

THE ELEMENTS OF

style

BY MARK ROWH

Photo: Nurture by Steelcase. Photo courtesy Steelcase Corp.



Things to think about when shopping for furniture for your practice

When a patient walks into the office area of your practice, what would you predict as his first impression? A positive assessment, based on attractive furnishings? Or the kind of reaction elicited by a waiting room at KGB headquarters?

Okay, so the latter may be an exaggeration for any 21st century American medical practice. But, if the comparison gives you

pause, or if you haven't really thought about the matter lately, it may be time to reassess.

Certainly, managing a modern practice involves so many responsibilities, it's easy to overlook something as seemingly mundane as office furnishings. But, some attention to this area can help create a professional image for the entire operation. For patients as well as office staff, the right focus on how the

surroundings are furnished can be well worth the trouble.

FORM AND FUNCTION

At a minimum, office furnishings should combine aesthetics with functionality. "Balancing beauty and technology is important when selecting office furniture," says Dr. John Grossman, a plastic surgeon with

offices in both Denver and Beverly Hills. "It's important to create an efficient work environment that provides appropriate space for all tasks and a seamless flow for patients, staff, and patient charts."

Of course, appearances do count, and a key consideration in selecting office furnishings is the way they'll look within the context of the overall environment. Complementary colors, appropriate designs, and attractive configurations are among the factors to consider.

Even more important is patient comfort and safety. Furniture must be able to accommodate a wide range of people, from older patients to bariatric patients, reports Jim Cleary, vice president of sales at Environments at Work, a Boston office furniture dealer. "The furniture must be comfortable, easy to get in and out of for older or disabled patients, and able to accommodate an increasingly overweight population," Cleary says.

Cleary says that the trend today is in providing an environment for patients and their families that is less institutional and more homelike. "The designers and manufacturers of healthcare furnishings keep this at the forefront of their marketing efforts in both hospitals and medical offices," he says. "New designs come out on a regular basis with the goal being to combine very attractive designs with all of the functional features required in the complex healthcare environment."

Max Church, sales manager for BioFit Engineered Products in Bowling Green, Ohio, says that although comfort and appearance should be considered for all products, additional factors come into play for different purposes. For examining and surgery areas in particular, cleanliness is paramount. "The furniture should not give off particles or contaminants," he says. "It should have antimicrobial properties to dissuade germs from living on its surface and

should be easy to clean and disinfect."

For general office furniture, both durability and ergonomics count. "Furniture should be strong and work properly for a very long time," Church says. "It should support workers properly and allow them to adjust [it] so they [can maintain] a good working posture."

FLEXIBLE OPTIONS

An increasingly popular feature with the latest generation of healthcare furniture offerings is modularity. "Since it is not uncommon for upholstered furniture to get stained in a medical environment, modular design is important so pieces can be easily replaced without disrupting the flow of patients in a busy medical practice," says Cleary. He points out that much of today's furniture designed for waiting areas, exam rooms, and other medical practice applications can be easily disassembled on-site and the component parts replaced quickly.

Not only can this be a convenient way to address problems, but it also offers economic advantages, according to Paul Nemschoff, executive vice president and COO at Nemschoff in Sheboygan, Wis. "Using reconfigurable furniture options allows components and fabric to be replaced versus the entire product," he says. "This extends the cost of ownership while also preventing waste."

Another trend is the extension of ergonomic concepts beyond employee work areas. For example, ergonomic exam room chairs can help assure patients are comfortable and potentially make them more at ease with an exam or procedure.

Increasingly sophisticated materials are also leading to higher-quality products. Cleary singles out Crypton, an advanced upholstery material. It includes an integrated moisture barrier that limits the growth of molds, such as *Aspergillus niger*, and bacteria, such as *Staphylococcus aureus*. By taking

questions to ask

Marta T. Neira, vice president of Florida-based Workscapes South, suggests asking questions such as these when selecting furniture for your practice:

- How do you want the space to look?
- What office functions must be done in that space?
- What is your total budget?
- How fast do you need the product?
- How do you want to handle repairs and service?
- How long will you need the furniture to last before replacing it?
- Is infection control important?
- Who will be using the product?
- What are the body types of your staff or patients that will be using the furniture?
- How well does the company you're dealing with understand your practice?

"The list of potential questions goes on," Neira says. "In the end, you should be able to communicate the primary drivers of your purchase, regardless of price. There are far too many options to let just price dictate your path. Budgetary concerns should only be used in the beginning to help in determining whether your vision can become a reality."

advantage of these or other advances in quality and variety, you'll find that there's a wide range of products available to any practice. Here are just a few examples:

- The Adagiato chair from Kimball Office combines comfort and attractiveness with sturdy construction. It features tubular steel legs, a shield-like beech back, and tightly tailored cushions. Textural contrast is provided by metal fasteners, soft upholsteries, and wood finishes in 18 hues. With a suspended seat and increased back pitch for extra support, the chair offers three back styles and can fit into minimalist interiors as well as multidimensional environments.

- Parents and staff alike appreciate items that cater to children, helping to occupy kids and keeping them from being disruptive. For example, Nemschoff's Play Islands are self-contained units for entertaining up to five children at a time. Easy to clean and sanitize, they're designed with multiple pieces but no loose parts. Several models are available, including one with a speckle tone finish that will fit in with any number of decors.

- Furniture from Clinton Industries includes a variety of tables and cabinets,

stools, blood drawing chairs, instrument stands, mobile carts, and other items.

These and other furnishings, available from a number of manufacturers, offer a wide range of options and price ranges.

When selecting vendors, don't overlook the service angle.


MAKING CHOICES

With so many available options, choosing furnishings can be a challenging, if rewarding, process. To make the best possible decisions, consider offerings from several manufacturers or vendors, and take time to compare features. In making comparisons, keep in mind that general office furnishings may also have their place along with those designed specifically for healthcare settings.

"Don't restrict your search to 'medical' only," Dr. Grossman says. "Look at all furnishing options, and keep your patients in mind when selecting furniture. Try to pick

something that they would find comfortable or intriguing."

Also, be sure to give the process sufficient time. "The most common mistake made when selecting furniture is waiting until the last minute to begin the selection process," says Marta T. Neira, vice president of Florida-based Workscapes South. "As a rule of thumb, a new practice should designate at least three months for the selection process. This allows ample time to look at a number of products and determine the right solution for the practice, while still leaving enough time to customize the order to the practice's liking."

When selecting vendors, don't overlook the service angle. Get providers to furnish detailed information about how they assist customers after the sale. "There are enough distractions to the continuum of care already," says Neira. "The last thing a practice manager needs is to deal with service issues regarding furniture." 

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tips for ergonomic workstations

Relax The Back, a retail chain based in La Palma, Calif., offers these tips for creating an ergonomic workstation:

Office chairs should produce the neutral body position and promote good posture.

- **Seat height should be adjustable**, so knees are bent at a 90-degree angle.

- **Armrests should be adjustable**, so arms are bent at the elbow at a 90-degree angle.

- **The tilt position should be adjustable**, with a slightly reclined

position recommended.

- **The chair should support both the lumbar and cervical areas of the back.**

- **The front of the seat should allow 1-2 inches between your legs and the chair.**

Feet should be flat on the floor with knees bent at a 90-degree angle. A footrest can be added to reduce pressure on the lower back and thighs

and also promote circulation. A computer monitor should be at least 20 inches away from the user's face and should be positioned at eye level. Laptop users should position their screens higher on their desk. A laptop holder aligns your computer to eye level and frees up workspace. Users should change positions, from a sitting position to standing, throughout the day.