Now What?

**A Guide to Navigating Those First Years  
in the Dental Profession**

**Second Edition**



**Academy**  
*of General Dentistry™*

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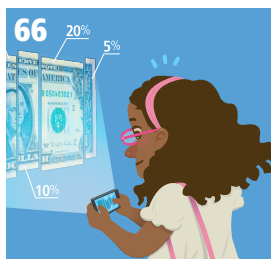
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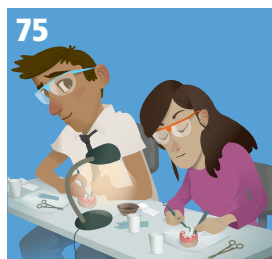
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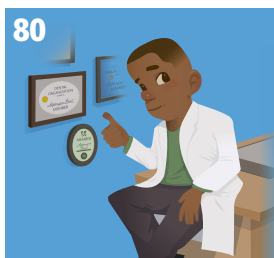
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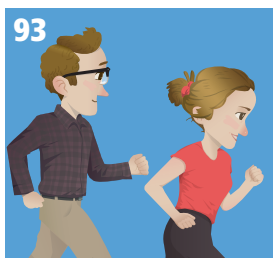
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## Chapter 1

# Goal Setting



## Achieving Clarity

You did it!

And you deserve to revel fully in the accomplishment of graduating dental school. At the same time, you need to take the next steps to make the most of your training. There are plenty of decisions to make. What do you want life to look like now? And later? And why?

The health care landscape continues to change dramatically, creating more options for dentists than ever before. But the more possibilities there are, the more you need to think about your immediate next steps, as well as your broader plan for the future.

The term vision statement may sound amorphous—even ominous. Goal setting may feel more like academic-speak at a time when you are ready to go and do, but creating a road map with a vision statement and clearly defined goals can help you to get

where you want to go, avoid troublesome detours, and live more intentionally as a person and a professional. Taking time now to set goals will eliminate the feeling of “How did I get here?” that many experience after letting chance lead the way. Goal setting won’t eliminate every obstacle on the road ahead, but it sure can help smooth your path.

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*Goal setting won’t eliminate every obstacle on the road ahead, but it sure can help smooth your path.*

View goal setting as a positive experience. The process should be about what you want to achieve, not what you want to avoid. It’s about aspiring to a

future that has been thoughtfully considered. You no doubt already have many ideas about your future—and just as many questions. You are poised for success. Now it’s time to discover just what success means for you by clarifying and crafting your vision and your goals.

## Stepping Through the Goal Setting Process

Goal setting is a lot like the discipline of dentistry itself: logical steps, taken with great care, in the proper order, to achieve the best result possible. Sift through your thoughts in order to find and focus on your priorities. Consider the full blueprint of your life; don’t just focus on your professional ambitions. Whether you are building a business or a family, setting and achieving goals can lead to greater fulfillment—and the confidence to enter each new phase. So let’s get started.

## **Step 1: Create and write a vision statement.**

Your vision statement should passionately spell out who and what you want to be. Your goals—which we'll get to next—will be the step-by-step directions on how to get there. Close your eyes and try to place yourself in your future. Go ahead, no one's watching. What do you see?

Open a blank file and type "DRAFT" at the top. Give yourself about 10 minutes to type the kind of life—professional and personal—you want to have. Be bold. Use bullet points, prose, or whatever feels right. Don't write as if your high school English teacher or anyone else is going to read it. What you type will serve as the basis for your vision statement—an aspirational description of what you would like to achieve or accomplish in the long term.

Your vision statement can be short or long—what matters most is that it is meaningful to you. "I want to help people with my work" is a fine vision, but it's very general. "I believe it's crucial to use my training to assist in a volunteer project at least twice a year" is more specific. "Being the best" is a great vision, but it also could be anyone's vision. Your statement should be uniquely about you.

Here are a few examples of vision statements:

- "I believe in serving my community, my family, and my patients in such a way that I make a lasting impact. I believe my own health is the foundation to all of the above, and that living a healthy lifestyle is non-negotiable."
- "I am committed to creating a trusted general dentistry practice with an environment that fosters a fun approach to dental care and loyal employees who feel like they are part of a family. I want my own family to be financially secure and an active part of the community."
- "My professional life will be one of practicing dentistry in a trusted partnership that creates a profit margin, enabling me to one day teach the next generation of dentists. My personal life will be one of annual adventures, meaningful friendships, and spiritual discipline—all of which will create a positive energy that I can pour into my family, my patients, and my career."

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**"You've got to decide what you want. Focused, written goals allow you to accomplish more in a shorter period of time. People with goals succeed because they know where they are going."**

Samantha Shaver, DMD, FAGD  
Louisville, Ky.  
University of Louisville  
School of Dentistry, 1994

Some life coaches advise putting your newly written vision statement away for a few days and coming back to it with fresh eyes to retool. Your first draft might well be the most honest, but there likely will be tweaks.

Your vision statement is the "what," so the next question is "how?" Answering that question rolls you right into defining your goals.

#### **A Vision Statement Is...**

- Full of energy and emotion.
- An outline of a specific future.
- Written from the heart.
- Long-term and broad.
- Motivating.
- Still inspiring in 10 years.

#### **Creating a Vision Statement**

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Why did I go into dentistry?
2. What market or societal need am I trying to fill?
3. What sort of work-life balance do I want to achieve?
4. Which values are most important to me?
5. How do my strengths and weaknesses play into my vision for the future?
6. What does success look like to me?

#### **A Vision Statement Isn't...**

- Generic.
- A strategic plan.
- Written to appease others.
- Immediate and safe.
- Textbookish.
- Limited or limiting.

### ***Step 2: Put your goals in writing.***

How will you achieve your vision? By paying off your student loans in five years? By partnering with a mentor? By buying into a large practice? Answering questions like these, while keeping your vision statement in mind, is how to determine your goals.

Financial needs and goals are undeniable, and right now they are likely weighing on you. But seeking a work-life balance in your goals will set a tone moving forward. Look at your vision statement. Dentistry isn't a compartment you visit each day; it becomes a lifestyle in terms of hours, colleagues, family time, philanthropy, and community. Your goals should reflect those areas of your life, too.

Consider setting goals in several, if not all, of the following categories:

- |            |              |             |            |
|------------|--------------|-------------|------------|
| • Personal | • Charitable | • Financial | • Physical |
| • Career   | • Family     | • Spiritual |            |

As you consider these areas, do some soul searching. Allow yourself to get a little uncomfortable. The transition from education to practice is the right time to ask yourself the hard questions. Going through

the process now will help you with future life changes and weighty decisions. For each category, create three to seven goals. With each goal, ask yourself why achieving it is important to you. Also ask:

- Is this my goal or someone else's? It's easy to unwittingly make decisions based on the standards that others have for us. Our culture exerts pressure on us, too. Ultimately, however, personal success will hinge upon goals that stem from your own vision.
- Is this goal making me consider moral or ethical shortcuts? You have a responsibility to your patients and to yourself. Be true to yourself, and you will be better positioned to meet all of your goals—and you'll sleep better at night.
- Will this goal get me closer to or further from my vision statement? Be honest. Consider, for example, the goal of owning a new home or car. Extending yourself too far or too early might undermine your ability to reach your goals.

### Vague vs. Strong Goals

Wondering if your goals are worded strongly enough? Here are a few good examples:

#### Vague Goals

- To live comfortably.
- To give back to my community.
- To have a great reputation as an involved dentist.

#### Strong Goals

- I will save \$75,000 toward a new house in five years.
- I will explore my options for community service and find niches for volunteering within one year.
- I will create and execute a two-year community relations plan involving school speaking and event/team sponsorships.

Now it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty of formulating your goals. Use our goal [worksheet](#) to turn your dreams into realities. Use a different worksheet for each goal. Put each idea up against the SMART formula, a strategy that has been leading corporate strategic thinking for more than 30 years.

As you create each goal, make sure that it is:

1. **S**pecific: What do I want to accomplish, why, and with whom?
2. **M**easurable: How will I know when it's accomplished?
3. **A**ttainable: Is this realistic?
4. **R**elevant: Is this worthwhile, and does it line up with my vision statement?
5. **T**ime-related: How can I work toward this goal today? Next month? Next year?



Once you've got your goals in place, it's time to plan for some of life's little diversions, some of which are sure to come your way.

### ***Step 3: Identify obstacles.***

Now that you have created a vision statement and supporting goals, consider this: There will always be speed bumps on the road to success, but the earlier you identify potential obstacles, the more prepared you will be to deal with them. Planning for contingencies is a must.

Review the following factors and think about the hurdles they could create for each of your goals:

- Money
- Time
- Self-discipline
- Family considerations
- Geography
- Fear of failure

List these and any other hurdles on your goal worksheets and look at your goals again with these items in mind. This list is not intended to discourage you from your goals. It's meant to help you think about what changes you might need to make along the way to ensure you remain on the path to attaining those goals.

### ***Step 4: Identify resources needed.***

So you have your vision statement and your goals. You've asked yourself why they're important. You've noted obstacles, both potential and tangible. Now it's time to identify the resources necessary.

You will want to consider the resources needed for each one of your goals.

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*All early career dentists also should seek out a veteran dentist to connect with and learn from, particularly in the goal setting phase.*

Surely financial resources lurch to the forefront of your mind. But you need to think more broadly, too. Consider human resources, such as an attorney, a professional consultant, or an accountant. Think of associations that provide resources of information and connections, such as the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD), as well as local professional networking and community groups.

Consider a trusted family member, a mentor from the dental field or business community, or a personal guide, such as a religious leader or teacher, who could be a key to your success. All early career dentists also should seek out a veteran dentist to connect with and learn from, particularly in the goal setting phase.

When speaking with a veteran dentist or other mentor, consider asking a few of these questions. The answers are sure to be enlightening.

- Looking back, what goals would you have set or set differently at the beginning of your career?
- What used to be your weaknesses?
- What unexpected obstacles did you face?
- Knowing what you know now, would you have gone about professional planning any differently?
- What are you most proud of?
- Can I follow up with you?

When you have your resources lined up, think about setting up some checkpoints.

### Steps to Setting and Reviewing Goals

Remember these steps when creating your goals.

1. Brainstorm about your values and aspirations.
2. Craft a vision statement integrating both personal and professional tenets.
3. Identify goals—meaningfully written steps toward living out your vision statement.
  - a. Identify obstacles for each goal.
  - b. Identify resources for each goal.
  - c. Set up intermediate goals, including a check on your work-life balance.
  - d. Make any necessary personal changes that will help further your goals.
  - e. Set a completion date.  
(Repeat a-e for each goal)
4. Visualize success.
  - a. Keep your vision statement and goals where you can see them.
  - b. Review your vision statement and goals annually.

### Step 5: Set up intermediate goals.

It's necessary to have checkpoints along the way to meeting your goals. These will help you assess your progress, and they also can serve as milestones of encouragement. For example, if you have a goal of paying off your student loans within a certain time period, a great intermediate goal would be to make an extra payment every six months. Another intermediate goal might be to, every six months, review your budget for "weak spots"—places where you spent more than you should have—and take steps to rededicate that money to loan payments.

Life is rarely in perfect balance. Assess regularly whether a professional goal is crowding out a personal goal. For example, is increasing the number of patients seen in a day coming at the cost of regular exercise? Or vice versa—did a personal purchase put you behind on

buying the latest state-of-the-art equipment that was a priority for your practice? A great interim goal is to regularly evaluate your work-life balance. Times of stress and anxiety tend to come and go, but if they become a daily habit, that's a sign that things are off.

### ***Step 6: Make any personal changes necessary.***

How well do you know yourself? Sometimes you have to make personal changes in order to meet your goals. Maybe it's your personality, or work ethic, or a habit that stands in your way.

Evaluate yourself closely on this one. What needs to happen within you in order to meet each goal?

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**“Goals will provide direction and clarity on your end vision, but to achieve your goals, you must focus on a daily course of action and stick to a specific, measurable, and actionable plan. Committing to the process of achieving meaningful goals will set you in motion to aim high and become the person you most want to be.”**

Cheryl L. Mora, DDS, FAGD  
Vernon Hills, Ill.

University of Illinois at Chicago  
College of Dentistry, 1991

### ***Step 7: Note a completion date.***

It's been said that a goal is a dream with a deadline. Set deadlines; make them realistic ones, but not ones without challenge. Stagger them. Stick to them. Look at all of the goals you have written. Which take precedence? Which need to be accomplished in order for other goals to be met?

Sometimes the most effective deadlines are those set by others. Dental school exams kept you on track. Your landlord or mortgage company gives you a regular deadline that you must meet or risk a penalty. Once your deadlines are set, view them as external, not something you can move around. Consider sharing your deadlines with someone who can help hold you accountable.

### ***Step 8: Visualize success.***

A vision statement doesn't do anyone any good if it's stuffed in a drawer. Goals that are filed away can't inspire your smallest decisions, let alone the big ones. Keep your vision and goal statements where you can see and internalize them, and you will have a better chance of bringing them to fruition. Write them on a card and keep it in your wallet. Post them on a bathroom mirror or inside a cabinet door that you open daily. Put another copy in a place where finding it will serve as a surprise and keep you mindful of what you promised yourself.

## Putting Procrastination in Its Place

Procrastination feeds on itself and becomes a monster. Push through with these techniques for getting both small and large things done.

- **Set deadlines.** You had them throughout dental school. Hold on to that discipline. Set reasonable timelines for your ultimate and intermediate goals.
- **Avoid absolutes.** Do not back yourself into a corner. Remember that success can be measured by the ability to change. Be flexible when the situation calls for it.
- **Break the task into components.** Taking things one step at a time will get the job done. Trying to do too much at once will overwhelm you and sabotage your goals. Remember your interim steps and their timetables.
- **Reward yourself.** It may seem easier to punish yourself for failing to be superhuman than it is to reward yourself for completing a necessary task. But simple rewards can work wonders.
- **Use the 10-minute rule.** We all have tasks that we detest. You may be avoiding something right now! Try setting your clock for 10 minutes and working on your task for just that long. You might find that, once you get into a project, you will have the motivation to follow through.
- **Review your vision statement and goals at least annually.** Life can throw you curves, and it's important to stay motivated as circumstances change. As you achieve individual goals, check them off the list.

Consider adding new goals. Be patient, but stay faithful to the process. The life you've always envisioned is right in front of you.



### Additional Resource

Use our goal worksheet to turn your dreams into realities.





## Chapter 2

# Career Options



# Charting Your Path

When you decided on dental school, you had an idea of what the future would hold for you. Maybe you saw yourself working with patients, or speaking to students from a lectern. Maybe you saw yourself thriving in a big urban practice, or enjoying the comforts of a small town. Perhaps you envisioned owning a practice, or maybe you wanted to join the staff of an established office. There certainly are many paths a dental career can take.

The vision statement and goals you established in Chapter 1 should help you navigate the possibilities, so keep them in mind. And, remember, whenever you're presented with an employment opportunity, you should gather as much information as possible through interviews and discussions with potential partners, co-workers, and employers. But, before you start your job search, consider how the following practice options—with their advantages and disadvantages—fit your passions, personality, and long-term goals.

- Residency/fellowship
- Associateship
- Opening a new practice
- Purchasing all or part of a practice
- Academia
- Corporate dentistry
- Public health
- Military/federal dentistry

Read on to learn more about each of these practice options.

## Residency/Fellowship

After eight years of higher education, many graduates are ready to jump into practice. However, a one- or two-year stint in an advanced education in general dentistry (AEGD) or a general practice residency (GPR) program may be beneficial. A GPR is hospital-based and rotates through dental, medical, and surgical specialties, while an AEGD program is dental school-based.

In a few states, completion of a residency program is required for licensure. In others, finishing an AEGD or GPR results in automatic licensure. (In some cases, this only applies to dentists who agree to work in underserved areas.)

Dentists have another option for postgraduate training: fellowships. These are non-degree programs that provide dentists with more hands-on experience in their chosen field or with a particular aspect

of it, such as implants, or allow dentists the chance to conduct research projects approved by the organization granting the fellowship. Fellowships usually last one year or two, and—depending on how they’re structured—either the dentist is paid a salary, or he or she has to pay for the additional education.

**Advantages**

- Increased confidence and competency
- A larger patient base than you saw in dental school
- Opportunity to discover a discipline you might not have previously considered
- Opportunity to work with a specialized patient base, such as children or seniors
- Preparation for a future career in education
- Possibility of expanded earning potential

**Disadvantages**

- Demanding hours
- Low salary or no salary
- Financial and geographical uncertainties

What about an associateship? Here are a few details to help guide your decision.

## Associateship

An associateship allows you to work for another dentist without the financial obligation of owning a practice. It’s a good way to get your footing—by learning from an experienced dentist and his or her staff with less financial risk than purchasing or starting a practice. Depending on the arrangement, an associate may receive a straight salary, or he or she might receive pay and/or bonuses based on patients seen, procedures completed, and fees collected. Some incentive-based models are designed to encourage the associate to find some of his or her own patients. Sometimes an associateship can be the first step toward buying into the practice.

A non-owner dentist can be considered an employee of the practice or an independent contractor. In order to avoid uneven workloads, unreasonable expectations, or financial pitfalls, a thorough, clear contract and good communication with the dentist employer is crucial.

### **Advantages**

- Immediate income
- Low financial risk/no overhead
- Opportunity to enhance clinical skills
- Mentoring by dentist employer
- Experienced dental team
- Possible opportunity to buy into the practice
- Chance to establish yourself in the community
- Management skills training

### **Disadvantages**

- Lack of clinical autonomy
- Lack of control over scheduling, supplies, etc.
- Potentially uneven workload that doesn't expand skills
- Possible limited income

Thinking about starting your own practice? Read on!

## **Opening a New Practice**

Opening a new practice straight out of dental school is an ambitious decision—but it may be the right one for those who know where they want to be, believe there is an untapped or strong patient base to serve, and have the financial means to make it happen. At any point in your career, buying an existing space or planning new construction requires a solid financial plan. To be successful as a small business owner, a dentist needs skills and knowledge beyond dental school training.

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*To be successful as a small business owner, a dentist needs skills and knowledge beyond dental school training.*

### **Advantages**

- Chance to establish your vision and philosophy
- Your choice of location, office space, equipment, and staff
- More direct control over your professional life
- Greater income potential than employed positions

### **Disadvantages**

- No immediate income
- Financial pressure that may impact personal decisions/goals
- Potential difficulty in securing a loan as an unproven entity
- Possible lack of experience in making management decisions
- Added stress of running a business

Maybe an option to consider is purchasing all or part of a practice. Learn more on the following page.



## Purchasing All or Part of a Practice

Dentists often choose to purchase an existing practice or a share of one after they've gained some experience elsewhere, but new graduates also may consider this option. You can learn about purchasing opportunities from several sources, including brokers, colleagues, allied dental groups, or local business organizations. To ensure a seamless transition, it's important to do your homework on the practice you're considering.

### Advantages

- Established reputation, client base, and income stream
- Chance to put ownership philosophies to work without starting from scratch
- Opportunity to learn from an experienced partner

### Disadvantages

- Potential loss of patients if purchase coincides with departure of established dentist
- Large initial investment
- Added stress of running a business
- Potential difficulty of transitioning staff/vendors
- Risk of conflicts with co-owners in shared practices

Missing school already? Maybe academia is the place for you.

## Academia

There are more than 65 dental schools in the U.S., plus 10 in Canada, and these institutions can provide a stimulating environment for dentists. An academic career often requires postgraduate specialty training and a postdoctoral fellowship, and those who plan to pursue this path also should have conducted research as a dental student.

### Advantages

- Secure salary and benefits
- Opportunity to influence the next generation of dentists
- Opportunity to conduct research and influence the standard of care
- Option of pairing clinical practice with teaching
- Part- and full-time positions available
- Variation in daily routine

### Disadvantages

- Initial time commitment and costs for postdoctoral training
- Time management concerns for those who simultaneously treat patients, teach, and/or conduct research

Corporate dentistry arrangements are a relatively new option for newly graduated dentists. Here's some food for thought.

## Corporate Dentistry

Another option is working for a dental office chain. In corporate dentistry, most practice protocols and operational standards are set forth outside the practice; on-site dentists are employees of the corporate entity, and patients are often drawn in by advertising campaigns highlighting affordable care. Corporate dentistry, also known as a managed group practice, has come under criticism by some in organized dentistry over its business and care practices. Also, some lawmakers and state's attorneys general have scrutinized individual companies. Investigations have led to bankruptcies or other financial troubles for corporate dentistry companies.

However, not all corporate chains are alike in their business models. The key for dentists considering employment in a corporate practice is to understand how the particular company functions. Dentists also should be cognizant and cautious of practices that they feel might interfere so substantially with the dentist-patient relationship that it would create a risk for the dentist, as these tend to be the same practices that face scrutiny from lawmakers and other investigators. For more information on corporate dentistry, see [Chapter 4](#).

### Advantages

- Guaranteed base salary; immediate income
- Opportunity to hone skills and observe management practices
- Varied patient base

### Disadvantages

- Autonomy limited by corporate rules, including patient quotas
- Lack of control over hours
- Higher dentist and staff turnover compared with private practices

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**“Solo practice, associateship, corporate dentistry, the military? There are so many options when deciding which type of dentistry to practice, but your decision should be made based on what you think is best for you and your family at the present time.”**

Timothy B. Tinker, DMD  
Captain, U.S. Navy Dental Corps  
San Diego, Calif.

University of Louisville  
School of Dentistry, 1993

Have you ever considered a career in public health? Read on to learn more.

## Public Health

Public health dentistry allows you to make a difference at the state, county, federal, or international levels. From practicing in a hospital or prison system to joining the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, the possible career paths in this field vary widely. Most, however, involve advancing the oral health of the public, particularly the underserved.

### Advantages

- No investment or overhead
- Guaranteed salary and benefits
- Work-life balance
- Diverse patient base
- Opportunity for research/preparation for a career in education

### Disadvantages

- Limited earning potential compared with private practice
- Job may be reliant on government funding or grants

Of course, pursuing a career in military or federal dentistry is another rewarding option.

## Military/Federal Dentistry

Federal Services dentistry offers a unique opportunity to use your skills while serving your country. Dentists in this field provide care to military members and their families, both stateside and around the world, and those trained as officers can expand their service to leadership, crisis support, and other duties on ships and in clinics/hospitals.

### Advantages

- Opportunity to serve your country
- Travel opportunities
- Leadership training
- Options for loan repayment assistance
- Advancement opportunities
- Steady salary and benefits
- Close-knit community
- Possibility of retirement income after 20 or more years of service

### Disadvantages

- Lower earning potential than in private sector
- Possible relocations and deployments

With so many options for practicing dentistry, there is a lot to consider before taking your next step.

## It's Personal

In addition to considering your vision statement and goals, taking stock of your personality traits can help you determine the most desirable practice environment for you.

Each career path is different, but every career path offers the chance to improve and excel. Ultimately, your career will be what you make of it. Ask yourself these questions to further discern which option most appeals to your personality.

Do I...

- Like to work in small or large groups?
- Get nervous or motivated when I'm in charge?
- Enjoy comforting people as much as, more than, or less than I enjoy technical dentistry?
- Thrive on discovery or on routine?
- Feel comfortable or anxious when taking risks?
- Find it easy or difficult to interact with people very different from me?
- Prefer to lead or follow?

Review your vision statement once again, keeping your answers to these questions in mind. How well do they match up? Also consider your vision statement and goals as you review the following chart—highlight, make notes, and see what might be the best direction for you.

And, remember, speaking with an established dentist can be very helpful—he or she can be a great sounding board for your ideas, questions, and concerns about any career path. And you never know—you might find a new partner, practice, or venture in the process.

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**“Your first years are for consolidation and discovery—consolidation of the knowledge and skills you began to absorb in dental school, and discovery of your identity and preferences as a professional. You will never stop changing; the reflection that leads to self-understanding will help ensure that you also keep progressing.”**

Eric K. Curtis, DDS, MA, MAGD  
Safford, Ariz.

University of the Pacific, Arthur A. Dugoni  
School of Dentistry, 1985

The possibilities of how to build a career in dentistry are many. By taking time to consider the options, and how they match with your vision and goals, you can help to ensure that your career is everything you hoped it would be.

### The Big Picture: Evaluating Career Options

	Residency/ Fellowship	Associateship	Opening a New Practice	Purchasing All or Part of a Practice	Academia	Corporate Dentistry	Public Health	Military/ Federal Dentistry
Financial Risk	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Practice Autonomy	No	Limited	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Patient Interaction	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Possible	Yes	Yes	Yes
Predictable Hours	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Potential for Growth	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ability to Develop Practice Equity	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Residency Required	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Supports My Career Goals</b>								
<b>Supports My Personal Goals</b>								
<b>Meshes With My Personality</b>								



## Chapter 3

# Associateships



## Charting Your Path

An associateship can be a great first step in your dental career because it offers valuable learning opportunities. As an associate, you'll have the chance to observe the full range of dental practice, including management, while honing your clinical skills. Your experience also may help you to plan for your professional future by allowing you to determine your clinical focus.

Working as an associate before starting your own practice may prove to be a smart investment on the path to later success. This arrangement allows you to earn income at an established practice without personal investment, which may be especially appealing as you begin to tackle your student loan debt.

The decision to enter an associateship, however, should not be based solely on financial concerns; like any career choice, it requires careful consideration. Keep your vision and goals in mind as you investigate this career path.

### An Associateship Quiz

Answer these questions to help you decide if an associateship is right for you:

1. Does the idea of running my own practice make me feel uneasy or overwhelmed? ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. Would I rather enhance my clinical skills than be my own boss? ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Would I enjoy having a mentor? ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Does my personal life require a lot of flexibility? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Does an associateship line up with my vision statement and goals? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered yes to all or most of these questions, then an associateship might be a good option for you!

## Finding an Associateship

The Internet has made it much easier to find career opportunities, but you shouldn't limit your job search to the Web. [Networking](#) and word of mouth often lead to the most satisfying employment scenarios.

Consider using the following resources as you begin your search:

- Your school's career placement service
- Local, state, and national dental organizations
- Dental practice brokers
- Online job boards
- Dental supply sales reps
- Dental publications
- Mentors
- Dental school classmates

As you begin your search, one key question will be where you will practice. Maybe you've already decided that, no matter what, you want to practice in your hometown—or in the city where you went to dental school, or in a town you've always found appealing, or somewhere that looks like a high-growth area with a strong patient base. Be sure to look at local market trends to help guide your decision. No matter where you're going, even if you're sure where you want to be, there are a few critical questions you must ask yourself to ensure the location you're choosing meshes well with your professional and personal goals. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is there a need for my services here?
- Is this an acceptable place to live and raise my family?
- How would my commute affect my work-life balance?
- How would leaving this practice under a non-compete clause—barring me from working in this area for a year or more—affect my future?

Consider your goals and your responses to these questions. Where you ultimately decide to practice could be as critical to your professional happiness as the dental practice environment itself.

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*Where you ultimately decide to practice could be as critical to your professional happiness as the dental practice environment itself.*

## Evaluating a Practice

How should you evaluate an associateship position? Well, that will depend first on whether or not you're planning to someday buy a share of the practice. If you're not, or if the associateship is not offering this option, then use the information in this chapter to help you determine how to assess the operational and financial health of a practice to ensure that it's the right opportunity for your professional development. If you're pursuing the associateship with an eye on someday owning a share of the practice, then see [Chapter 5](#) for additional information on how to assess a buy-in opportunity.

You can do some research on your own by reading the practice's online reviews or investigating the area's growth trends. You'll be able to answer your other questions through on-site observation and discussions with the owner/dentist. The goal here is to make sure the associateship would maximize your training and skills. Questions to consider when evaluating an associate position can be broken down into two categories: operations and finances.



## Operations

Consider these questions when studying a practice's operations:

- Why is the practice looking for an associate? Is this a new or replacement position?
- Are there evening office hours?
- Is the patient filing system in good order?
- What does the practice consider to be its biggest competition?
- Would the position handle only certain patients and/or cases?
- How will patients be allocated to the new associate?
- What is the rate of staff turnover?
- Are dentist and staff certifications up-to-date?
- What is the condition of the office equipment?
- Are the treatment rooms set up for left- or right-handed practitioners? Can they be switched if necessary?
- What types of technology does the practice utilize? Are they routinely updated?
- Does the practice actively support continuing education?
- Does the practice have a presence in the community beyond its office walls?
- What sort of presence does the practice have on social media?
- Does the practice have positive online reviews?
- Has the state board received any complaints about the practice?

If the practice's operations look to be in good order, look next at the practice's finances.

## Finances

Ask yourself these questions when studying a practice's finances:

- Is the practice in good financial standing? Is it current on taxes?
- Is the office rented, owned, or part of a system of practices? How might that change in the future?
- What is the patient flow, and how has that varied in recent years?
- Does the practice have opportunities for patient growth?
- Are there production quotas?
- What is the collection rate, and how has that varied over recent years?
- What is the practice's insurance base?
- Is the owner/dentist planning to retire soon? Is he or she interested in selling the practice or a practice share within the next several years, and does he or she have a buyer in mind?
- What is the practice's current salary structure? What are its future projections?

- What kind of liability insurance does the practice have? Has it been used?
- Are there any pending state regulations that could significantly impact the practice?

Most associate jobs fall into two categories: employees or independent contractors. Employees generally have fewer responsibilities, little or no financial risk, and a steady, predictable income. They don't typically have much autonomy, but they can certainly set forth terms in their contract to define their role in the practice.

Independent contractors enjoy more autonomy, because they are self-employed practitioners utilizing another dentist's office. Depending on the terms of the contract, this may include having some say over staff and equipment. However, unlike an employee, an independent contractor receives no benefits, such as health insurance or retirement plans, and he or she is responsible for computing and paying his or her own taxes, rather than having them withheld in a paycheck.

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**“Networking is probably the most under-stressed and under-utilized tool by many up-and-coming dentists. I cannot stress enough the importance of networking early on as a student in college and in dental school. Networking should transcend beyond your childhood dentist; you need to build relationships throughout college and dental school. It paid off for me and it could pay off for you, too, when it comes to landing the perfect associateship!”**

Scott R. Cayouette, DMD, FAGD  
Charleston, S.C.

Medical University of South Carolina  
College of Dental Medicine, 1996

## Approaching an Interview

Decide what truly matters to you before your initial visit and interview. Write down your non-negotiables, and keep them in mind as you consider opportunities and participate in interviews. Some flexibility will likely be required, but you don't want to compromise too much; this could lead to future discontent. You should be sure that the practice meets your standards in the present; don't rely on future plans and promises.

As an associate, you're generally not expected to come in and substantially change the practice's culture, but your employer will want you to contribute to the bottom line. Come to the interview

with a business plan in mind and share your ideas. Your interviewer likely will be impressed with your initiative and drive. Also be sure to have a personal financial statement and your credit score on hand; your employer will require access to that information before an offer is made.

Overall, as you consider a practice, you need to ask yourself, can I be a successful associate at this practice? Consider these issues to help you decide whether a practice is right for you:

- What is the office culture?
- Is the staff knowledgeable and friendly? What is the staff's relationship with the dentist like? What does the staff say about the practice?
- How are staff issues addressed?
- Does the practice have stated philosophies on treatment, communication, and ethics?
- What is the owner/dentist's chairside manner like?
- How does the practice deal with anxious patients?
- How does the practice deal with economically disadvantaged patients?
- Why does the owner want an associate? Why does he or she think having an associate will improve the practice?
- Do the owner/dentist's core values and personality mesh with mine?
- Do the owner/dentist's plans for the future align with my plans?
- What were the owner/dentist's own goals after dental school graduation, and how have they evolved?
- Is the practice committed to an optimal work-life balance for its staff? How is this carried out?
- Do staff members seem invested in something larger than themselves?
- Does the practice contribute to the community through initiatives, such as dental health education or team/event sponsorship?
- Is this owner/dentist willing to share his experiences with me as a mentor? If so, how would that be accomplished?

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**"If upon graduation from dental school you do not have a definite next step in mind, associating with an established dental practice may be a good place to begin your career. Do so under the guidance of trusted legal counsel. Advantages of associateships are freedom from initial purchase and setup of a practice, the availability of a mentor if needed, and more time to practice without overhead concerns."**

Kay Jordan, DDS, FAGD  
New Orleans

LSU School of Dentistry, 1999

Take a moment to think about what mentoring means to you. New associates are often excited about gaining both technical and practical wisdom as they work closely with an experienced dentist. Not every experienced dentist, however, will be interested in serving as a mentor or available to do so. If mentoring is important to you, bring up the topic during interviews with the owner/dentist, and discuss how mentoring might play out on a weekly or monthly basis. If the owner/dentist shows a lack of enthusiasm for mentoring, take note of that as you reflect on your priorities. If a particular practice seems to have everything going for it except for a mentoring opportunity, however, don't necessarily count it out. Many local, state, and national dental associations, including the AGD, pair up members through mentoring programs.

## Negotiating a Contract

When you are ready to commit to a practice, remember that nothing is official until it's in writing. Working on a "Let's see how it goes" or "We'll formalize things later" basis can lead to great frustration and potential income loss down the road. It's important to negotiate a solid contract that clearly details your employment terms (see sidebar).

As you review the fine print of your employment agreement, even if everything seems clear and acceptable in your mind, you will need a trained eye to assist you. Paying for professional advice will help you to protect your interests. Plus, if you plan to own or buy into a practice some day, it's a good idea to make long-term connections

### Reviewing an Associateship Contract

Your contract should include explanations about each of these key areas:

- **Compensation:** Classification status (i.e., per diem, flat rate, percent of production, percent of collections), productivity requirements, salary and commission structure, lab fee deductions
- **Duties:** Expectations, hours/schedule, patient base, procedure for covering emergencies
- **Insurance:** Professional liability, workers' compensation, property, loss of income, disability
- **Future buy-in (if applicable):** Availability, timing, percentage, terms
- **Benefits:** Health, dental, vision, life, vacation, sick leave, flexible spending accounts, retirement savings, continuing education
- **Life events:** Pregnancy, maternity/paternity leave, bereavement days
- **Termination of relationship:** Notice requirements, death, disability, option to purchase, right of first refusal, non-compete/non-solicitation clauses

When reviewing a contract, be sure to seek assistance from legal and financial professionals.

with legal and financial professionals so they can get to know you and help you achieve your career goals. Seek assistance from the following sources:

**An attorney** can review employment contracts, conduct negotiations, assess compliance issues, and more. Consider an attorney who specializes in dental transactions.

**An accountant** can review your finances, put your financial goals into a meaningful framework, and process taxes.

**A dental association** can provide you with practice management resources to help you achieve success.

**A mentor** can be your childhood dentist, a trusted professor, or someone you really connected with at a networking event—anyone who can be a valuable resource if you have questions or need to confide in someone.

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*As you review the fine print of your employment agreement, even if everything seems clear and acceptable in your mind, you will need a trained eye to assist you.*

## The Promise of Associateships

An associateship can be a great opportunity if you enter into the right arrangement with your eyes open and your goals in hand. Don't get complacent about your future plans, of course, but don't ignore the benefits of your current situation. As an associate, you can develop your technical expertise, business acumen, and interpersonal skills alongside an experienced dentist, positioning you to make the most of your career.

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## Chapter 4

# Corporate Dentistry



## What Is Corporate Dentistry?

Corporate dentistry refers to any of a variety of practice modalities in which management services, at a minimum, are provided in a manner that is organizationally distinct, or separate, from the scope of activities performed by a dentist within his or her own practice. In short, corporate dentistry is overseen by a third-party owner/management structure that does not necessarily include the dentist who is providing the patient treatment and care.

In some instances, dentists contract with companies, known as dental management organizations (DMOs) or dental service organizations (DSOs), for business support. One model of corporate practice utilizes practicing dentists as shareholders who develop and implement business functions and expectations. Another model uses professional corporations (PCs)—sometimes one per state, and sometimes many per state or one per many states—as interfaces between the DMO and individual practices, with the PCs providing oversight over multiple practices, with the responsibility of administering business services and managing the DMO's expectations through business services contracts.

Where local laws permit, the corporations own the practices and hire their own dentists. Some outside owners are investors or equity firms.

### Corporate Dentistry Growth

Corporate dentistry continues to grow. According to the American Dental Association (ADA) Health Policy Resources Center, 76 percent of dentists in 2006 were solo practitioners. By 2010, that number had fallen to 69 percent. Since 2010, the number of large dental group practices has jumped 25 percent from 2,000 to 2,500. It is important to understand that not all large dental group practices are corporate dentistry practices; a large group practice also may be a traditional practice arrangement with multiple owner dentists.

The reasons for the rise in corporate dentistry are varied. First, dental practices have become attractive to investors, and, as a result, the profession has become one of the last health care fields to fall under the realm of corporate-driven professional services. Second, corporate dental practices may be attractive to dentists who are looking for work-life balance, a regular paycheck, and relief from the day-to-day responsibilities related to managing a dental practice. Third, many

young dentists train in a group environment and prefer working with their professional peers rather than as sole practitioners.

## Opportunity for New Dentists

For recent dental school graduates, corporate dentistry provides the opportunity to repay hundreds of thousands of dollars in student loans. Today, there are fewer associate opportunities for new dentists, and starting a solo practice can require \$500,000 to \$1 million in financing, an overwhelming sum to someone with \$200,000 to \$300,000 in student loans. In fact, many older dentists are finding that young dentists cannot afford to purchase established practices—nor do they desire to do so. In many of these instances, it is a corporation that ultimately purchases the practice.

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*For recent dental school graduates, corporate dentistry provides the opportunity to repay hundreds of thousands of dollars in student loans.*

## Scrutiny of Dental Corporations

Despite their appeal to patients and dentists alike, some dental corporations have come under federal and professional scrutiny amid accusations of fraud and patient abuse. As a result, dentists need to proceed cautiously and obtain as much information as possible about any potential employer before signing a contract or committing to a new job.

A 2013 U.S. Senate committee investigated a few specific companies that claimed to operate as dental management companies but, in reality, owned the dental practices that they managed with excess control over operations, including the provision of clinical care. This practice is illegal in states that only allow licensed dentists to own dental practices. In addition, some companies tend to focus their care on low-income children on Medicaid. Some have been cited for providing unnecessary treatments and, in some cases, causing serious trauma to young patients. In each instance, investigators charged that the need for corporate profits was placed ahead of patient care.

## Weighing the Pros and Cons

What are the pros and cons of corporate dentistry? For dentists, especially recent dental school graduates, there are many factors to consider before deciding whether or not to pursue a career in



corporate dentistry. Please note that these pros and cons are not applicable across all corporate practices, and many of them also might be applicable to traditional practices.

**Pros:**

- A consistent paycheck and, at least initially, a more favorable salary, benefits, and bonus package
- A pension or retirement fund
- Company-paid insurance and taxes
- The ability to start practicing dentistry without the stress and expense of owning or starting your own business
- A management infrastructure that handles staff recruitment, human resources, patient scheduling, and marketing, as well as the purchase of supplies and equipment, technology, and the negotiation and payment of laboratory services
- Work-life balance, thanks to a consistent work schedule
- Opportunities for professional relationships with dentist peers
- Continuing education support and reimbursement, and other corporate benefits
- The patient perception that a “big box” dental company may offer services at a reduced cost (As dentistry requires more out-of-pocket payment than general medical care, this perception may result in more patients.)
- Affiliation with a known brand or entity

**Cons:**

- Packed workday schedules with many patients and, as a result, less time for attention to detail
- May be required to meet sales quotas for various procedures—scaling, crowns, or root canals, for example
- No practice equity
- No ownership of patient records
- Limited potential for growth
- Use of “insider-only referral,” meaning that dentists are forced to refer patients to company specialists instead of dentists whom they have worked with and trust
- Laboratory services chosen based on the lowest bidder instead of the best provider
- A professional stigma that corporate dentistry places profits over quality care
- Possibly a lack of say in treatment and care policies and procedures

- Strict supply processes that may result in shortages and an inability to provide necessary care at a given appointment
- Differing treatment philosophies
- A potentially diminished patient-dentist relationship

After closely weighing the pros and cons, you may decide that a position in corporate dentistry is the way to go.

## Finding a Corporate Dentistry Position

These dental positions often are posted in the same way that other jobs are: through headhunters, classified ads, or websites like LinkedIn and DentalPost. Dental organizations, like the AGD, also offer [career centers](#) that are worth checking out. Also, some corporations recruit and provide informational presentations at dental schools.

## Deciding If a Company Is Right for You

According to the AGD's "[Investigative Report on the Corporate Practice of Dentistry](#)," all dentists, especially new graduates, should ask a wide array of questions when considering corporate dentistry employment. In addition to basic questions about hours and pay, the report recommends that dentists also ask:

- Who is my employer?
- Who can create or edit a treatment plan? Who is responsible for the treatment plan? Do I have the authority to disagree with or change the treatment plan?
- Who owns the dental professional entity? Who owns the business entity?
- What is the governance structure of the dental professional entity or the business entity?
- Does the business entity have a relationship with any outside investors, such as an equity firm or public company?
- Is there a management services agreement? If so, does that agreement comply with state laws?
- What are my employer's expectations regarding productivity, patient volume, and revenue? For example, may I take two hours to complete a crown prep?
- What formula is used for dentist compensation? To what degree is my remuneration based on my productivity?
- What is the relationship between my compensation and that of the business entity?

- Who owns the lease agreements for the building? For the equipment? If I buy a practice, will I have the opportunity to own the equipment in full, or will I rent the equipment perpetually? If I can own the equipment, what is the lease term, and is there a separate agreement for a lease-to-own opportunity?
- May I use any vendor for supplies? Is there a cap on the volume or type of supplies available?
- May I use a dental laboratory of my choosing? How are lab costs ascertained and apportioned?
- Who has control over revenue stream distribution, and how is the revenue stream distributed?
- Who owns patient records? Upon termination, would I have access to patient records? If so, to what extent? Is there a procedure for accessing these records?
- How are after-hours emergencies addressed?
- Who makes hiring and firing decisions? Are there any protocols or guidelines for these decisions?
- May I have access to all contracts and other documentation upon which the above answers are based, so that I may share them with an independent attorney, accountant, or professional adviser?

The AGD's investigative report reminds dentists that many of these questions might be useful to ask even when considering employment in a traditional practice.

## Reviewing a Corporate Dentistry Contract

Before reviewing a corporate dentistry contract, you first should outline your personal and professional goals, as discussed in [Chapter 1](#). You need to have a strong sense of what you are looking for in a dental position and your ethical boundaries.

Know that regardless of who holds the responsibility for business decisions, you as the dentist are ultimately responsible for the clinical and ethical decisions you make.

Before making a decision on whether or not to join a corporate dental practice or clinic, or any large practice, the AGD recommends that all dentists, from new graduates to established practitioners, gather all the relevant information

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*Know that regardless of who holds the responsibility for business decisions, you as the dentist are ultimately responsible for the clinical and ethical decisions you make.*

obtained through the interview process, including the contract, and consult with an independent attorney, accountant, and/or another professional who is familiar with the various modalities of business practices in health care delivery. It also is important to understand that the contract alone might not reveal some of the cons discussed above. Regardless of what is stated in the contract, it also is important to ask the potential employer the questions included in the AGD's investigative report.

Corporate dentistry may be a viable option for you. To know for sure, it's imperative that you fully understand the company you are considering and what they will expect of you in terms of patient care: Will you be making patient care decisions, or will the corporation? Your personal goals must align with corporate requirements, as ultimately you are responsible for the care you provide.

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## Chapter 5

# Owning a Practice



## Being the Boss

*Being your own boss.* You may have yearned for such independence since Day 1 of dental school. And you may be ready. With a solid vision for your practice and a plan that articulates what you need and how to find it, going out on your own after school may be the right option. It's also undeniably the most challenging, at least initially.

For many, it's not a question of whether to own a practice, but when. The reality is that you will carry the responsibilities of business owner and boss, as well as dentist. The investment is large and will add to your debt load. Your financial momentum will build slowly as you seek to establish yourself in the community you choose. For all those truths, numerous dentists choose to dig in and commit to practice ownership.

The question of when to own is one only you can answer, based on your financial and professional comfort level, and the goals you've thoughtfully set. When you are ready, ownership comes in three categories:

- Buying a share of an existing practice
- Buying an existing practice
- Starting your own practice

Whichever you choose, it's important to make sound decisions each step of the way. You will be juggling many things at once and dealing with many outside factors, any of which—poor location, under-experienced staff, economic downturn—could be your undoing. Do your homework on each piece of the practice puzzle, and your future will fit together seamlessly.

### Buying a Share or All of a Practice

There are several paths to owning your own practice. As we explored in [Chapter 3](#), working as an associate with an option to buy into a practice can work well. In this scenario, you get acquainted with the rhythm of the practice before making a financial commitment. This avenue works best if the dentist/owner is clear and contracted on his or her timeline to sell all or a portion of the practice. Sometimes a dentist/owner can get cold feet about turning over his or her life's work. Perhaps that's understandable, but it

can be quite frustrating if you have been investing your time with the expectation of achieving autonomy. The importance of a solid associateship contract can't be overstated.

Even if your plan is to buy a practice outright, it can be very helpful to step in and work there for a while first, taking the time to learn the ropes and become very sure of your decision, before finalizing a purchase. A committed dentist will likely welcome someone who cares enough about the practice to make sure it's a good fit. Terms for this arrangement should also be specifically contracted.

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*Even if your plan is to buy a practice outright, it can be very helpful to step in and work there for a while first, taking the time to learn the ropes and become very sure of your decision, before finalizing a purchase.*

### **Find your location**

You may be single and ready to work 80 hours a week. But you won't always be. Things like rush hour patterns, school systems, and distance from family and friends will eventually impact you, so start by determining your limits geographically. If you first define what you need from your practice's location, you won't waste time visiting practices or entertaining options that won't work in the long term.

Next, get in touch with dental practice brokers. Often found in the classified listings of dental magazines, brokers usually represent committed sellers. Let them know you, too, are committed, and for which area. As with associateships, buy-in or purchase opportunities also can be found through dental organizations, online listings, and word of mouth from former classmates and dental supply sales reps whose job it is to know their customers.

### **Assemble your advisers**

You would be well-advised to have a financial planner, accountant, and attorney lined up as you begin your search. Waiting until there's a contract or a financial question to find representation—or get basic financial approval—could hold you up and hold you back from an opportunity. It's OK to need help. While attorneys and accountants with dental experience might not be the cheapest, they will have the experience necessary to help you correctly determine your financial

parameters and prevent purchase mistakes. Sellers are more likely to respond favorably to an organized, prepared buyer. A professional who understands your goals can help you get there.

### ***Remember your goals***

When you purchase a practice or practice share, you will eventually put your personal stamp on the business. But that's *eventually*. Therefore, the *current* environment needs to fit with your philosophies and values well enough for a healthy transition. It's a lot like buying a home—after all, your practice is your work home. While it might look different than you imagined, the core of where it is and how it operates needs to mesh with your goals and personality.

Be realistic. Your wish list might not be met to the letter. But you shouldn't feel like you are settling, either. This is your future!

Many of the questions set forth in [Chapter 3](#) to help assess the fit of a potential associateship apply to the fit of a potential purchase, too: What's the current dentist's philosophy of treatment? What is the patient niche? What is the culture and contentedness of the staff? What is the practice's presence in the community? Focus on demographics, location, reputation, and staffing to determine if this is a practice you should own.

- **Demographics:** Is the area growing? Growing older? What's the area's saturation of dentists? Contact the local chamber of commerce and municipal economic development department to find answers to these questions. Fluctuations in the unemployment rate and the area's economic base also can be important indicators about an area and its future success.
- **Location:** Are nearby construction projects on the horizon in the next decade that will help or hinder access, or potentially increase or decrease your patient base? Are new neighborhoods going up? Note projected timelines and whether these are just rumors or approved plans.
- **Reputation:** How tied is the practice's reputation to the previous owner? This could alert you to a potential problem or indicate that sensitivity is needed for a smooth transition. This could include broad-based measures, like advertising, or specific strategies, like conversations with each patient about earning his or her trust. Patients and neighboring businesses could be resources,



and so could the dentist/owner. Ask him or her about community connections and involvements, and who would be a good gauge of reputation.

- **Staffing:** Ask about job satisfaction, performance, turnover, and attitude. The staff's acceptance of a new owner will undoubtedly involve some hurdles, but you need to know if there are bigger issues afoot. Quality staff members are crucial to the success of a practice. Some dentists don't want patients or staff to know about an impending sale too early to avoid upheaval or rumors. Be sensitive, but also understand that you have a right to know if everyone will leave when the dentist does.

Once you are comfortable with what you know about a practice and that it fits with your goals and values, it's time to get technical.

### *Evaluate operations and finances*

A solid foundation is crucial for future practice success, so make sure to research a practice's finances and operations thoroughly before purchasing it. A professional appraisal of the practice should be the first piece of financial information that you obtain, and you should consider an independent appraisal rather than relying on the practice owner. Sellers who want to keep their information private—and don't want you to become a competitor instead of a buyer—may ask you to sign a confidentiality agreement before receiving any financial information; understand what you are signing.

In evaluating a practice, you should ask for the past three to five years of financial information. The information you need might be organized in different ways. Below are the things you should know—and have reviewed by an adviser who knows dental economics. The goal is to identify any issues and assess whether this is a sound purchase.

- Recent profit and loss statements
- Balance sheets and income tax returns from at least the past three years
- Percentage of collections used to cover overhead
- Revenue broken down by source: private insurance, patient out-of-pocket, Medicaid, etc.
- Equipment valuation and age (evaluation should be performed by an independent equipment dealer)
- Value of all usable clinical supplies and hand instruments

- Any lease agreements on equipment
- Detailed physical description of the office, including the number of operatories, as well as whether the practice owns the building and land, and whether expansion is possible
- Copy of the lease agreement if property is leased
- Production and collections report broken down by each dentist and hygienist
- Accounts receivable and aging report; percentage of accounts receivable collected
- Description of any contractual relationships with patients, employers, and insurance companies, including HMOs, PPOs, DMOs, and capitation plans
- Breakdown of practice expenses: insurance, retirement benefits, employment benefits, payroll taxes, medical reimbursement, telephone/technology expenses, continuing education
- Total number of active patients (and criteria for “active”); number of new patients each month
- List of referring dentists for specialty practices
- Details on liens on any assets
- Information on any complaints filed with the state

Additional homework likely will include:

- A review/audit of patient charts
- Inspection of hard assets
- Learning the billing/collection policies
- Examining the employee handbook
- Becoming acquainted with patient management software

It is likely that, as you review all of these items, new questions and additional concerns will arise. This can be a long, difficult process, but it is one that, in the end, will prepare you for practice ownership.

### ***Negotiate a contract***

When it’s time to make an offer, you will be working on two fronts. You’ll need to compile personal and practice information for lenders en route to securing financing, and you’ll need to make a formal offer for the practice. Agreeing on a price is the most important aspect of the transaction, surrounded by many, many more fine points.

A letter of intent or offer to purchase should:

- clearly state the price and that the offer is subject to securing financing, the lease, and agreement to other terms that will be coming in the practice sale agreement.
- be non-binding, except for the price.
- allow you time to continue detailing the terms of sale.
- be accompanied by earnest money so the seller can feel comfortable taking the practice off of the market.

An attorney with dental practice experience or a practice transition consultant can prepare the initial contract or practice sale agreement. You can limit legal costs by having a thorough discussion of the details with the seller early on. Your attorney's role would then be to review, not negotiate. Your contract will depend on your situation, of course. Here are a few contract or practice sale agreement provisions to consider:

- Selling price, all assets being sold, provisions for patient records
- Provisions for the selling dentist not to compete, not to solicit the patients you are purchasing, not to encourage employees to leave
- Provisions for how and when the seller will notify the patients about the change in ownership (Consider requiring the selling dentist to endorse you.)
- Provision for a healthy transition period with the outgoing dentist, perhaps as an employee or consultant. Having guidance as you take over the practice is crucial, especially if you have little experience managing a business. Some, however, prefer a clean break. Think it through thoroughly and with an eye on the culture of the particular practice.
- Provisions for preventing any pre-existing legal problems the seller might have from affecting you. Anything that happens during the seller's tenure as owner should remain the seller's responsibility.

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**"Owning my own practice has enabled me to provide outstanding total health for our patients and to nurture my team members to superstar status. This, in turn, has allowed me to reach my goals of raising my family on my terms and making a difference in the community I serve."**

Bruce L. Cassis, DDS, MAGD  
Fayetteville, W.Va.

West Virginia University School of Dentistry, 1980

You'll also want to keep in mind these contract "red flags":

- Vagueness (e.g., "to be determined" or "as necessary")
- Language you don't understand
- Pressure to close too quickly
- An information gap that keeps you from addressing any aspect of the practice

As you can see, buying a practice takes a lot of work. Perhaps you'd prefer to put that effort into starting a practice from scratch. If so, read on!

## Starting Your Own Practice

Some new dentists are determined to build their own practice from the very first patient. The same careful consideration of demographics and location necessary to buy a practice also is required to start your own practice. Scrutinize an area's past economic trends and document future development plans. Assess how your own vision and goals mesh with your proposed practice site.

You also will need to determine how your business will be organized. You will want to choose the form that best protects you from exposure to liability, debt, and unnecessary taxes. (You are always responsible for your own negligence.) Here is where up-front money spent on an accountant can save you time, trouble, and taxes later. Yes, you are capable of boning up on business practices, but the wisdom of using a dental CPA can't be overstated. Choose carefully. Get comfortable with your adviser. Ask lots of questions—be honest about what you don't understand—and provide him or her with honesty and insight into your goals. This person should function as the equivalent of a trusted business partner.

A proliferation of information also exists online and in books regarding business partnerships, corporate formats, and tax structures. On the following pages is basic information that will help you approach an accountant and attorney, and determine the types of decisions you will have to make.

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*The same careful consideration of demographics and location necessary to buy a practice also is required to start your own practice.*

In the context of dentistry, there are four organization types: sole proprietorship, partnership, corporation, and limited liability company.

**In a sole proprietorship:**

- The owner is the practice in the eyes of the law.
- The owner is personally liable for all debts/lawsuits incurred by the practice.
- The owner pays personal income tax on profits, making for simpler, less costly accounting.
- The owner pays a self-employment tax.
- The owner has complete autonomy and control, as well as freedom from government regulations.
- Raising capital and hiring employees may be more challenging.

**In a partnership:**

- There are two or more persons who share ownership and management.
- The co-owners are personally liable for partnership's debts and obligations.
- The partnership agreement details how profits and losses will be shared, and how the partnership can be transferred or sold.
- The taxes are handled as with sole proprietorships, but the partnership files an income tax return.

**In a corporation:**

- The organization has a separate legal identity from the person or people who make up the corporation.
- The organization must comply with specific requirements of state statutes.
- The owners are shielded from debts other than those that stem from professional negligence, except when the corporation commits certain violations.
- The taxes are determined by how the corporation is set up within federal and state statutes.

A professional corporation has two choices for tax purposes: a C corporation or an S corporation. The chart on the next page details their differences.

Corporation	Status	Profits	Losses	Advantages	Disadvantages
C Corporation	Tax-paying entity	Pays taxes on profits	Not passed on to stockholders; can offset past or future income	Tax-free health insurance and group-term life insurance; C Corporations get a deduction for premiums paid; stockholders don't have to include premiums in income	Double taxation of corporate income and dividends to shareholders
S Corporation	Not a tax-paying entity	Passed through to stockholders, who report them on their own income tax returns	Passed on to stockholders, who report them on their own income tax returns; can be used against other stockholder income	Bypasses double taxation; accounting can be easier	Strict guidelines about ownership and profit/loss sharing; serious tax ramifications if S corporation changed to C

#### **In a limited liability company (LLC):**

- The organization is essentially a hybrid between a partnership and a corporation.
- The organization is simple to form, as long as there are at least two members.
- The organization typically insulates its owners from liabilities resulting from business operations, but LLC members (owners) are still liable for their own negligence.
- There are no federal income taxes; state income tax is applicable in some states.
- Profits and losses are reported on the owner's personal tax returns.
- Members are not generally liable for the company's debts or torts.
- Many states levy a franchise tax or capital value tax; the practice must pay the state for the limited liability protection it receives.
- It can be more difficult to raise capital.

Whether you decide to buy a practice or start your own, you'll need to secure financing.

## Financing Your Practice

It's important to be organized, prepared, and enthusiastic as you meet with potential lenders. Your time is precious, and so is theirs. Before approaching lenders, you should create a business plan, which will help them gauge your credit-worthiness. Show them you understand your financial needs and the business of dentistry.

The three main arteries of practice financing are dental-specific lenders, banks, and your seller. Your seller may offer you the best interest rate, but you may have his or her retirement in your hands if you borrow. You would need to decide if the rate is worth the potential pressure and expectations.

Third-party lenders offer something more than money. By evaluating you and your purchase and deciding to fund both, they will provide an educated opinion that your plan is doable and potentially profitable. Plus, third-party lenders will be aggressive about searching out liens or anything else that would put their investment at risk, again bearing out your own evaluation of the purchase opportunity.

When comparing financing options, consider the following:

- Interest rate
- Life of the loan
- Early repayment penalties
- Flexible payment options
- Lender's terms
- Fees
- Collateral requirements

You'll also need to be prepared for what your lenders will need.

You, the buyer, will likely have to provide:

- Your résumé
- A net worth statement
- Two years of income tax returns
- Consent to conduct a credit check
- Copies of your dental, driver's, and DEA licenses
- Completed lender's credit application
- Your business plan, if available

The practice seller will need to provide:

- A copy of the practice valuation
- Copies of practice's income tax returns and profit and loss statements
- A historical depreciation schedule listing practice's equipment, furnishings, and fixtures
- A business plan or projected two-year budget for the practice
- The practice's active patient count

Once your practice's finances are in order, it's time to consider the systems that will keep it running.

## Reviewing Systems Development

The various aspects of your practice are interdependent. If one breaks down, the others likely will suffer. It's important to develop sound systems, or scrutinize the ones already in place in the practice you plan to purchase. Having a blueprint for daily operating procedures will keep you from going into crisis mode—something you want to avoid as you seek to build patient confidence. Here are the top eight systems to review:

### *System 1: Chart maintenance*

Accurate treatment records are a top priority. Today's electronic charting systems make safe storage and precise recordkeeping easier than ever. Consistency is key, and attention to detailed charting should become a natural part of every day and every appointment. This is in the best interest of your patients—and your practice—should complaints or lawsuits require chart scrutiny. Check your state's requirement for how long records must be kept, and adhere strictly to that statute.

When it comes to organizing charts, be sure to include the following:

- All doctor and patient remarks
- X-rays and photos
- Prescriptions and lab slips
- Letters and other correspondence
- Referrals
- Medical history
- HIPAA releases
- Any written patient records
- Financial arrangements
- Signed treatment consent forms



What to remember:

- Never alter a chart.
- Always write legibly.
- Update medical entries promptly.
- Ensure entry date coincides with the schedule.
- Chart all noncompliance; avoid derogatory remarks.
- Follow up by phone for difficult/invasive procedures.
- Chart alternative treatment options.
- Do not make financial entries.

Your patient charts aren't the only important records in your practice; you also will need to keep a close eye on your finances.

### ***System 2: Accounts receivable/collections***

A strong financial policy, understood and executed by your entire team, will help you establish goodwill with patients and collect a higher percentage of accounts. When creating financial policy:

- Think convenience and flexibility.
- Tell/show each patient exactly where he or she stands monthly.
- Provide payment arrangements in writing to avoid misunderstandings.
- Put a system in place to collect past-due accounts. Consider a phone follow-up before the account becomes delinquent.
- Have a last-resort system, such as a collection agency, in place.

Collection figures may indicate success, but tracking other numbers can help you achieve that success. You need to know the following at all times:

- **Production:** This is the amount you charge on a daily basis, which measures the productivity of your time.
- **Hygiene production:** This is the amount generated by providers other than the dentist. It's important to monitor the effectiveness of your staff in providing a full hygiene schedule daily. Software programs can help you do this.
- **New patient referral:** This might appear to be a less important statistic, but it's vital to know if you are gaining and retaining new patients. Keep records of names, dates, appointments made and kept, referral sources, and whether that source was sent a thank-you.

- **Operating expenses:** This is the cost of doing business, which can be tracked month to month. This includes charges, payments, accounts receivable balances, new patients, hygiene patients, and major expenses such as payroll, supplies, lab costs, and rent.

In order to maximize your productivity and profitability, you will need to maintain a good scheduling system.

### **System 3: Appointment control**

Electronic scheduling and software packages are amazing pieces of technology, but only to the extent that they consistently meet your needs. Good appointment and scheduling control can prevent problems and help you make the most of your day in production and profitability. This is a crucial aspect of your practice, even if you aren't the team member who handles it. Always remember there's a human being on the other side of any cursor strike or slot filled.

Consider the following:

- If buying a practice, thoroughly assess your current system by working with it for a while before deciding to upgrade or replace it.
- Consider visiting and observing systems in action in non-competing practices, along with the team member who will be handling most of the IT issues.
- Consider compatibility before purchasing single software elements. Some programs offer different modules for billing, electronic health records, and so forth. Whatever you use, it needs to work in concert with the other aspects of your practice.
- Know which hardware and upgrades will be required, how often they'll be required and at what cost, how much support you'll receive, and the track record of any company you use.
- Be comfortable with your system's capabilities—even if you don't use them all now—and the amount of sustained training offered.

Once your scheduling system is in established, make sure it includes continuing care appointments.

### **System 4: Continuing care**

*Regular visits by all the patients in your practice.* Sound impossible? A dentist committed to a continuing care system can move his or her practice toward this reality. Some dentists are trending away from the term "recall," instead using "continuing care" to better signify

that ongoing hygiene program visits are about personal connection and service. Get to know each patient during his or her visits to foster continuity, referrals, and growth in your practice. Here's how:

- Emphasize the importance of prevention in a meaningful way.
- Use patient time to motivate and educate patients on new concepts in care.
- Use marketing and patient relations approaches that show you value patients as individuals.
- Customize recall appointment intervals to patient needs.
- Pre-schedule the next appointment.
- Follow up with patients who turn down pre-scheduling.
- Send a reminder two to four weeks before appointments.
- Confirm appointments to lessen no-shows and cancellations.
- Collect data that will help you know and meet the needs of your particular patient base.
- Make sure staff schedules include time for maintaining continuing care procedures.

In order to provide your patients with the best possible care, you need to have the best supplies and materials on hand.

### ***System 5: Inventory control***

Your choice of materials and a systematic approach for keeping track of them are essential to a smoothly run practice. Remember time spent up-front counting and sorting will be paid for in savings from preventing errant or overboard purchases.

Consider the following:

- From the outset, stick with what you know and expand inventory as your practice grows.
- Don't let "new" cloud your judgment as to best practice.
- Designate a staff person as your main purchaser and inventory monitor, but include the entire staff in awareness of materials usage.
- Beware of stockpiling materials, which can lead to waste and confusion.
- Develop a checklist of what and how much you need, and a protocol for how often and by whom inventory is reviewed.

It's important to involve your entire team in inventory control, and it's also important to surround yourself with the best possible team.

## System 6: Staffing

It takes an excellent dental team to create an excellent practice. Your staff spends valuable face time with patients, which can help your practice maintain a personal connection.

Your work home should be pleasant—even fun! Remember from Day 1 that selecting experienced staff with complementary personalities sets a tone that enhances the value of your practice. It might require more expense initially, but these are the people who will determine where your practice will be years from now.

What makes a good team member?

- **Experience:** Insurance claims, scheduling knowledge, people skills—as you get started, you need every edge you can get. Don't be afraid to learn from your team.
- **Enthusiasm:** Each staff member could be the first person your patients encounter. How would *you* react to that person?
- **Empathy:** Concern for everyone who walks in is a must. It's a here-to-serve mentality, not we're-doing-you-a-favor.
- **Team attitude:** An all-for-one-and-one-for-all spirit generates a comfortable, can-do atmosphere that rubs off on patients.
- **Organizational skills:** A concern for detail, best practices, and maximizing productivity should be shared throughout the office. Precision in accounting, scheduling, and insurance filing can make or break a practice.
- **Effective communication skills:** Whether it's with you or your patients, the ability to be clear, friendly, and direct can prevent misunderstandings and result in a strong practice all the way around. Your own communication skills are just as important on a daily basis—not just at review time!

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**“In response to that little voice in my mind or feeling in my gut telling me to rethink and reconsider every decision, I reminded myself that I graduated from dental school and that I was indeed confidently prepared to do what I was about to do. I also try to remember that my patient is on my side, wanting me to be successful. ”**

Jon L. Hardinger, DDS, MAGD  
Mason City, Iowa

University of Iowa College of Dentistry, 1979

What will you expect from *your* team?

- A daily commitment to being on time
- A daily commitment to being prepared
- A daily commitment to minimal interruptions
- A consistent focus on the patient
- A consistent focus on great communication

As you run your practice, you'll spend a lot of time working with others—and not just your employees.

### **System 7: Consultants**

Dental practices are complicated businesses. Coming out of school, you can't be expected to know and anticipate everything. A practice management consultant may be able to alleviate some of your stress and provide specialized guidance in improving your practice, so hiring the right practice management consultant could be a solid long-term investment. If you've purchased a practice, you might need help scrutinizing current processes. If you're starting anew, you may need help in areas where you're less confident.

Here's how to assess what's best for your practice:

- Determine *first* what's lacking in meeting your practice goals. Production? Overhead? Staffing? The big picture is overwhelming. Try to bear down on specifics.
- Conduct a thorough search. Investigate experience and references. Have a practice you admire? Ask who its advisers are.
- Don't be limited to dentists who have become consultants. Do strongly consider a specialist in dental practices.
- Don't expect a consultant to do all the work or make everything better. You, as owner, must be fully invested in the process, whether it's clinical or organizational.

Choosing a consultant is choosing a business partner for your journey, and the same goes for choosing a dental laboratory.

### **System 8: Laboratory**

The work of the lab or labs you choose will reflect on your own, so select carefully, and then maintain a personal connection with the laboratory and technician. What should you be looking for?

- Quality
- Reputation
- Consistency
- Timeliness
- Open communication
- Whether outsourcing is used
- Continuing education
- Value for the price

It's important to note that being able to check off just a couple of these factors won't keep you at one lab very long. Great quality but long delays? Great price but inconsistencies in product? Devote time to this decision. Visit laboratories under consideration, during a workday, to observe firsthand things like controls and cleanliness and show your level of connection to this decision.

## Moving Forward

Whether you are buying a share or all of an existing practice, or you are starting your own practice, as you begin making your practice vision a reality, remember that it's a process. You will learn as you go. You don't need the latest and greatest everything yesterday. And thoughtful planning goes a long way toward success and giving patients your very best.

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# Marketing and Networking



## Getting the Word Out

You're starting or joining a practice. You're confident about your skills, your dental school education, and your ability to provide excellent patient care. But how do you introduce yourself to new and potential patients, and how do you foster ongoing relationships to ensure that you remain the dentist whom patients want to see?

The answers are marketing and networking—the ongoing process of letting your patients, prospective patients, and community know about you; your dental services, practice philosophy, and commitment to quality; and the way in which patients and peers view your treatment and care. A comprehensive marketing effort should provide accurate and timely information, incorporating the latest media and technology with the more traditional networking and communication tools.

It may seem like the years of hard work in dental school should be enough to successfully launch your new career. You may be worried that creating and managing a marketing strategy may be too difficult, expensive, or time-consuming, especially when you lack marketing expertise.

The reality, however, is that marketing is a must. In today's environment, you can't afford *not* to market yourself and your practice. Dentistry is a competitive field—one that requires marketing and networking skills. Marketing also helps consumers make informed decisions about the dentist who they choose to see, ensuring that the dental professional reflects their own priorities and values.

### Marketing Methods

If you are working in corporate dentistry, or joining a practice as an associate or partner, a marketing plan and tools already may be in place. In this case, certain guidelines might be set, and you may be subject to marketing restrictions, especially pertaining to social media use. After you become familiar with the policies, it's important that you still take the time to promote yourself and your unique experience while still marketing your practice or office.

If you are starting your own practice, you may want to consider hiring a marketing firm or consultant. Either can help you develop a marketing plan, which should include a brand for your practice, a practice website, and a realistic budget and timeframe to execute



the tactics in the marketing plan. There also are many marketing resources available on the Internet.

You also can create your own marketing plan, based on the demographics and needs of your community. To do this, it's important to know your audience.

For example, what is the average age of the residents living within 10 miles of your office? What is the percentage of adults, seniors, and children? What is the average income? Do most adults work nearby, or do they have long commutes to their jobs? In your community, are traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. jobs the norm, or do many people have varied work schedules? The local government or chamber of commerce can provide you with demographic and other information, as well as opportunities to meet other business and community leaders.

You also will want to learn about the other dentists in your community—your competition. Which services do they offer? Where are they located? Do they have flexible payment options? Do they have evening and weekend hours? What is the dentist-to-population ratio? This information is important, because a saturated area will likely mean slower growth for your practice, especially in the first five years, and specific strategies for differentiation and branding will need to be implemented.

Also, take a good look at your practice and its offerings. Be honest about and aware of any obstacles or challenges related to your office, such as heavy traffic or a hard-to-find or hard-to-access location, so you can address them in your marketing efforts.

In addition, it's important to have well-defined goals for yourself and for your practice, as outlined in [Chapter 1](#). Your marketing plan should be clearly defined, reflecting your professional goals and business plan.

Once you have compiled as much information as possible, you can begin to determine which marketing tools may work best for attracting new patients to your practice. To do this, you will need a basic understanding of the marketing technologies and tools

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*One of the simplest, cheapest, and most effective ways to market a dental practice is through recommendations from satisfied and loyal patients.*

available to you, and how they can help you to better market yourself and your practice. Depending on your budget, you can use some or all of these tools.

### ***Word of mouth***

One of the simplest, cheapest, and most effective ways to market a dental practice is through recommendations from satisfied and loyal patients. If a patient compliments the quality of care or has an especially positive experience, encourage him or her to spread the word to family and friends, and even on social media. A positive review on Internet review sites also can drive new patients to your practice. With patients' written permission, you also can highlight positive comments and testimonials on your practice website, in brochures, on social media, and through other marketing tools.

### ***Online strategies***

The Internet has changed the way in which businesses communicate with current and potential customers. What follows is a list of the most commonly used online tools and how you can incorporate them into your marketing plan.

- **Websites:** A current, fresh website is critical for any new or existing dental practice. Your website should include basic contact information, including hours and location; an outline of available services; links to the practice's social media sites; and educational tools, like podcasts, webinars, or videos. It's also important to understand search engine optimization, which can enhance your website's visibility on search engines. The Online Practice, an [AGD Member Savings & Offers provider](#), offers personalized website services to help you get started.
- **Social media:** Many patients and potential patients, especially young adults, prefer to communicate via social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Google+. These sites are free to use, allowing you to create your own page and distribute short messages, photographs, and links to your website, promotional videos, or other educational/marketing tools. You also can create a practice YouTube page to post educational or other videos featuring you or someone in your practice. Ideally, you should designate a staff person to dedicate several hours, two or three days a week, to posting new content and monitoring your sites and others to ensure that questions are answered and that the information

about you and your practice is accurate and appropriate. The sites also should be monitored to gauge which posts generate the most engagement (e.g., in “likes” on Facebook or retweets on Twitter).

- **Blogging:** One way for dentists to engage patients and potential patients regularly is through a written or video [blog](#) in which you share your expertise on various topics that are important to patients, including oral health, nutrition, disease prevention, and other topics or concerns related to dental care. A blog is an inexpensive way for you to share your care philosophies and priorities and establish yourself as an expert on oral health. Your blog can appear on your practice website, and you also can link to it from your social media pages. Note: Do not provide medical and/or dental advice, diagnosis, or treatment via social media. Any general medical or dental information offered on your website should include a disclaimer. See sidebar “**Dental Practice Website and Social Media Tips**,” at right.
- **Email:** Email is a low-cost way to market your practice and services and to communicate regularly with your patients—provided that you utilize it appropriately and selectively. Your email communications should be segmented (based on age or other factors); reflect your practice brand; include limited text and appealing visual elements; and use a short, engaging subject line. Emails also should be sent only when there is new and interesting information to share—a new

### Dental Practice Website and Social Media Tips

Here are a few tips to keep in mind when marketing online:

- Never share patient health or personal information on your practice website or social media pages.
- Keep your personal and professional social media sites separate.
- Take control of your online image. Regularly monitor your social media sites for negative comments or inappropriate posts.
- Ensure that your social media and website postings reflect your practice brand, as well as your goals and values.
- Regularly update the information on your website and social media pages.
- Always ask your marketing consultant or someone on staff to review your content before it is posted.
- Make sure your website is easy to navigate.
- Include positive patient comments and testimonials on your website.
- Get to the point in your website and social media content. Say what you want to say in as few words as possible.
- Include a call to action in your communications, like “Call today,” “Schedule your back-to-school dental exam,” and “Like us on Facebook!”

Perhaps, most importantly, do not provide medical and/or dental advice, diagnosis, or treatment via your website or social media. Any general medical or dental information offered on your website should include a disclaimer. The disclaimer should indicate that the material on the site is for informational purposes only and “isn’t intended as a substitute for an office visit.”

service, office hours update, tips on dental care and hygiene, and so forth. If patients begin to opt out of your emails (i.e., ask to be removed from your email distributions), you should probably review the frequency and content of your emails.

Smartphones have changed patients' lives in recent years, and you need to take this technology into account as you develop a marketing plan and create marketing content. The content that you develop should be viewable on these and other handheld devices.

### ***Mobile text reminders***

Some patients may prefer to receive text messages to remind them of upcoming appointments, practice news, or the need to schedule an exam and cleaning. These alerts also can save staff time by limiting the amount of phone calls they have to make. Ask patients if they would like to provide their mobile phone number for office reminders.

### ***Traditional strategies***

Before the Internet, dentists relied on several methods to attract new patients. Many of these strategies continue to be effective as part of an overall, larger marketing plan.

- **Direct mail:** This strategy involves sending printed advertising pieces directly to homes and apartments within your community. Direct mail is a good way to remind patients to schedule a regular cleaning and exam; to announce new treatments, services, office hours, or locations; or to introduce you and your practice to the neighborhood.
- **Paid advertising:** You also can promote your practice by purchasing advertising in local newspapers and on radio and television stations. Today, advertising space also is available on the Internet and in the digital editions of print publications. Radio, television, and billboard advertising can be expensive for a sole practitioner or small dental practice; advertising in a local community newspaper or targeted digital advertising piece may be more cost-effective.
- **Public and media relations:** Free media placements are another effective means by which to promote yourself and your practice. Write a letter to the editor of your local paper, reminding parents to schedule back-to-school dental exams, commenting on the

carries epidemic in young children, providing oral health care tips for seniors, and/or explaining why annual dental exams are necessary to ensure a lifetime of good oral health. If you are hosting or speaking at a local event, let your local newspaper know so the event can be covered.

- **Community outreach:** As a professional in your community, you may have opportunities to speak to children, seniors, or local business leaders, or to participate in community fairs or other events, including Missions of Mercy. The AGD offers numerous patient education resources, including personalized oral health fact sheets. Dentists can distribute these resources at these local events, in their office, or through their practice websites.

No matter which strategies you use, don't forget to keep all of your different audiences in mind. If you understand your community, including your patients and potential patients, you can market to specific segments of the population more effectively, such as parents of young children, families, young adults, and older adults. Each group may require a specific strategy that combines multiple marketing tools.

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**“Today’s dental marketplace is highly competitive, requiring each of us to distinguish ourselves as unique. Self-promotion isn’t about bragging; it’s about sharing your qualities and passion. Self-promotion is imperative to building a successful practice.”**

Laurence A. Grayhills, DMD, MS, MAGD  
Wellington, Fla.

University of Florida School of Dentistry, 1985

## **Internal marketing**

While many marketing strategies focus on obtaining new patients, internal marketing tactics help you retain the patients you currently have. It's important that your patients know that you value their business and care about their overall oral health. Internal marketing ideas include:

- **Cards:** Send thank-you cards, birthday cards, and recall cards to your patients.
- **Brochures and in-office video:** Use these promotional tools to remind current patients about office services, office hours, dental care and hygiene tips, product offerings, and more.
- **Freebies:** Everyone loves free toothbrushes, toothpaste, and floss!

- **Practice amenities:** Incorporate amenities like TVs, headphones, neck pillows, hot towels, and lip balm into your practice.
- **Office décor:** Add plants and soothing music to create an appealing, more stress-free environment for patients.
- **Referral gift cards:** Show your appreciation by giving gift cards to patients who refer new patients to you.

All of these tactics are important to remind your current patients that they are valued by you and your team.

## Creating Content

Creating strong marketing content can be difficult. Consider hiring a marketing consultant to assist you. If you do hire marketing and/or writing assistance, be sure to remain in control of the content, whether it is created for direct mail or a blog posting. Insist on always reviewing and approving any copy created to represent you and your practice.

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*To test the effectiveness of your marketing strategies, always ask new patients how they heard about your practice.*

## Measuring Effectiveness

To test the effectiveness of your marketing strategies, always ask new patients how they heard about your practice. A continual assessment of your marketing efforts can help you make necessary adjustments and optimize your results. A marketing consultant can assist you in setting up metrics to measure the effectiveness of your efforts.

Of course, there is more to marketing than social media, brochures, websites, and radio ads. You also can market your practice simply by establishing yourself within your community. And you can do this through networking.

## Making Connections

School is over. And while the friends and mentors you cultivated during your education will still be available to you, it's likely that you'll see them much less frequently.

What's more reliable for a successful work life—and life in general—is the development of new networks. This task can seem daunting,

as many people are not naturally comfortable reaching out to meet new people. It is very important, however, to expand your network of colleagues and friends and to make networking a priority in your new practice and career.

Networking coaches generally recommend that you jump right in and get used to the water. There are all kinds of organizations that can help you to meet other professionals who could serve as mentors, sounding boards, or just outside connections to keep your world from becoming too insular.

Networking isn't about asking for favors; it's about putting yourself in a position to take advantage of the opportunities your network may present. In general, there are four main paths to successful networking:

### **1. Mentors**

You probably have a good handle on who a mentor is and what a mentor does. The collegiate environment from which you are emerging is built on a system of mentors who advised you based on their experiences. While your dental school mentors may continue to provide support and advice, it's a good idea to cultivate new mentors. For example, as an associate in your first practice, you are very likely going to need a new mentor. In fact, whether or not there are potential mentors in a practice may be something to think about when deciding where to practice.

A mentor does not necessarily need to be a dentist. Someone who provides moral support, common sense, and a professional context (not necessarily limited to dentistry) can be a tremendous help.

In any mentoring relationship, make sure you are bringing something to the table as well. Mentoring should not be a one-sided experience in which the mentor speaks and you take notes. It's a give-and-take relationship, so prepare yourself to participate fully!

### **2. Study clubs**

Because most dentists practice in solo or small practices, many belong to dental study clubs for professional interaction and camaraderie. Dentists who participate in study clubs often cite the many advantages of participation, including increased clinical knowledge

and skills; friendships with other colleagues outside of their practice; the development of a valuable circle of professionals for referrals, as well as coverage during vacation time; and the ability to get information on new products and services from someone other than a sales representative.

Study clubs encourage new ideas and discussion. Some study clubs are devoted to a single topic or specialty, such as cosmetic or pediatric dentistry, while others offer broader discussions, like the daily challenges of operating a dental practice.

Good study clubs are generally long-lived and characterized by strong leadership, mandatory attendance, attendance fees regardless of attendance, and a commitment to finding the best speakers regardless of cost.

To some dentists right out of school, a dental club may seem old-fashioned, and, thus, many young dentists do not seek out these groups. You, however, should consider joining a study club, as it can provide an invaluable source for clinical information, mentors, and camaraderie.

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**“Marketing yourself is a constant project. Becoming involved in your local community through church, school, public access television, and other groups will make your unique patient base aware of you for little or no financial investment, other than your time.”**

Timothy F. Kosinski, DDS, MAGD  
Bingham Farms, Mich.

University of Detroit Mercy School of Dentistry, 1984

### **3. Professional associations**

Joining a professional dental association is about taking advantage of a wide range of resources, many of them human and communicative, which can help you to stay on top of a constantly evolving profession. The first rule in dentistry is to never stop learning. Professional associations provide an uninterrupted continuum of information from the past and into the future. As a new dentist, you should immediately join two organizations: The first is the American Dental Association, which represents the interests of all dentists—both specialists and generalists alike. The second organization should be one that represents your particular interests. If you are a specialist, that would be the group that represents your specialty. If you are a



generalist, that would be the AGD. If there are any other groups or organizations that interest you, then join them and reap the benefits. [Chapter 9](#) offers more detail on how dental associations work.

#### 4. Other organizations

Rotary International, Lions Clubs International, the Knights of Columbus, the Jaycees—the list of “other” organizations is long and varied. Participation in these groups is extremely valuable. For starters, these organizations teach discipline and communication skills, provide an important sense of place in your life, introduce you to new people who could become good friends, and keep your brain in shape.

Organizations like these can help you to get out of your practice for some fresh air, and they can teach you humility as you venture beyond the world of dentistry. Mostly, they help keep you from stagnating, which usually happens long before you actually realize it.

People are social creatures—some of us are very quiet, some are shy, some are garrulous, some are analytical, some are off-the-cuff creative—but all of us have a need to share life and our experiences with somebody else. It is very difficult to be a dentist and be an island unto yourself. Sole proprietors are especially susceptible to isolation, due to the nature of their practices. Interaction with others is important, from not only a business perspective but also a personal one.

Networking exists in many forms—mentors, professional associations, study clubs, and organizations outside of dentistry. By utilizing these groups, you will not only grow as a dentist, but you will improve your quality of life.

### Creating a Budget

It’s important to properly budget for your practice’s marketing plan. To make sure you are investing your time and money wisely, make sure to consult a marketing expert. However, a standard rule of thumb to follow is to spend between 3 to 5 percent of your production total on marketing your practice. Practices that are doing well and looking to maintain their current success typically opt to spend closer to 3 percent on marketing, while newer practices or

those looking to grow more rapidly may spend 5 percent or more. Speaking with your marketing and financial advisers can help you to decide just how much you should spend on marketing yourself and your practice.

## **Time to Implement**

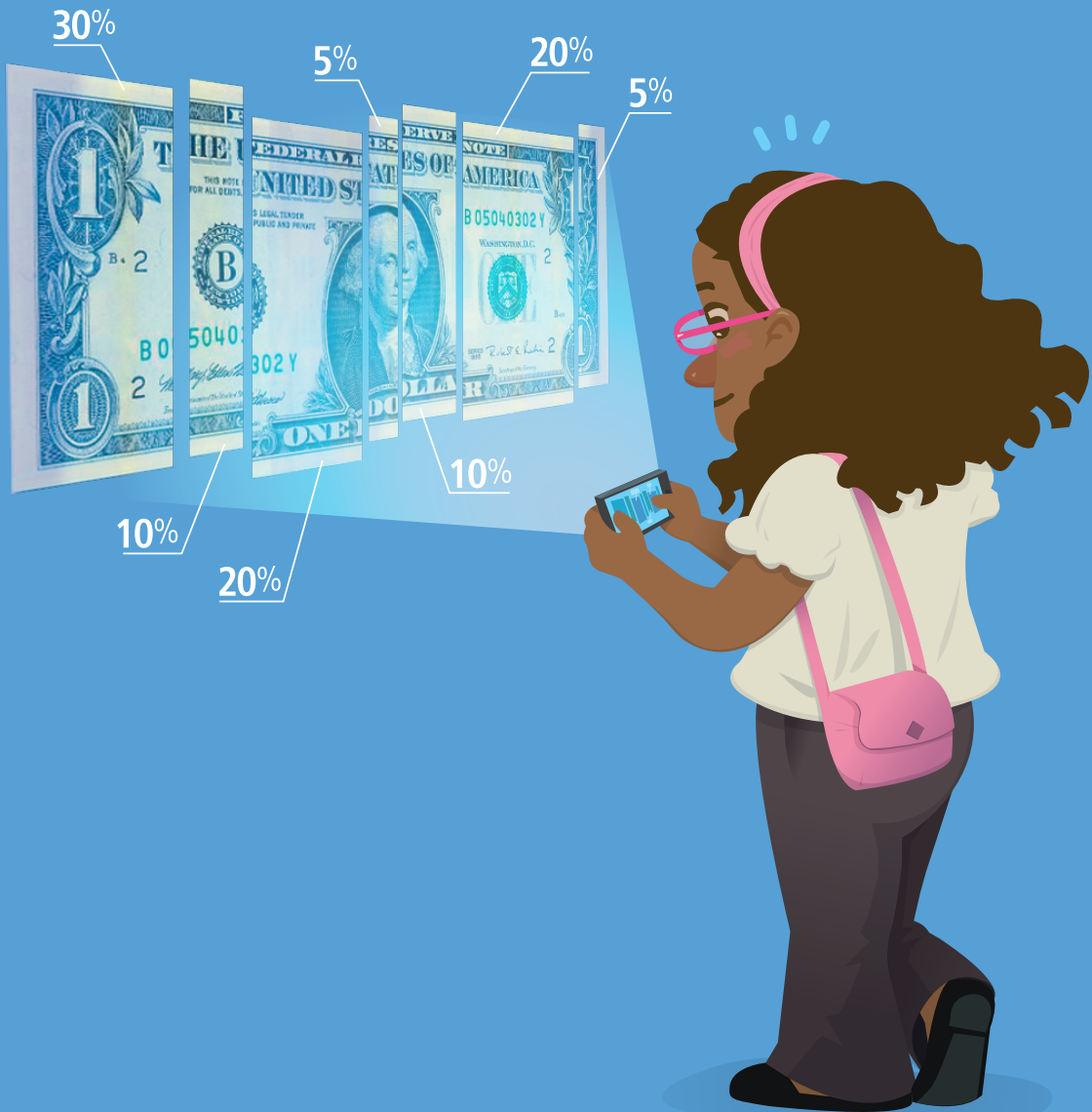
Don't shy away from marketing—embrace it! A comprehensive marketing plan, one that reflects your goals and values, as well as the demographics and preferences of your community, will benefit your practice greatly. Determine the types of marketing your practice needs and then take the necessary steps to implement your marketing plan. Good luck and happy marketing!

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## Chapter 7

# Financial Planning



# Managing Money—and Debt

Finally, you're making money. But you're also raking in the bills. Between your student loan debt and other expenses, the totals can seem insurmountable. Taxes, insurance obligations, retirement savings, and mortgage payments can easily overwhelm your budget—and your psyche.

When dentists talk about financial regrets from their early career, they talk of being ill-prepared for tax bills or not understanding the importance of saving early. Dentists join attorneys and physicians in having a high-earning potential—even early on—but those nice paychecks may tempt new graduates to spend without a plan. Avoid those missteps. Start off your career by setting yourself on the right financial path. Doing so will open more opportunities for you in the future—to buy into your own practice, have the lifestyle you've always wanted, or set up yourself and your family for the long term.

So how do you balance paying off your debt with saving for retirement and funding your daily life? Drawing on the experience of other dentists and the advice of financial professionals, this chapter will provide an overview of the factors you should consider as you start off your career. You'll learn how to manage your student loan debt, prepare a budget, set long-term financial goals, and hire the right people to advise you.

## Preparing a Budget

The only way to get a handle on your financial situation and develop a sound strategy is to know where your money is going. Collect your receipts, bank statements, and credit card bills for the past month, and then organize your expenses according to these categories:

- Housing (mortgage/rent)
- Utilities
- Insurance (home/auto)
- Student loans
- Other debt, including credit cards
- Car payments/transportation costs
- Taxes
- Groceries
- Medical
- Entertainment/miscellaneous

Some expenses will be recurring and fixed every month, like your mortgage or rent payment. Other amounts can vary from month to month, like gas or groceries. As you review what you've spent, identify which costs are absolutely necessary. Of course, you must pay

your mortgage or rent and car payments. But is eating out for lunch every day an absolute necessity? Could you make do with your current car until you become more established, instead of buying a new one?

This exercise should illustrate how quickly little things can add up (like that grande coffee every morning), and where you can eliminate or reduce expenses. Financial advisers say one big mistake new dentists make is to give into pressure to “look” like a dentist—trading in the Honda Civic for the BMW, buying more house than they can afford, or purchasing big-ticket luxury items. In doing so, they’re adopting the lifestyle of the dentist who’s been in practice for a couple of decades, not of the new dentist coming out of school with six-figure student loan commitments. Live within your means. Buy the house that you can afford on your current salary, not on the salary you expect to make a few years from now. You never know what financial curveballs life might throw you, so you don’t want to get in over your head.

Take a good hard look at your credit card bills, too. If you can’t pay off your balance at the end of the month, stop using the cards so they don’t add to your debt load.

Now that you know where your money is going, it’s time to look at where your money *should* go. Here’s where a financial planner can help you come up with a plan that fits your goals and puts you in the best possible financial shape.

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**“You have to plan from the beginning. Otherwise, your money automatically starts going in places it shouldn’t go. Being a young graduate, and struggling through school for eight-plus years, you want to have all the things everyone else has because you finally graduated and have money. It’s a hard temptation to avoid, but you want to temper it with setting yourself up for down the road.”**

Chethan Chetty, DDS, FAGD  
Los Angeles, Calif.

Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry  
University of Southern California, 2000

## Planning for the Future

Where do you want to be in five years, or 10, or 20? Examine your financial goals for the short and long term. Do you hope to buy into your own practice? Buy a house? Save for a fabulous retirement?

Maybe all of the above? But how can you accomplish all of this with that student loan debt hanging over your head? Financial advisers can outline a number of strategies that new dentists can employ to support all of their goals.

### ***Planning for retirement***

You've just started your career, so it may not seem like the time to start planning for the end of it. But it's exactly the time to do so. Check out your Social Security statement to see how much money you will receive once you reach retirement age. It's probably not enough to maintain your lifestyle. That's why it's important to start saving now, to maximize your savings potential and have more time to grow your money.

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***You've just started your career, so it may not seem like the time to start planning for the end of it. But it's exactly the time to do so.***

When setting up retirement plans, be sure to first maximize your contributions to any 401(k) or similar program offered through your workplace, especially those in which the employer matches your contribution. If you are on your own, or your practice doesn't offer a retirement plan, you can set up an Individual Retirement Account (IRA). Through a traditional IRA, you can invest your money and it is not taxed until it's distributed. Depending on your situation, contributions may be fully or partially tax deductible. There are limits on how much you may contribute to an IRA. With a Roth IRA, you cannot deduct contributions, and the amount you can contribute depends on your income level. But the Roth IRA has some distinct advantages: The taxes are taken before any contributions to the account are made and the government won't tax the earnings, giving you a future tax-free income stream.

If you own your own practice, or you do any work that qualifies as independent contracting or freelancing, you may want to investigate a Simplified Employee Pension, or SEP, which allows owners to make retirement contributions for employees and for themselves. A SIMPLE (Savings Incentive Match Plan for Employees) IRA plan, which allows employees and employers to contribute to traditional IRAs set up for employees, is another option. Both SEP and SIMPLE plans often are more accessible and less complicated to set up and administer than 401(k)s. Talk with a financial professional to see which options make the most sense for your situation.

### *Purchasing insurance*

For your personal life, you will need a homeowners or rental insurance policy to cover your home and possessions, as well as health and auto insurance. You'll want a life insurance policy to protect your family in the case of your death. Term life insurance policies are practical and cost-effective. Other policies, such as whole life insurance policies, should generally only be purchased after very careful scrutiny and only in the context of a comprehensive insurance plan. Dentists also should carry disability income insurance. The time to buy it is when you're young and healthy, as it helps cover the loss salary if you are injured and can't work.

Depending on your employment arrangement, you may need to purchase professional liability insurance. Seek out an insurance agent who works with dentists to counsel you about what coverage to buy. If you have your own practice, you will need to purchase additional coverage like general liability and workers' compensation insurance.

### *Planning for your estate*

Talk with financial and legal professionals about establishing a will and a trust to cover your assets and protect your family in the event of your death. Proper estate planning can ensure that your possessions go to the right people while also limiting tax obligations that would detract from what your family receives. If you have children, inquire about setting up college funds or a 529 savings plan.

### *Creating an emergency fund*

It's also important to set aside some cash that's easily accessible in case of an emergency. Financial professionals typically advise clients to have three to six months of living expenses on hand.

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**“Ask questions. This is a habit that applies to life in general, but it especially applies to finances. It’s incredibly important that you understand what is happening with your money. Ask questions of your CPA, your attorney, and your financial planner. Read books on personal finance. Read the fine print on contracts, agreements, and anything else you put your signature on and ask questions before signing. Knowledge is power when it comes to your money and there are no stupid questions.”**

Gerald J. Botko, DMD, MS, MAGD, FACD  
2014-2015 President, AGD Foundation  
Boca Raton, Fla.

Tufts University School of Dental Medicine, 1976

## Dealing with Debt

You should have an intentional strategy for repaying debt, but it may not always focus on eliminating your student loan balance as quickly as possible. Consider the interest rate on your loan. If you have a low-interest rate, you may not want to sock all your extra dollars into repaying your student loans. It depends on your goals.

For instance, if you're eyeing a practice in the near future, you will probably need money to make a down payment, so you'll need to find a way to free up some cash.

Stretching out your repayment schedule as long as possible preserves some flexibility, as you can attain a lower monthly payment. You can still pay off your debt early if you have the opportunity by paying more than the required amount.

But you won't be suffocated by a high monthly student loan payment should you run into some unexpected trouble. You'll also be able to accumulate some cash for that down payment or to put into savings.

Money that you borrow to buy a practice may come at a higher interest rate than your educational loans, costing you more in the long run. Plus, if you funnel all your money into debt repayment, you're also not investing, and that time can never be made up when it comes to investment returns.

The federal government, the military, and many states offer programs to help graduating dentists repay their loans—in some cases, in their entirety. In exchange for this loan help, dentists must commit to practicing in a federally designated health professional shortage area, in a state-approved site, or with the military. The programs may require you to practice and live in a rural area for at least two years, maybe more. It may not be an easy tradeoff that works for everyone, but some new dentists have taken advantage of these programs to erase their debt.

### Eliminating Debt

When Brenden Moon, DMD, FAGD, FICD, FADI, emerged from dentistry school in 2007 with \$140,000 in student loan debt, he decided to take a job in a federally underserved area in West Central Illinois that would qualify him for grants to cover his loans. Moving away from family and friends to a rural area was a difficult decision, but his student loan debt was paid off in five years. Each year, between \$15,000 and \$35,000 went to his student loan balance. "I know I'm more comfortable as a result and I have been able to put money toward different kinds of investments—to continuing education, traveling, and equipment," Dr. Moon says. He also feels that the decision enabled him to buy more advanced equipment earlier in his career than some other dentists can. "Whether you have a job out of school making \$80,000 or \$200,000, if you can live within your means and make good decisions the first two to five years, it's going to make a huge difference over the span of your career," he says.



If you need to borrow, it's important to know the difference between good debt and bad debt. Good debt includes low-interest loans for education or your home, where the interest may be tax-deductible. So-called bad debt covers high-interest credit cards or loans for luxury items, like cars that depreciate in value as soon as you drive them off the lot.

Before signing on the dotted line, ask yourself: Is there a good reason to take on this debt? Don't take out loans for items that aren't going to help you generate income. A loan for office equipment that may enable you to treat more patients could pay for itself. But make sure you can make the payments even in slow months. Ask yourself: Will it make me more stressed to take on this new debt?

When determining which debts to pay off, many attack the loan with the highest interest rate first, which is a good strategy. But sometimes there are emotional benefits to paying off smaller balances; it brings a sense of accomplishment and provides encouragement if you're struggling to stick to your financial plan. Talk to a financial adviser to determine which route makes the most sense for you.

## Thinking About Taxes

The tax man can deliver quite a wallop that first year, as new dentists adjust to their higher income bracket and a loss of certain deductions. Many dentists exceed the income limits for the deduction for student loan interest. Some may even be hit by the alternative minimum tax, which limits deductions for wealthier taxpayers.

Your employment arrangement also could affect how you're taxed. Independent contractors will be responsible for the

### Credit Check

Your credit score determines how much credit is available to you and the interest rate you will pay for it. It's smart to periodically check your credit reports so you can correct any mistakes or discover identity fraud issues as soon as possible. Under federal law, you are entitled to a copy of your credit report annually from all three credit reporting agencies—[Experian](#), [Equifax](#), and [TransUnion](#). To keep your score in line, make your payments on time. Note that late payments will be recorded on your credit report and could affect your credit score. Other issues that negatively impact your credit score include too much outstanding debt, going into default, or opening too many accounts too quickly.

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*Getting your financial house in order may be a bit painful at first, as you pass up that dream house or delay those expensive vacations, but experienced dentists say you will be glad you did.*

self-employment tax, so they'll pay double what most employees pay for Social Security and Medicare taxes.

Don't wait until April to look at your taxes. Do a rough projection in November to see if you're on track to meeting your tax expectations. You'll have more time to make up the difference before April 15 rolls around.

## Hiring a Financial Professional

You're a specialist in oral health, but most likely not one in the world of finance. Unless you have a lot of extra time to school yourself in investment returns and how retirement plans can be structured, you will want to seek the help of accountants, attorneys, and financial planners. Ask around to find financial professionals who have experience working with dentists, as they will remain current on any special circumstances that apply to your profession.

An accountant can help anticipate tax issues that may arise. He or she also can walk you through the numbers to help determine whether securing a loan to buy a new piece of equipment is worth it, or what the benefits may be of buying into a practice. Attorneys are essential when reviewing employment contracts, setting up an estate, or buying into a practice. Financial planners will help develop your overall long-term strategy.

When hiring a financial planner, be aware of their credentials. Certified financial planners have to go through a course of study and pass a board exam. Some financial advisers may not have competed as intensive a training or be held to the same standards. Also, before hiring a financial professional, inquire how they will get paid. Are they paid through commission off the investment products they sell, or are they paid through fees?

### Why Start Saving Now?

Compound interest is why. The earlier you start saving, the more years you'll have for your investment to grow, no matter how small you start.

For example, take a look at the difference time can make if you invest \$500 per month with a 5% interest rate that's compounded annually.

If you started at age 25, and don't touch the money until age 65, you will have roughly \$728,000.

If you start saving at age 35, and don't touch the money until 65, you will have roughly \$400,000.

If you wait until age 45 to start saving, and don't touch the money until 65, you will have roughly \$199,000.

*Source: U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Investor.gov*

## Finalizing the Budget

Your final budget should cover the following:

### Expenses

- Housing—mortgage/rent
- Utilities
- Insurance—home and auto
- Student loans
- Debt—credit cards, etc.
- Car payments/  
transportation costs
- Medical
- Taxes
- Groceries
- Entertainment/miscellaneous

You've made your plan, now how to make yourself stick to it?

### Savings

- Retirement plan
- Emergency fund
- Other investments  
(529 plans, etc.)

### **The Rule of 72**

How many years will it take for your investment to double in value? To find out, use this financial trick, called the Rule of 72. According to the rule, just divide 72 by the investment's interest rate.

So, if you put away \$10,000 with a compounding interest rate of 9 percent ( $72/9=8$ ), it will take about 8 years for that initial investment to grow to a value of \$20,000.

## Plan Now, Gain Later

Many dentists say the easiest way to stay on the right financial path is to set up automatic payments, so money for your savings, student loans, and retirement come right out of your paycheck. You don't see the money, so you can't make alternative plans for it. Sticking to your plan will take discipline and you may have to put off some of those big-ticket purchases for a while.

Getting your financial house in order may be a bit painful at first, as you pass up that dream house or delay those expensive vacations, but experienced dentists say you will be glad you did. The right strategies should enable you to dig out of debt, while simultaneously saving for your career goals and family needs.



## Chapter 8

# Continuing Education



## Pursuing Continuing Education

For many years, the goal has been clear: Finish dental school so you can start your career as a dentist. Your degree is a tremendous achievement, reflecting years of hard work and commitment—but the learning doesn't end there.

Technology and treatment strategies are constantly evolving. You will need to keep learning throughout your career in order to provide your patients with the best possible care and meet state licensure requirements. Your continuing education (CE) also may inspire you to pursue special awards and recognition, including [AGD Fellowship and Mastership](#).

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*Your continuing education (CE) also may inspire you to pursue special awards and recognition, including AGD Fellowship and Mastership.*

### Finding CE Opportunities

Fortunately, there are a variety of ways to access CE, including:

- Online
- Local dental schools
- Local study clubs
- Dental education companies
- Dental manufacturers
- Dental professional organizations, including the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD) and the American Dental Association (ADA)
- Annual meetings and specialty conferences sponsored by the AGD, ADA, state and local dental societies, and specialty dental societies
- Peer-reviewed research journals and other publications aimed at dentists and dental health care professionals
- Business school executive management programs designed specifically for dentists

Most CE requires that you pay a fee to participate, but some corporate-sponsored opportunities are free to practicing dentists. Most programs require advance registration.

## Participating in CE

Just as there are many different sources of CE, there also are a variety of ways in which this learning may be presented.

### *Online courses*

Live webinars and other online courses often offer convenient access to high-quality CE. Webinars on a variety of topics are available through dental organizations, dental schools, dental education companies, and dental manufacturers.

### *Participation courses*

Whether they involve live patients or simulated clinical settings, participation courses allow you to immediately practice your newly learned skills under the watchful eye of the presenter. In a simulated clinical setting, course participants practice new or refined dental procedures on patient models, allowing them to take their time and make mistakes without harming the patient. Live patient courses, which require proof of a state license to practice at the course location, give participants the opportunity to hone their skills on live subjects. Both types of courses may require you to bring some of your own supplies and equipment. The specific requirements will be included in the courses' marketing materials. National and state dental meetings are a great place to look for high-quality participation courses, as well as lectures and seminars.

### *Lectures and seminars*

Even though they don't involve a hands-on component, seminars and lecture courses are valuable sources of CE. A seminar includes interaction between the presenter and students (usually a smaller group), providing an immersive experience. A lecture involves a teacher or presenter addressing a large group of students, which can be very effective, depending on the presenter's level of expertise, teaching methods, and level of engagement with attendees. If you attend a state or national dental meeting for the lectures and seminars, make sure to also take some time to stop by the exhibit hall to check out the latest advances in dental equipment, supplies, and materials.

## Dental publications

Dental journals provide peer-reviewed research on dental conditions, tools, and treatments. By regularly reading these journals, many of which are published by state and local dental organizations, you can gain invaluable insight on the latest trends in dental care and technology. The AGD publishes a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal, *General Dentistry*, each issue of which includes three [Self-Instruction](#) exercises that members can complete for CE credit.

## Meeting CE Requirements

Nearly all states require dentists to complete a minimum number of CE hours in order to maintain their license. Relicensure requirements vary from state to state, both in the number of CE hours required (15 to 100) and the time-frame in which those hours must be earned (one to five years). Many states also mandate CE on specific subjects, such as infection control and ethics.

Different states also use different methods to monitor CE. Some states conduct random audits of dentists and practices to confirm compliance, while others require regular reporting of course completion.

It is your responsibility to understand your state's CE requirements, which are usually outlined in your state's dental practice act. Check your state dental board's website for more information.

In addition to information on relicensure, state dental board websites often include a list of approved dental education providers. CE credit earned from these providers' programs can be used toward relicensure in that particular state.

As you evaluate your educational opportunities, you should make sure that the program provider is committed to offering high-quality CE.

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**“Continuing education after graduating from dental school is exciting! It serves as an opportunity to peruse your passions in dentistry, as well as strive to be well-rounded. My favorite way to earn CE is via a small study club with less than 15 people. I love to be able to have honest, engaging conversations with like-minded dentists.”**

Kallie L. Brock, DMD  
Woodstock, Ga.

University of Alabama Birmingham, 2012

## Assuring Quality CE

To determine whether a CE program is worth your time, make sure the provider has earned AGD Program Approval for Continuing Education ([PACE](#)) or ADA Continuing Education Recognition Program (CERP) approval. Approved providers should display the program logo in their marketing materials, and lists of approved providers are available on the AGD and ADA websites.

To receive PACE approval, providers must meet or exceed certain standards for the presentation of CE. As a result, attendees can feel confident that PACE-approved providers will offer quality courses.

Additionally, CE credit earned through PACE-approved providers can be used toward the [AGD Fellowship](#) and [Mastership](#) awards, the only achievement-based awards in general dentistry. By earning these awards, general dentists can demonstrate their commitment to lifelong learning and their dedication to providing quality patient care.

## Learning for Life

Your professional growth and competence rely on an ongoing commitment to dental education. The pursuit of lifelong learning will allow you to keep your skills sharp and stay up-to-date on the latest treatment and technologies, allowing you to become the best dentist you can be.

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**“To be an expert in our field requires hard work and numerous educational experiences to sharpen and hone our skills. Post-graduate continuing education is the beginning of your dental education career. Your eyes will be opened to new and advancing concepts that will put you on the cutting edge in your profession.”**

Otice Z. Helmer, DDS, MAGD  
Fort Worth, Texas

Texas A&M Health Science Center  
Baylor College of Dentistry, 1970





## Chapter 9

# Organized Dentistry



## Career Health

No matter what kind of dentistry they practice, or what types of patients they see, there's one thing all dentists know to be true: A healthy body requires healthy teeth—and healthy teeth require constant upkeep.

It's not just smiles that need a lifetime of maintenance, however. It's also careers. Like an overlooked incisor, a neglected career gathers tartar. Over time, the tartar builds, eventually culminating in decay. Whether it's oral or occupational, the best way to avoid plaque is to prevent it from building up in the first place. In the mouth, a toothbrush and regular cleanings come in handy. In the workplace, the best tool dentists have is organized dentistry, which keeps dentists' careers—individually and collectively—in optimal health.

In fact, without organized dentistry, there might not be a profession of dentistry at all. In the Middle Ages, dentistry belonged to barbers, who performed not only haircutting, hair-dressing, and shaving, but also tooth extractions. Later, oral health was the domain of physicians and surgeons. It wasn't until 1840—when the world's first national dental organization, the American Society of Dental Surgeons, was founded—that dentistry came into its own as a health profession. The group disbanded in 1856, but was promptly replaced by the American Dental Association (ADA), which was established in 1859 at a meeting of 26 dentists in Niagara Falls, N.Y. Their goal: Improve patient care by creating a national body to develop and steward professional standards, science, and ethics.

Although the ADA remains the nation's oldest and largest dental industry association, it has since been joined by dozens of other local, state, regional, and national organizations, serving and representing virtually every nook and cranny of the dental profession. As a newly minted dentist, you're probably familiar already with at least one of them: the American Student Dental Association. However, organized dentistry doesn't stop bearing fruit upon

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**“What is success if, when you are standing at the top, having everything you wanted to achieve, you have no one to share it with? We are inadequate without quality, cooperative relationships. Colleagues are the supplements that make life better. Organized dentistry gives you those relationships.”**

Roger D. Winland, DDS, MS, MAGD  
Editor, AGD  
Athens, Ohio

Ohio State University College of Dentistry, 1970

graduation from dental school. On the contrary, it continues to serve even the most seasoned dentists well into retirement—and in many cases, beyond it. Dental organizations boost the careers of their members and promote the improved oral health of the public.

## What Is Organized Dentistry?

Organized dentistry is a community of independent dentists who have united to form a collective whole. Comprised of national, member-run organizations like the ADA and the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD), specialty societies like the American Association of Orthodontists and the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons, groups with focused interests like the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, and state and local organizations like the California Dental Association and the Chicago Dental Society, these organizations take a “we’re in this together” approach to dentistry. Operating under formal governance structures, these organizations leverage the strength of the group to deliver benefits to the individual dentist and patient.

## 10 Reasons to Join Organized Dentistry

For new and veteran dentists alike, organized dentistry yields numerous benefits. Here are 10 of the most powerful reasons to join:

### 1. *Continuing education*

From the outset, organized dentistry’s impetus was better patient care. When it was established in 1952, the AGD recognized that the best way to improve patient care was to improve the dentists who delivered it. Thus was born its foundational objective: continuing education for general dentists.

The AGD’s founders believed that lifelong learning was inextricably linked with oral health. The latter is impossible, they insisted, without the former. Clearly, the rest of the profession agreed, as continuing education and professional development have been principal benefits of organized dentistry ever since.

General and specialty dental organizations alike offer a slew of educational opportunities for their members, including live webinars, on-demand education, publications, courses and conferences, annual meetings, and awards.

Although you've just completed dental school, dental techniques and technologies will continue to evolve at breakneck speeds. The curriculum you've just completed could easily be out of date in a matter of years. Staying current ensures that you can deliver the best care possible to your patients, which in turn ensures that your practice stays healthy.

## **2. Political advocacy**

Dental techniques and technologies aren't the only things that evolve. Dental regulations also can change quickly. When they do, organized dentistry is ready to respond on behalf of individual dentists at the local, state, and national levels. Over the years, politicians have legislated a wide variety of issues that had the potential to affect your practice and your patients, including, among many others:

- Amalgam
- Anesthesia and pain control
- Antibiotics
- Dental benefits and access to care
- Ethics
- Fluoride and sealants
- Lasers
- Licensure
- Midlevel providers
- Oral cancers
- Oral fluid diagnostics
- Oral health literacy
- Oral piercings and tongue splitting
- Product usage
- Student debt
- Teeth whitening
- Tobacco and nicotine
- Unconventional dentistry
- X-rays

Clearly, you know more about oral health issues than do politicians. By channeling individual dentists' voices into an industry-sized chorus that, in many cases, has a direct line to elected officials, organized dentistry ensures your knowledge and experience are brought to bear during crucial policy discussions that could impact you, your colleagues, your patients, your employees, or your community.

Dental associations and societies don't just give you a voice in political discussions. If you want to contribute more actively, they also give you a hand in them. Many organizations host legislative summits, and town hall meetings and continuing education that teach grassroots organizing, policymaking, communication, and other political skills.

Whatever you want to protect—your patients, your profession, or your practice—organized dentistry is your first and best defense.

### 3. Philanthropy

A smile is universal. No matter one's age, race, religion, ethnicity, or income, it's a key that unlocks friendships, relationships, health, and employment—things every person is entitled to, and which most people take for granted. Thanks to programs that deliver dental care to underserved and disadvantaged communities around the world, organized dentistry is a vehicle through which dentists can give healthy smiles—and all their physical, social, and economic benefits—to those who lack them, including children suffering from chronic pain, urban poor who lack employment and insurance, and elderly patients who aren't mobile enough to visit a dentist, just to name a few.

As a dental student, and perhaps as an ASDA member, you received much from the dental profession, including education and support from instructors, experience from mentors and employers, and possibly even financial assistance from dental institutions, associations, and benefactors. Now that you're a licensed dentist, organized dentistry is your chance to give back.

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*Wherever and however you seek connections, you also will find them in organized dentistry, which can be a foundation for personal and professional relationships alike.*

### 4. Camaraderie

There's only room for one set of hands in a patient's mouth.

Although some dentists have partners and colleagues, many operate as solo practitioners. While this affords many advantages—including simplicity, flexibility, independence, and autonomy, just to name a few—it also comes with disadvantages. For new dentists, especially those who are used to working and learning alongside peers in a classroom setting, one of the biggest challenges they might face upon graduation is social and professional isolation. Simply put: Being a dentist can be lonely.

Wherever and however you seek connections, you also will find them in organized dentistry, which can be a foundation for personal and professional relationships alike. The result can be new knowledge, a fresh perspective, a professional sounding board, a support system, and even lifelong friends.

## **5. Business acumen**

Not all dentists own their own practice. But many do. If you're one of them—or you plan to be someday—you must think not only like a dentist, but also like a small business owner.

Just like owning your own store, restaurant, or salon, owning your own dental practice means creating your own work environment, making your own decisions, setting your own hours, and earning your own money. Unfortunately, it also means writing your own business plan, negotiating your own office lease, conducting your own marketing campaigns, managing your own employees, paying your own taxes, and keeping your own books.

If you missed those classes in dental school, you're not the only one: Because there is so much dentistry to teach to students, most dental schools have neither the time nor the resources to supplement their dental curriculum with business coursework. Some do, but even the best among them offer only a taste of the education afforded to a full-time MBA student. The onus for turning dentists into business owners therefore falls on organized dentistry, which is ideally positioned to offer practical business training and support via educational sessions, mentorships, consulting services, practice management tools, and dental practice benchmarking. Dentists who take advantage of these and other member benefits will be best equipped not only to provide superior patient care, but also to run a thriving business that generates healthy income, creates jobs, and gives back to local communities.

## **6. Patient referrals**

Speaking of business: For many patients, a dentist's membership in organized dentistry is a bona fide seal of approval. Thanks to its tradition of patient advocacy, this membership represents credibility, which in turn engenders trust. And, in the age of social media and user reviews, trust is paramount. Furthermore, some dental organizations offer referrals through online directories and other patient-focused resources. Indirectly and directly, then, organized dentistry is an important tool for patient acquisition and retention.

## **7. Discounts on products and services**

As a member of organized dentistry, you'll receive discounts on a wide swathe of professional products and services, including liability insurance; hotel rooms and rental cars when you travel; apparel for

your employees; and equipment, office supplies and software for your practice. Membership practically pays for itself.

## 8. Career resources

Organized dentistry won't just advance your practice; it also can advance your career. In addition to education, advocacy, and camaraderie—all of which can increase your career prospects—it is a gateway to scores of resources that will open new doors by raising your profile and refining your résumé. Among them:

- **Mentor programs** that pair you with veteran dentists who have beneficial connections, experience, and advice
- **Job boards** that can help you discover new job opportunities
- **Volunteer opportunities** that you can leverage to make new contacts and develop new skills
- **Leadership opportunities** on councils, committees, and boards, all of which can help you establish and expand marketable skills, including leadership, communication, and conflict management
- **Speaking opportunities** at meetings and events, which can establish you as a subject-matter expert
- **Writing opportunities** as a contributor to books, magazines, journals, newsletters, and websites, which bolster your credentials as a thought leader
- **Honors and awards** that recognize and reward your professional achievements and endorse them for peers, colleagues, partners, and employers

All of these resources can help you build a promising and rewarding career.

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**“The greatest asset we have is our education and training, and organized dentistry is how we protect and cultivate that investment. The stakes are too high to abdicate that responsibility. Organized dentistry gives us a seat at the table when the future of the profession is decided.”**

Ryan Dulde, DDS  
Eagle, Wis.

Marquette University School of Dentistry, 2011

## 9. Influence

Without your engagement, dentistry won't reflect or represent you and your peers. Participating in organized dentistry, you'll find, is an act of professional democracy that keeps the profession as current as it is complex. Your membership ensures that the next generation of dentists is not just practicing in its profession, but also shaping it.

## 10. Fun

Organized dentistry is incredibly valuable. It's also incredibly fun. The events you'll attend and the people you'll meet will be a joyful break from the daily grind. So much so, members say, that the best part about organized dentistry isn't learning new techniques for fixing smiles; often, it's having experiences that cause smiles in the first place.

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*Participating in organized dentistry, you'll find, is an act of professional democracy that keeps the profession as current as it is complex. Your membership ensures that the next generation of dentists is not just practicing in its profession, but also shaping it.*

## Many Organizations, Infinite Possibilities

Organized dentistry is a tree with many branches. The two largest are the ADA and the AGD.

### The ADA

As the nation's largest dental organization, the ADA represents the whole of dentistry, including general practitioners, as well as every stripe of dental specialist. It has what it calls a "tripartite" structure and membership, which looks like a three-tiered pyramid. The ADA encompasses a network of local dental societies at the bottom, called "components," which feed into state dental societies in the middle, known as "constituents." These constituents funnel into the national dental association at the top. When you join the ADA, you typically join all three levels—your local and state dental society, as well as the national ADA organization—at once.

The ADA has two governing bodies, its Board of Trustees and its House of Delegates. The Board of Trustees, which is like the executive branch of the federal government, consists of elected trustees



and officers who formulate and review ADA policies and procedures, and make recommendations to the ADA's other governing body, the House of Delegates. The House of Delegates, which is like the legislative branch of the federal government, consists of representatives from each of ADA's constituent (i.e., state and territorial) bodies, which meet once a year to vote on issues of import to the association and profession. Along with the Board of Trustees and the House of Delegates, ADA has councils, commissions, and committees that perform focused work in specialized topic areas, such as communications, membership, or dental education and licensure.

ADA leaders typically rise from committees to boards, first at the local level, then at the state and national levels. However, opportunities are growing for young dentists to fill more senior positions more quickly.

### **The AGD**

The ADA's greatest strength is its breadth. By contrast, the AGD's greatest strength is its depth. As the only organization dedicated exclusively to the needs of general dentists, the AGD is uniquely equipped to provide benefits—including information, education, advocacy, and outreach—tailored to those who plan to practice as a general dentist.

Like the ADA, the AGD consists of local "component" organizations, state and provincial "constituent" organizations, and a national dental association. Unlike the ADA, however, not all of the AGD's constituents have components; the AGD, therefore, is more

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**"Organized dentistry represents the profession and your right to practice as you wish, based on your life experiences and education. It also works to ensure that the patient receives the best and most appropriate care. Organized dentistry is not just for the seasoned dentist, but it's for the new dentist, too. It allows us to come together to learn from each other and to advocate on behalf of this great profession and the public. The shared community of like-minded professionals that you will find in organized dentistry will complete you as a practitioner and provide moral support and knowledge to make you the best dentist you can be. Become a part of organized dentistry—we need your input and ideas."**

W. Carter Brown, DMD, FAGD  
2014–2015 AGD President  
Greenville, S.C.

Medical University of South Carolina James B. Edwards  
College of Dental Medicine, 1982

bipartite than tripartite. Still, it's structured and governed in much the same way—by an elected Board of Trustees and a representative House of Delegates.

As they do in the ADA, members in the AGD typically ascend to leadership first by joining councils and committees at the local and state level, then assuming local and state leadership positions before following a similar path at the national level. By looking for needs that match their strengths, and volunteering to fill them, young dentists in the AGD often can take an expedited path to leadership in the same way they can in the ADA.

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### **The AGD: Smart Beginnings**

The world's first national dental organization, the American Society of Dental Surgeons, was founded in 1840. A little more than 100 years later, a group of dentists founded the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD).

It was 1952. World War II was over, and dentistry was in the national spotlight. Many U.S. cities had begun fluoridating their public water systems after the war, and in 1948 President Harry Truman signed a bill establishing the National Institute of Dental Research, initiating for the first time federal funding for dental research. Subsequently came a rapid-fire string of innovations in dental technology and techniques. It was exciting—but also challenging, especially for general dentists.

For general dentists, the nature of their practices meant they had to keep their finger on the pulse of virtually every new advance in oral health. It was a lot to keep up with, and there was no clearinghouse of education and information to help them do it.

On Feb. 6, 1952, Dr. Thaddeus Weclaw and several colleagues met in Chicago to create and sign what would be the first charter of the AGD. When it was established, the AGD was intended to be that clearinghouse. And it has been ever since. Back then, it offered a handful of courses. Today, it offers hundreds, which members can leverage to meet their state's licensure requirements or to pursue achievement-based designations, such as the AGD Fellowship and Mastership awards, granted to dentists who devote themselves to continuous learning.

Although the AGD was founded with an emphasis on continuing education, the organization has broadened its focus over the past 62 years. Over time, the AGD's activities expanded to include advocacy, networking, practice management, public education, and more. Like its past, however, its present and its future are intimately and forever intertwined with a commitment to continuing education.

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## An Extended Family

Although the ADA and the AGD are the parents of organized dentistry, the profession encompasses a large extended family of dental associations, societies, and academies. Belonging to several of them at once offers many advantages, including more and varied education, networking, and volunteer opportunities, not to mention access to more and diverse sources of industry news, information, and insight. Here are just a few of the organizations worth checking out:

- Academy for Sports Dentistry:  
*www.academyforsportsdentistry.org*
- Academy of Dentistry International: *www.adint.org*
- Academy of General Dentistry:  
*www.agd.org*
- Academy of Laser Dentistry:  
*www.laserdentistry.org*
- Academy of Osseointegration:  
*www.osseo.org*
- Academy of Prosthodontics:  
*www.academyofprosthodontics.org*
- American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry:  
*www.aacd.com*
- American Academy of Craniofacial Pain:  
*www.aacfp.org*
- American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry:  
*www.estheticacademy.org*
- American Academy of Fixed Prosthodontics:  
*www.fixedprosthodontics.org*
- American Academy of Implant Dentistry:  
*www.aaaid-implant.org*
- American Academy of Implant Prosthodontics:  
*www.aaipusa.com*
- American Academy of Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology:  
*www.aaomp.org*
- American Academy of Oral & Maxillofacial Radiology:  
*www.aaomr.org*
- American Academy of Oral Medicine: *www.aaom.com*
- American Academy for Oral Systemic Health:  
*www.aaosh.org*
- American Academy of Orofacial Pain: *www.aaop.org*
- American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry: *www.aapd.org*
- American Academy of Periodontology: *www.perio.org*
- American Academy of Restorative Dentistry:  
*www.restorativeacademy.com*
- American Association for Functional Orthodontics:  
*www.aafo.org*
- American Association of Dental Boards:  
*www.dentalboards.org*
- American Association of Dental Consultants:  
*www.aadc.org*
- American Association of Dental Editors & Journalists:  
*www.dentaeditors.org*

- American Association of Endodontists: [www.aae.org](http://www.aae.org)
- American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons: [www.aaoms.org](http://www.aaoms.org)
- American Association of Orthodontists: [www.aaoinfo.org](http://www.aaoinfo.org)
- American Association of Public Health Dentistry: [www.aaphd.org](http://www.aaphd.org)
- American Association of Women Dentists: [www.aawd.org](http://www.aawd.org)
- American Board of Dental Public Health: [www.aaphd.org](http://www.aaphd.org)
- American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology: [www.abomp.org](http://www.abomp.org)
- American Academy of Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology: [www.aaomr.org](http://www.aaomr.org)
- American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery: [www.aboms.org](http://www.aboms.org)
- American Board of Orthodontics: [www.americanboardortho.com](http://www.americanboardortho.com)
- American Board of Pediatric Dentistry: [www.abpd.org](http://www.abpd.org)
- American Board of Periodontology: [www.abperio.org](http://www.abperio.org)
- American Board of Prosthodontics: [www.abpros.org/abp](http://www.abpros.org/abp)
- American Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Association: [www.acpa-cpf.org](http://www.acpa-cpf.org)
- American College of Dentists: [www.acd.org](http://www.acd.org)
- American College of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons: [www.acoms.org](http://www.acoms.org)
- American College of Prosthodontists: [www.gotoapro.org](http://www.gotoapro.org)
- American Dental Assistants Association: [www.dentalassistant.org](http://www.dentalassistant.org)
- American Dental Association: [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)
- American Dental Education Association: [www.adea.org](http://www.adea.org)
- American Dental Hygienists Association: [www.adha.org](http://www.adha.org)
- American Prosthodontic Society: [www.prostho.org](http://www.prostho.org)
- American Society of Dentist Anesthesiologists: [www.asdahq.org](http://www.asdahq.org)
- American Society of Forensic Odontology: [www.asfo.org](http://www.asfo.org)
- American Society of Geriatric Dentistry: [www.scdaonline.org](http://www.scdaonline.org)
- American Student Dental Association: [www.asdanet.org](http://www.asdanet.org)
- Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors: [www.astdd.org](http://www.astdd.org)
- Dental Assisting National Board Inc.: [www.danb.org](http://www.danb.org)
- Dental Trade Alliance: [www.dentaltradealliance.org](http://www.dentaltradealliance.org)
- Hispanic Dental Association: [www.hdassoc.org](http://www.hdassoc.org)
- Indian Dental Association: [www.ida-usa.org](http://www.ida-usa.org)
- International Academy of Gnathology: [www.gnathologyusa.org](http://www.gnathologyusa.org)
- International Anesthesia Research Society: [www.iars.org](http://www.iars.org)
- International Association for Dental Research: [www.dentalresearch.org](http://www.dentalresearch.org)

- International Association for Disability and Oral Health: [www.iadh.org](http://www.iadh.org)
- International Association for Orthodontics: [www.iaortho.org](http://www.iaortho.org)
- International Association of Orofacial Myology: [www.iaom.com](http://www.iaom.com)
- International College of Cranio-Mandibular Orthopedics: [www.iccmo.org](http://www.iccmo.org)
- International College of Dentists: [www.icd.org](http://www.icd.org)
- International Congress of Oral Implantologists: [www.dentalimplants.com](http://www.dentalimplants.com)
- National Association of Dental Laboratories: [www.nadl.org](http://www.nadl.org)
- National Dental Association: [www.ndaonline.org](http://www.ndaonline.org)
- National Dental Hygienists Association: [www.ndhaonline.org](http://www.ndhaonline.org)
- National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research: [www.nidcr.nih.gov](http://www.nidcr.nih.gov)
- Oral Health America: [www.oralhealthamerica.org](http://www.oralhealthamerica.org)
- Pierre Fauchard Academy: [www.fauchard.org](http://www.fauchard.org)
- Society of American Indian Dentistry: [www.thesaidonline.org](http://www.thesaidonline.org)
- Special Care Dentistry Association: [www.scdonline.org](http://www.scdonline.org)

As you can see from the list above, organized dentistry has a lot to offer.

## Get Organized

Whether you join one organization or a dozen, the benefits of organized dentistry to your career, your practice, your patients, and even your social life are many and immediate. Perhaps you'll join for the subscription to a journal or magazine. Perhaps you'll join to partake in continuing education. It could be that you join in order to help care for underserved patients or to represent your peers on Capitol Hill. Or maybe you want to go to the annual meeting to learn new techniques and meet people who understand what you do, because they do it, too. Whatever your motivation, organized dentistry is your chance to stay sharp, stay current, and stay connected. And with dental school finally over, there's no better time to "get organized."



Chapter 10

# The Beginning



## On Your Way

Your entry into practice signals a change of identity—your emergence as a health care professional. Everything you have planned and worked for all of these years is now beginning to converge. You may feel excited, or nervous, even a bit overwhelmed. This manual can help calm your nerves. While the information here is not meant to be all-encompassing, it can prep you for navigating the complexities of your transition into practice. Use it when you feel perplexed. Refer to it when you need some perspective.

The first rule of dentistry is that you never stop learning. Dental school graduation marks the close of your apprenticeship, but not the end of your training. You are simply passing into a fresh life stage of personal accountability and self-motivation. Your dental education continues right into the world of practice. Accept that the learning curve can be steep. Be patient. Stay flexible and curious. Cultivate both a sense of wonder and a sense of humor. Remain alert and open to new science, techniques, procedures, and instruments. Your careful, considered enthusiasm will reward you. You will discover that you get much more right than you get wrong, especially if you don't get in a hurry. Take as many continuing education courses as you can.

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*The first rule of dentistry is that you never stop learning. Dental school graduation marks the close of your apprenticeship, but not the end of your training.*

Recognize that education also comes in less formal settings. There are many accomplished dentists in the world, and a lot of them enjoy sharing their accumulated wisdom. Some will even share their mistakes. Get to know the veteran dentists in your area. Visit their practices. Learn from their outlooks, their habits, their priorities, their regrets, and their ways of doing business. Take note of what you admire and emulate it. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. Don't be frugal in gathering older dentists' advice. Don't cut corners with assessing their experience. Take advantage of experts whose knowledge can save you time, money, and anguish.

Beware the dangers of seclusion. As you spend your days alone in your operatory, concentrating on running your practice, you may drift into isolation. Habits, both good and bad, become ingrained. Your intellectual suppleness can stiffen. Your emotional resilience can grow brittle. Change can become painful. While finding your rhythm is essential, don't become so comfortable in your routines

that you stagnate. Stay in touch with your colleagues, through journals, classes, meetings, blogs and chat sites, and social gatherings.

Dentistry is developing quickly. The bodies of knowledge are advancing, clinical techniques are evolving, and practice paradigms are shifting in exciting and sometimes unforeseeable ways. An old saying in the profession holds that in five years, half of everything you learned in dental school will be obsolete—but you can't predict which half. As long as you remain engaged and connected, the inevitable changes will make for a stimulating, satisfying career.

As you journey into practice, particularly its entrepreneurial side, you will be bombarded by invitations from assertive companies and individuals. They will seem to know best. Do not rush to accept their pitches. Weigh any proposition with a critical eye. Investigate all claims rigorously. Surround yourself—by joining dental organizations, appropriate specialty organizations, and local study clubs—with colleagues who can suggest alternative viewpoints.

If you are going to be a general dentist, join the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD). The AGD gives general dentists a distinctive voice in the profession, and a place to call home. It encourages generalists to achieve a broad mastery of clinical skills, and it vigorously advocates for general dentists and their patients when the winds of outside political pressure blow. The AGD, in short, is the specialty organization for general dentists, offering a comfortable, supportive environment for getting continuing education and for growing your practice and yourself.

Dentistry is both art and science, but favorable outcomes involve more than the sum of clinical parts. A flourishing practice requires as much organizational sense as technical expertise. You will come to realize that the needs of your patients, along with your capacity to render effective care, coincide with the needs of your business. If you establish solid operational systems from the outset, the business end of your practice is more likely to thrive. You will be able to turn your attention more fully to your patients' needs. Your patients will appreciate your approach to practice, and you in turn will have the freedom and peace of mind to appreciate your patients.

We hope that this manual gives you a boost in your quest for success. We wish you prosperity and a rich, rewarding career as you embark on your life adventure into dental practice.



