

DESIGN POWER



Take a thoughtful approach to design to provide your patients with a better experience.

BY CRAWFORD IFLAND

WHAT IS DESIGN?

Upon hearing the word *design*, many people think of architecture, graphic design, or the consumer products we use every day. But, whether we realize it or not, design is all around us. Nearly everything you come into contact with—from the newspaper you read in the morning with your cup of coffee, to the coffee cup itself, to the Keurig machine used to prepare it—has been designed.

In the dictionary, *design* is defined as “purpose, planning, or intention that exists or is thought to exist behind an action, fact, or material object.” However, design is not limited just to the products we use; it also applies to our experiences. Have you ever attended an incredible concert? Design, in part, was responsible. Have you ever had a terrible experience at the DMV? Design (or lack thereof) played a part.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Humans love order. It is hardwired in our brains. Whether we realize it or not, we enjoy finding patterns and other ways to help us translate the world around us, especially when we encounter something unfamiliar. Although some people are more right-brained and creative than others, order, hierarchy, and other psychological methods of translation are still important.

Think about stop lights. Every stop light in the United States has the exact same order and design: red on the top, green on the bottom, yellow in the middle. Although this consistency is merely convenient for most of us, there is incredible intentionality behind the design that is vital for others: Because some people are red-green colorblind, it is crucial that the red lights and green lights are always in the same



place. The consequences of inconsistent or thoughtless design would be disastrous.

Good, thoughtful design understands and takes into account the ways in which our brains process information and makes the object of design as easy to understand as possible. There are many psychological elements that come into play.

However, when I say that design is psychological, this does not mean you should use psychology to trick people into coming to your practice; rather, you should be intentional about assisting prospective patients in every way possible, as they are making life-changing decisions and are likely unfamiliar with the process.

HOW CAN I DESIGN MY PRACTICE?

Design helps us translate the world around us by making unfamiliar experiences easier to comprehend. This is especially important in the medical field, where the average person may be confused about the medical situation he or she is facing, the treatment options available, and what the process of care will look like. You must also factor unique circumstances into the design of your patients' experience—after all, elderly cataract patients struggling with their vision may have considerations and concerns different from those of millennials seeking LASIK.

Good branding is all about telling an authentic and consistent story. Applied to design, this means that every aspect of your practice must tell the same story. It is a well-understood principle in the design industry that the function of any given



Figure 1. A typical waiting room (A) versus one with a thoughtful design (B).

object should inform the design of that object. Applied to your practice, this can be done in many ways. If the goal of your website is to attract new leads through content generation, a blog would be an important component. If you want patients to spend a minimal amount of time in your waiting room, then focusing on staffing and patient wait time would be a vital piece of your practice design.

Although many physicians don't think of "designing" the experience of being in their office, many do consider the design of their website, their business cards, and their marketing. Let's take a look at those elements.

YOUR WEBSITE

There are certainly best practices when it comes to designing a website with your patients in mind. We have all visited websites that were hard to navigate, didn't perform well on mobile devices, or didn't seem to have the information we were looking for.

When designing a practice website, important considerations include:

- Making sure your website is mobile-friendly;
- Organizing information so that it is easy to locate, both within the website and in the top navigation;
- Ensuring that visual elements and typography are organized in a clear visual hierarchy;

- Ensuring that all graphics, images, and other visual elements are consistent with your branding, including having a similar color scheme;
- Implementing clear calls to action so that the patient knows what to do next (as I like to say, is it idiot-proof?); and
- Making your website's content easy to understand. If your homepage is filled with medical jargon, you may scare people away. Focus on the benefit to your patients, not on the complicated medical procedures you need to get them there.

Remember that less is more. The simpler it is for patients to find what they are looking for, the better the experience they will have on your website and the more positive they will feel about your brand.

YOUR MARKETING

Your website is arguably the first and most integral component of your marketing. Chances are it is the first place many patients will go to find information about you. However, your marketing channels are a much more comprehensive picture of your practice. Below are some questions to ask when taking a holistic assessment of your marketing:

- Are you taking advantage of the different platforms available, or are you marketing via only one channel?

- Is your messaging consistent across all platforms?
- Are you considering the different audiences you are catering to on different platforms? Facebook and newspaper advertisements may be effective media to reach older audiences, but are you attracting the younger crowd on Instagram?
- Is your branding visible and consistent across all your marketing efforts?
- Is your advertising measurable? You cannot expect to just throw your marketing out there and hope something sticks. If the most aesthetically beautiful ad that has ever been made doesn't drive sales, it's not good marketing; you must have a way to measure the results and make adjustments if necessary.

YOUR PRACTICE

If you've been to one doctor's office, you've been to them all. They're filled with uncomfortable chairs that cram people together like sardines, old mangled issues of *Newsweek* and *National Geographic* on a coffee table, and more than a few patients silently praying that someone doesn't take the seat next to them. That is the typical waiting room. It is not well thought out. There is no intention or personality. Your appointment is an obligation, not a delight. Which waiting room would you rather be in, Figure 1A or 1B?



Design prompts the question, “Do I want my practice to feel like every other medical clinic out there? What can I do to make this experience unique and memorable?” What if you could make your patients’ visit the most enjoyable part of their day?

Not only is thoughtful design important when it comes to your website and marketing (digital and otherwise), but the design of your physical practice is just as meaningful. As noted in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, “Poor design may cost you patients.”¹ Below are some elements of your physical practice to take into consideration:

- What is a patient’s experience from the moment he or she walks in the door? Have a policy in place that dictates how a patient is greeted, establishes what steps he or she must take before being seen for an appointment, and sets goals for average wait time.
- Are your business hours competitive?
- What is your office forms policy? Do patients have to fill them out in the office, or can they complete them online before their visit?

- Do you play music in your waiting room? If so, what type?
- Do you have an option for patients to pay online?
- What is the furniture in your waiting room like? What magazines are on the coffee table?

THOUGHTFUL DESIGN MATTERS

Thoughtful design takes into account the experience of a product and asks “Why?” to nearly every aspect of that interaction. It may seem silly to so carefully consider all the fine details; you may even be wondering, “Does this even matter?”

Yes, it does. Think of your last visit to the Apple Store. Every Apple Store is, more or less, exactly the same, from the overall layout down to the floor. Next time you visit the Genius Bar, look down: The flooring in all 450-plus Apple Stores worldwide is identical. Not only is it blue sandstone; it all comes from a single family-owned quarry outside of Florence, Italy.

There is little debate that Steve Jobs understood the power and importance of a consistent customer experience. Although his

hyperobsessive personality may not be the best example to follow, you certainly can’t say he wasn’t thoughtful about the design of his stores. It is important to consider the fine details of your patients’ experience. If the surgeon down the road is overlooking it, that is an opportunity for you to set yourself apart.

Although many physicians may only think of their logo or their website when they think of design and branding, good, thoughtful experience design is much more than that. By taking a holistic approach to your practice design, both in the digital and physical realms, you will be able to provide patients with a more thoughtful, consistent, and authentic experience. ■

1. Swartz J. The doctor’s office: poor design may cost you patients. *CMAJ*. 1989;140(3):320-321.

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