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Dental Distribution Hall of Fame

In Business and in Health

The challenges and rewards of managing a spouse's dental practice

Editor's note: *The Dental Spouse Business Network (DSBN) was created by the American Association of Dental Office Managers to address the needs and challenges of dental practice management professionals whose spouses are the dentists in the practice. First Impressions spoke with one DSBN member – Michael Cruz – about the unique role of the spouse/office manager.*



When Michael Cruz took the role of office manager in the dental practice he began with his wife, Dee Dee Meevasin, DMD, he didn't know if the position would be permanent. "I had some business experience, [but] learned as we went," he says.

"This is our life, our credit, our personal relationship."

Four years later, Cruz – known as the "Zookeeper" at Dee for Dentist, in Las Vegas, Nev. – continues to manage the practice that now serves over 2,200 patients and prides itself not only on thorough treatment and education of its clients, but on its ability to create an enjoyable environment for its patients.

(Its amenities include a designer sun-glass station for patients to pick out their eye protection.)

Where work ends and life begins

Managing the office in which his wife is the lead dentist means Cruz has a high level of personal investment in the practice. “I can never really unplug from the business. It’s always in the back of [my] mind,” he says. Whereas a manager not related to the dentist would work within regular business hours with some separation between the office and life outside work, that’s not necessarily how it is for Cruz.

useful economic decision for Dee for Dentist. “You have to see it from the business perspective: how it will save time so we can see more patients, or how we can leverage the technology as internal marketing,” he says. “We’re here to grow this business, not just manage it.”

Rewards

Though it has its challenges, the business partner/spouse relationship does not come without its advantages. Cruz and his wife have a level of trust they might not have if they weren’t married. This trust means they can take bigger risks. “We can move faster because the

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“This is our life, our credit, our personal relationship,” he says. “I know that our life is dependent on the success of this business.” From that perspective, he notes, “I can’t fail.” As a husband and wife running the practice, they have to set boundaries: “where work ends and life begins.”

The business side

One of the challenges for the office manager who manages the practice of their spouse is understanding the actual business of dentistry, Cruz observes. His decisions have to come not from the perspective of just keeping an eye on things or maintaining the status quo, but how they will affect the business in the long term.

For example, CAD/CAM equipment, which had a high up front cost, was a

communication is good between us,” says Cruz. “We’ll see things and have a common idea how to integrate them into our business.”

He also believes patients experience the benefits of this relationship. When the doctor and office manager are married, he says, “hopefully the [doctor/patient] relationship is more personal.”

For Cruz, the most important piece of the puzzle in his job is his wife: the doctor. “If we were in the restaurant business, I could cook and help.” But unlike other family-owned businesses, here “I can’t help her with what she does without going to prison.” Without the doctor, the business fails.

So, “I’m very protective of her,” he says, because at the end of the day, “I can do everything I can do, but success is based on her.” **FI**

Calling on the couple

Michael Cruz, office manager at Dee for Dentist, in Las Vegas, Nev., says that great distributor sales reps “are the ones who really take the time to understand the vision of the practice.”

This should be the case when calling on any office manager, he says. But when the manager is married to the practicing dentist – as in Cruz’s case – he believes the rep should understand how purchasing decisions will affect the doctor/spouse relationship personally. For example, a large equipment purchase, such as CAD/CAM technology, is expensive and may affect personal credit or cash flow, but it might also bring in greater revenue for the practice, allowing the couple more flexibility in planning for retirement.

In addition, Cruz says, he takes special consideration of products that will help the dentist: his wife. “Things that make her vision better, help her health, or help her ergonomically: I take those [factors] into consideration.”

David Thill is a contributing editor to *First Impressions*.