



Dr. Freels



Dr. Freels' reception and waiting areas use colors and lighting that are warm and inviting. Natural greens pop in a sea of muted tones.

Let Your Office Space Boost Your Brand

Focusing on the five senses can help you attract new patients, boost referrals, and stand out from the competition.

BY STEPHANIE KLOOS DONOGHUE

First impressions count, perhaps more so in medical offices than in any other establishments. Patients (and prospective patients) start forming their impressions from viewing your website or driving by your office and seeing your signage. They continue to build their impressions when they walk into your office, are greeted by staff, and sit in your

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judgment, and even on their ability to comply with your instructions.

For example, some patients enter your office experiencing pain and/or discomfort, not to mention fear and anxiety (“What’s wrong with me? Can this doctor solve my problem?”). Patients want to feel confident that they made the right choice in making an appointment with you—and sensations can play a huge role.

Experiencing your office through the patient’s perspective is a first step. In her book *Life in Five Senses*, best-selling author Gretchen Rubin writes, “Acknowledging that people experience sensations in different ways can help us all be more understanding—not to dismiss people’s objections to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or touches, but instead to respect them so that we can create sensory environments in which everyone can feel comfortable.”

As you apply this heightened sensory awareness to your office, you can begin to determine whether small changes or a major overhaul are required. Let’s look at strategies for creating an inviting space that reflects your professionalism and practice personality while creating an inviting environment for your patients.

The Visual Impact

Brad Schaeffer, DPM, of Central Park SOLE in New York, New York, says that patients’ first impressions are a critical first step in establishing the doctor-patient relationship. “You would think that being a doctor, your doctor skills would speak for themselves,” he says. “This is true in a lot of ways, especially in keeping patients. But for getting patients in the door, it’s about the aesthetics and curb appeal.”



Dr. Schaeffer

Entryway signage should be well thought out and present the impression you want to convey, Dr. Schaeffer suggests. He uses the reception area to boost his brand with a custom sign built into the wall that has a light shining on it. As patients move through the practice, which includes four treatment rooms and a small surgical suite, they see an office that is “very family-centric, warm, and welcoming,” he says. “I want patients to feel like they’re in a spa.”

Nicole Freels, DPM, CPed., of

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waiting area. Positive (and, perhaps, negative) feelings emerge throughout their visit, with some impressions lingering until well after they leave your office.

How can you elevate the patient experience regardless of practice size, location, and specialty? It turns out that focusing on what patients see, hear, feel, smell, and perhaps taste can have a huge impact on their emotional state, their trust in your



Above, the the camouflage-patterned wallpaper on an accent wall reflects the practice color palette and has a “calming feel,” says Dr. Schaeffer. At right, blue is used again in the lighting and the jellyfish screensavers. The bookcases add a homey, comfortable feel to the waiting area.



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Lexington Podiatry and Modern Podiatrist in Lexington, Kentucky, built her practice with visual impact in mind. Her first office, a 900-square-foot space with three exam rooms, was “very quintessential Kentucky: horses, bourbon, and basketball,” she says. Her family was in the hardwood flooring business, so she wanted to incorporate natural colors and wood textures into her initial build-out. “Textures can speak volumes about a space without making it feel gaudy,” she says.

Dr. Freels opened other locations and eventually consolidated her practice into a single 10,000-square-foot location with 27 exam rooms on two floors. She took the best of what she had learned from her early practice designs as well as from other businesses that had similar customer appeal. “I wanted to create a destination,” she says, focusing on efficiency, comfort, and calmness. Her design inspirations were Delta Sky Clubs and cruise ships. “I wanted to create a cruise ship-like entrance,” she says. “We have a greeter, and

patients feel welcomed.”

Dr. Schaeffer wanted his office design to reflect his location as well—especially focusing on views that overlook iconic Central Park. “A lot of New York City is older and

practice, Dr. Freels did her homework. “We did some color research and found that green is one of the most calming colors,” she says—and it happened to be her favorite color. She also wanted to buck the local ste-

Dr. Freels suggests that doctors who want to stick to neutral colors...can enhance the look of the space by adding the practice’s signature color(s) strategically.

timeless, with just stunning architecture,” he says. “I have a very old pre-war building. The bones of it are gorgeous.” Yet he wanted to combine that with simplicity. “It’s like the Apple business model: clean, simple, and user-friendly,” he says. The result? Patients “feel the warmth of our practice environment” within a state-of-the-art practice.

Importance of Color

Color and lighting can affect patient impressions as well, according to both doctors interviewed. In choosing a color palette for the destination

reotype in Kentucky where everything is blue. “My whole motto is ‘Be different.’ Whatever everyone else is doing, I want to go in the complete opposite direction so we can differentiate ourselves from the competition.”

She suggests that doctors who want to stick to neutral colors throughout the office can enhance the look of the space by adding the practice’s signature color(s) strategically. In a sea of muted tones, “your brand color can pop,” she says.

Dr. Shaeffer worked with a designer for his office and chose gray

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with blue accents. “Color is essential to any space, whether that be a doctor’s office or clothing store,” says Dr. Schaeffer. “I like my choice of light blue or sky blue with whites and gray because it has a calming feel while staying true to our office brand and color.” Focal points for the use of blue are the camouflage-patterned wallpaper from Philip Gorrivan Design, which he calls “calming and chic,” and blue lighting that he shines above his bookshelf. Overall, achieving a unified look was the aim, he says. “I wanted everything to feel seamless,



The style of the historic building’s entryway (above) is reflected in Dr. Schaeffer’s choice of displays inside his office (at left).

Doctors who have difficulty discerning color differences might benefit from the help of a designer with expertise in color usage and combinations.

from my gray floors to white couches to black scrubs.”

Dr. Freels cautions that when choosing a particular color palette to recognize that there are subtle dif-

ferences in colors. For example, not every green or blue is the same. Doctors who have difficulty discerning color differences might benefit from the help of a designer with expertise

Designing on a Budget

To achieve her goals and stay within budget, Dr. Nicole Freels hired a virtual designer. While an on-site designer might handle ordering and mark up the items purchased, the virtual designer created vision boards with her and told her where to go to purchase items instead. Then the doctor and staff did the legwork, which she says was very cost-effective. “We saved about 25 percent by doing the heavy lifting,” she says.

Communicating her vision to the designer was key, she explains. Dr. Freels told the designer that she wanted “every inch to have an intention behind it and be functional.” She also wanted the overall look of the spaces to be similar, so that the office felt unified, but she wanted to create subtle differences between the spaces in her practice. Her virtual designer was able to help her achieve those goals. PM

in color usage and combinations. (See sidebar, “Designing on a Budget.”)

Selecting Artwork

Artwork selection is one way Dr. Schaeffer incorporated the historical aspects of his building’s architecture and Central Park location into his practice design. “We selected black-and-white photographs of the building from the early 1900s, including some with horses and carriages outside,” he says.

He strategically selected other displays: New York Yankees memorabilia, because he has a focus on sports medicine; ballet, because theaters are nearby; and photos that depict a healthy lifestyle and wellness.

Dr. Freels’ displays artwork that is “aspirational,” she says. She licensed stock photography of feet on sand and at a fireplace—relaxing poses—and mounted those on large foamboard in every exam room. “Patients say to me, ‘That’s what I want my feet to look like,’” says Dr. Freels. “They can connect [to the artwork], because that’s their goal.”

Technology in Full View

In keeping with the old/new feel of his practice space, Dr. Schaeffer

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maintained many of the architectural details while adding modern equipment and treatments, from lasers to fillers to stem cell injections. Glass doors make high-tech instruments visible from outer areas, so equipment remains in full view from various parts of the office. When patients are inside treatment rooms, he says he wants them to feel comfortable with the technology. “I like to pull up their x-rays on big screens so patients can look at them after I leave,” he says. “This way, they feel comfortable and not rushed as they might have if I carried a laptop from room to room.”

Dr. Freels finds that “most people are visual learners” and combines her educational approach with the latest technology. For example, offering live ultrasounds and interactive digital x-rays “allows patients to feel validated,” she says. She tells patients, “This will allow me to see what you’re feeling,” and she says she is amazed at their emotional response. “They often start tearing up and respond, ‘So I’m not crazy? Can I take a picture to show my spouse?’”

Focus on Comfort

Dr. Freels incorporates a Scandinavian design style with clean lines



Dr. Freels displays aspirational photos throughout the practice.

and lots of texture so that the décor is “modern, but not too modern so that it feels like a museum,” she says. The couches and loveseats enhance the free-flowing style throughout the entire space.

Dr. Freels also created a Sky Club-like drink station with snacks. “Often patients are rushing to their appointments with little time to think about grabbing a bite on their lunch hour,” she says. “Or perhaps they are a diabetic and have a sugar drop that could potentially be catastrophic. Offering convenience items is always noticed.” The area also includes a branded poster she calls a “comfort menu” that lists amenities. “For instance, if you are anxious, a weighted blanket will calm you,” she says. “We have lavender neck pillows, and that scent again will help calm you.”

Since the height of COVID-19 in 2020, Dr. Schaeffer has eliminated a community coffee center. Instead, a front desk person or medical assistant

will offer patients a cup of coffee or tea or small bottles of water with the SOLE logo on them. “We may revisit the coffee station idea in the future,” he says.

Dr. Freels currently offers a retail space for in-office product sales of the 180 items the practice carries. “This provides an intentional opportunity to showcase more items,” she says, and enhances compliance as the doctors can physically point to the items they recommend, such as the best product for dry feet. Patients can check labels on products as well, and they are more inclined to make a purchase if they can touch and feel the products the doctor has recommended.

She adds that she is always on the lookout for new ways to improve patient comfort, and she tries to tackle any issues before hearing multiple patient complaints. For example, if she finds that a corner is too sharp for easy

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Do a Five-Senses Audit

If you don’t have the budget or inclination to make major practice changes right now, a quick office walk-through may help you uncover individual issues for you to target. Use this list as your guide.

1) What do patients see?

Tip: Walk through the office as your patient would and sit where your patients do to get their perspective.

2) What do patients hear?

Tip: Listen for waiting room echoes, noises, and voices through closed doors and walls, etc.

3) What do patients feel?

Tip: Look for possible areas of discomfort (e.g., rough chair fabric) and dangerous surfaces (e.g., slippery floors).

4) What do patients smell?

Tip: Ask a friend or family member to go through your office and evaluate its scent. You may have become “nose blind”: desensitized to a particular smell after repeated exposure.

5) What do patients taste?

Tip: Try what you serve. Does the coffee you provide taste fresh? What’s the quality of the water in the bottles you provide? **PM**

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wheelchair access, she says, she will rearrange the furniture to widen the space.

Music and Videos

Dr. Schaeffer says that the use of background music is “imperative” to a positive patient experience. His playlist includes “everything from the Beatles to Frank Sinatra, Bobby Darin, and the old school hits,” he says. He recommends that DPMs pay a premium for music services to avoid commercials.

The background music in Dr. Freels’ office, which targets Baby Boomers and older age groups, includes instrumen-



Office Exterior Counts, Too

Outside of Dr. Nicole Freels’ 10,000-square-foot practice is a 20-foot-long sign that is visible from a distance. Even before patients enter the office, they are offered valet service, which lets her patients know that her office offers a “first-class experience,” she says. **PM**

tal covers, classical, easy listening, music from the ‘80s, and ‘50s doo-wop. “The reaction we get from

playing doo-wop in our office is incredible,” she says.

Large video displays in Dr. Freels’ exam rooms have swing arms for patient explanations and education. For example, she says that patients “love the explanation of biomechanics, including why we’re doing what we’re doing and recommending what they need to do.” When doctors aren’t in the room, the same monitors display practice services, promotions, and products.

Comfort is the focus of Dr. Schaeffer’s video selection for those in the waiting area. “Patients are probably in pain and are a little nervous,” he

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says, and they respond well to soothing screensavers. “I have endless screensavers of jellyfish.”

Scents Matter

Dr. Freels says that what patients smell as they enter a practice can be just as powerful as what they see and hear. She wanted to avoid the antiseptic odors associated with hospitals while keeping the office smelling clean and fresh. Her solution was to design custom scents that are

calming yet subtle and not too overwhelming. Patients can also use one

sense of smell and creating warmth and comfort for the whole body (in-

Both Dr. Freels and Dr. Schaeffer say that the sensory-based design decisions they have made have had a positive impact on patient numbers and their bottom line.

of the lavender-scented pillows from her comfort menu.

Smell has been an important focus for Dr. Schaeffer as well. “The

cluding our noses) are very important,” he says. He wanted to avoid the “doctor’s office” smell and especially any foot-related odors. “We have a scent machine that smells like 1 Hotel,” a luxury hotel group that is inspired by nature. “This fragrance has become 1’s signature scent, and I wanted to replicate that in our office. We get many compliments on it, not only not feeling like a doctor’s office but not smelling like one either.”

The Payoff

Both Dr. Freels and Dr. Schaeffer say that the sensory-based design decisions they have made have had a positive impact on patient numbers and their bottom line. These choices make their brands distinctive, they say. “Branding is everything” and needs to be a part of every practice business plan so that “you stand out from other doctors,” says Dr. Schaeffer. Dr. Freels agrees, adding that if you don’t pay attention to the details—and embrace your brand with every decision you make—“you’re just like everybody else.” PM

Watch for a second article on practice branding coming this summer.

Finding the Right Office Design Team

If you’re looking to build or change your office space, how do you find the right designer? Karina Kowalska and Amber Frazier of Karina K Studio (karinakstudio.com) share some questions doctors can ask prospective firms.

- 1) *How would you describe your design aesthetic?*
- 2) *What do you consider a successful project?*
- 3) *What kind of interiors do you specialize in?*
- 4) *What size spaces do you typically design for?*
- 5) *Do you work with a variety of budgets?*
- 6) *Can you work with our office’s existing conditions and make the space look new and cohesive?*
- 7) *What does your design process look like?*
- 8) *What is a typical timeframe for you to complete a design?*

Many designers specialize in a certain “look,” says Kowalska. Knowing that a firm typically designs traditional spaces or modern/eclectic offices, for example, will help determine if the design team is a good fit for the DPM’s project. “Ideally, you either select a designer who specializes in your style or a designer who has experience in any style so that they can help you narrow down yours,” she says. Once the doctor has chosen a firm, a collaborative approach works best. “We encourage clients to find two to four images of spaces they like or are drawn to—not necessarily medical offices,” she says. “That helps the design firm fine-tune [the project] from the start and create a vision.” That vision can include the doctor’s likes/dislikes, types of spaces, quantities (e.g., number of waiting room chairs), and functionality needed throughout the entire office. “You also want the design team to explain the process in laymen’s terms so that the client understands the steps—including how much time they will take and why they are important.” PM



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