

PRACTICE TRANSITIONS: SMOOTH HANDOVER OR COSTLY MISTAKE?



So, you are selling or buying a practice. What approach works best?

1. Does the previous owner need to stay on as an associate to introduce the buyer?
2. If so, how long should that transition last?
3. What happens when there is no transition at all, such as in the case of sudden death?
4. What pitfalls arise when both the previous and new owner work together?

I have read countless articles on this topic.

Experts across the industry offer a wide range of perspectives on practice transitions, often encouraging sellers to phase out gradually rather than leave abruptly.

Twenty-five years ago, I introduced the concept of Take the Money and Run (TTMR), and to this day, I have not changed my mind.

After closing, the previous owner is not necessary to make the transition "smooth."

Sorry, folks. It may sound blunt, but with respect, it's the ideal approach.

The concept of slowly phasing out while the buyer gains momentum sounds appealing in theory, but in practice, it fails more often than it succeeds.



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Unlike some other professions, dentists do not work well together in the same practice.

My dad used to say that dentists do not like sharing their toys, so don't put them in the same sandbox.

This is why most dentists are solo owners and not part of the corporate system.

One ruler, one King or Queen works best.

Ok – I concede that some work well in group settings, but are they really, genuinely happy?

So, whose advice should you follow?

Consultants, lawyers, accountants, and financial advisors who serve the dental profession are undoubtedly qualified to advise on practice management challenges, employment law, accounting, taxation, and personal financial planning.

But have they personally sold a practice?

Did they stay on as an associate after the sale?

Did it work well for them, or was there compatibility issues with the new owner(s)?

If they are honest, many may admit they should have sold and walked away.

My advice is to speak with professionals who are exclusively involved in dental practice sales.

Better yet, seek out dentists who sold and stayed on. They are your best source.

What about the patients?

Professionals have egos and overestimate their importance, dangerously assuming they cannot be replaced.

To that I say – let it go doc!

Don't work past your prime holding on for some sense of false loyalty to whatever you are clinging.

Yes, patients are loyal to you - that is true.

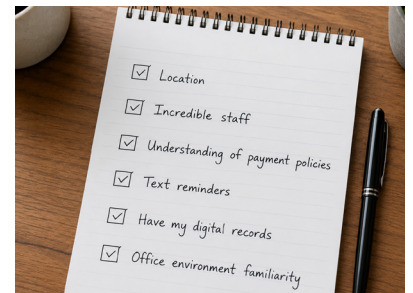
But they are not going to remain your patients forever.

Many have already changed dentists at least once or twice during their lifetime.

They will accept that you have moved on and send notes of a congratulatory nature

As a patient myself, I do not want my dentist to retire, but when he does, I will adapt and continue returning to the same practice for many other reasons:

1. Location – smack in the middle of my home and my office
2. Incredible staff – a DA that has been there for 30 years - she is a blast!
3. I know exactly what to expect for payment policies – I hate financial surprises
4. I know the appointment protocols – they TEXT reminders – no phone calls please!
5. My digital records are there – I do not want an NPE, Panorex or FMS unless necessary
6. I am familiar with the office environment – I know where the patient toilet is located!



Another dental office? I know little to nothing about it.

So yes, patients go to their dental office for many reasons!

You are on the list doc, but only one of the reasons.

Accept that and you are on your way to freedom from ownership!

The Clean Break (TTMR)

Many sellers want a clean break and are ready to cut the emotional ties to staff and patients.

We have managed many sales where the selling dentist never spent a single day in the office with the new owner.

In most instances, the seller was healthy and fully capable of associating after the sale, yet the buyer felt more than capable of managing the practice independently.

For some sellers, walking out the door for the last time creates an invigorating sense of freedom from ownership.

In surveys of clean-break transactions, buyers often comment: "I thought I would lose many patients because the previous dentist was not here, but I was surprised how many were happy to stay with the practice."



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Are You Ready to Let Go?

Some dentists have great difficulty letting go.

This often creates conflict around boundaries and authority, especially for staff who feel torn between loyalty to the former owner and responsibility to the new one.

In some cases, it can lead to preventable staff resignations.

Many sellers later tell us they should not have stayed on.

The new owner will naturally have a fresh style, and it can be difficult to watch the practice change so drastically.

Are You Ready to Manage?

Some younger dentists struggle with managing senior dentists.

It is unrealistic to expect a first-time owner to manage every single ownership challenge perfectly during the first year.

Managing staff, patients, suppliers, labs, and a previous owner working as an associate can be overwhelming.

Under pressure, some decisions will inevitably be made quickly and without much reflection. That is common among young business owners.

The emotions and pride of the previous owner are rarely their top priority.

Their focus is on meeting patients, running the practice, and managing the debt they incurred to buy it.

We all made our worst mistakes in the early years

As a result, the previous owner may receive the least amount of thoughtfulness because they are only expected to remain for a brief time.

If you choose to work for the buyer after the sale, expect the least and hope for the best.

Patients will often insist on seeing the former dentist if they know he or she is still available, even if it's only part-time.

Meanwhile, the new owner may feel frustrated that they paid for the business, yet the former owner is still holding on and preventing them from implementing their own philosophy and systems.

Resistance from the previous owner always creates serious conflicts, which can damage staff confidence and weaken enthusiasm during the transition.

This generational divide will always occur in dentistry.

Conclusion

Every dentist can be replaced.

I can be replaced too, quite easily I'm sure, within days if necessary.

As professionals, we must recognize that while we are valuable during our careers, once we decide to step away, someone else will take our place.

Today's young buyers are eager, willing, and full of energy.

They will manage fine without us.

SUMMER OF 2026: I will be on sabbatical – but still writing...

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