



How I did it

Celebrating its first birthday this month, **Carol Somerville Roberts** describes how **Evolve Dentistry** came to life

I can clearly remember the day that I decided that the time was right to open a practice of my own. It was 12 November 2007, a beautiful sunny day and I was waiting for my son who was at a pre-school gym lesson. I was walking around the area of Portishead, which was about 12 years into a 15-year expansion programme, and realised that the newer area of Portishead would be perfect for the type of practice that I wanted to create.

I graduated in 1996 from Bristol, did my VT in Shepton Mallet and couple of house jobs in the area, and had been an associate in a private practice since 2000. My boss and his wife, who were the other two dentists in the practice, were over halfway through a two-year sabbatical in France. The practice manager and myself were running the practice and I was getting a good idea of what commitment would be involved to do the same myself.

I felt that Portishead was the right location even though it had five dental practices, two of which were still accepting NHS patients. However, there had been massive recent

growth, none of the practices were what I had in mind, and it was convenient to my home and children's school.

A fresh challenge

A couple of years previously I had toyed with the idea of opening a practice in Portishead but the time and location were not right. This time, my youngest son was about to start school, and I felt like I needed a fresh challenge.

I had been doing a lot of postgraduate courses and wanted to be in a position to implement some of the ideas that I had heard. So that day, I took a deep breath and rang my husband (who has nothing to do with dentistry) and said, 'I think the time is right, I want to open my own practice.' Luckily he agreed and the journey began.

I had a clear vision of what I wanted the practice to look like. I knew that to achieve this I would need a retail site that could be made into a dental practice. I didn't want to buy an existing practice, I wanted to create it all from scratch.



The size of the project was fairly big and I could easily have lost my self in a quagmire of details. I went to my first BACD conference and landed, after two days of lectures, rather tired, in the Breathe Business seminar with Simon Hocken and Chris Barrow. It was the launch of Breathe and when I was listening to what Simon and Chris were saying that I realised that these people were talking my language! That day confirmed for me that I was on the right path.

The next step was to consider a time frame and find a location. I decided that I wanted to open on 1 September 2008. My boss and his wife were due back in July 2008 and I planned about five weeks off between finishing being an associate and becoming a practice owner. Little did I know at that time that I would have five months off between jobs!

The initial location that I wanted was at a new office park. I knew of other practices that had opened very successfully in similar locations, and I felt that this would allow freedom in the design of the practice. Unfortunately, the local planners told me that they would not consider change of use until the

units had been marketed for 12 months, and as they were new that would mean a long wait. Luckily, I asked the right question next: 'Are there any other sites in Portishead that you would consider for a dental practice?' and the reply: 'Well, yes, there are some units next to Waitrose that already have D1 use, why don't you try there?' And so the location found me. It was a new retail unit, next to a large new Waitrose, with plenty of pedestrian traffic going between the older part of Portishead and the marina. Negotiations then started with the landlord.

In the meantime, I had decided that I needed some help to do this project so had started to work with Simon Hocken and Breathe Business. This turned out to be a very good investment and I am still a client of Breathe Business. Simon and I met just before Christmas and talked about how to move forwards to ensure that the dream became a reality. At my initial meeting with Simon, I heard about visions, budgets, Gant charts, suppliers, architects, branding, marketing and he reminded me to enjoy the project.



I knew that I would never open my first practice again, so I wanted to enjoy it all. That concept was challenged a few times, but overall it was enjoyable.

The to-do list

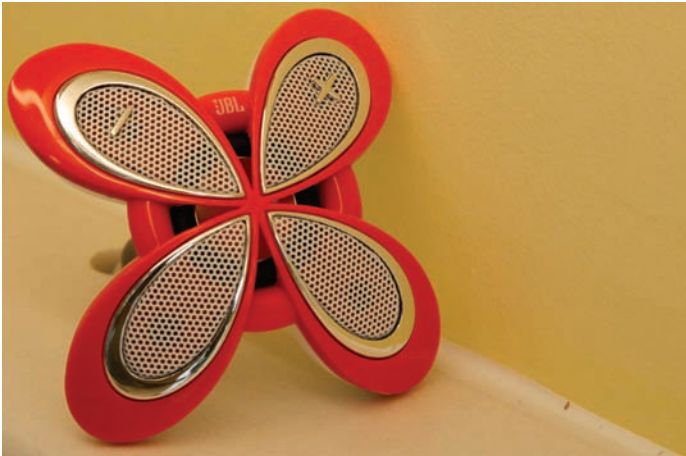
So the New Year arrived and I started on my to-do list, something that grew daily despite the effort that I put into it. I travelled around the country visiting practices to get ideas, talking to architects, builders, graphic designers, banks and solicitors. I was also working three-days as an associate, trying to be good a mother to my children and lovely to my husband. Life was busy and I loved it!

On Simon's advice, I applied to Lloyds TSB for finance, and got a great rate for the business loan. It was quite lucky that I did it when I did as the credit crunch started to take hold after that and things could have been very different.

I met an architect called Chris Bateman who specialises in dental practices, and we started to discuss how my dream practice would look. Chris's job was made harder as I changed units (I had five to choose from in the block) and so he had to start the drawings again. After a couple of attempts, Chris got it spot on and I had a beautiful practice on paper that would eventually have three treatment rooms. No matter what came up, Chris was always reassuringly calm and would get it sorted out.

Within the practice we have a large reception area, two treatment rooms that have been kitted out, a consultation room, imaging room, central sterilisation, a patient toilet and a disabled/staff toilet, an office, a staff room, and various store rooms. We also have a third treatment room, which is ready for equipment as soon as there is the need for it.

While at the BACD conference (where I met Breathe and Simon), I also met Adam Hampson. Adam runs his own company doing web design, graphic design, and branding. Adam's brief seemed simple, could you create for me a name and brand image for my new practice? However, this actually is a huge job. After deciding on my market, we went through the branding process, and I have to say that I am delighted with the results. Evolve Dentistry was created. Adam also designed all my stationary, all my marketing material and



website. We continue to work together and he is always coming up with great ideas.

So far so good, everything was falling into place. Simon was on hand to bounce ideas off and to provide guidance. At times, he made me challenge my own boundaries and he sometimes had to tell me that I was on the wrong track, but he wouldn't have been doing his job if he didn't.

The hardest part of the whole project, without a doubt, was the lease. Despite the fact that the units had been empty for sometime, the landlord was very difficult to deal with. The unit that I was taking on was a shell, it had no proper floor, no ceiling, no shop front and nothing in it. There were empty units either side of me. Despite this, the negotiations were not easy.

However, everything was going forward and I thought we were about to exchange contracts early May. The designs were complete, the builders were ready, the finance was in place, the practice had a name, and then disaster struck.

Iceberg ahead!

The landlord told me over a brief phone call that they had another party who wanted all five units and that they were no longer going to continue discussions with me.

I was absolutely gutted that my dream practice had been so close and now looked as if it wasn't going to go ahead at all. That was a very bad day, but after my husband had literally picked me up off the floor and Simon had metaphorically picked me up, I realised that I really wanted Evolve Dentistry to happen more than ever. It was very difficult to have to tell all the people involved in the project that it wasn't going ahead for the time being, but it had to be done.

After a stressful week, I was thinking about a plan B and then I got a phone call. It was the agent for the landlord, there was a possibility that I may be able to have the unit, was I still interested? Despite the temptation to tell them where to go, I realised that the location was still perfect and so I started negotiations again. I did manage to negotiate slightly better terms but still found them difficult to deal with the entire time.

The upshot of this was that it delayed the entire project and in the end we opened on 12 January 2009 – four months after the original planned date. Luckily, I had saved quite a bit of money whilst working as an associate, and still finished work in August.

I used every second of this extra time project managing the creation of Evolve. Originally, Chris Bateman was going to project manage the build, but we both agreed that because I was on site most days, it made sense if I liaised with the builders, with Chris at the end of a phone.

I used a company called Aspects to build the practice. They had worked with Chris previously and they showed me a couple of practices that they had built. Aspects mainly build dental practices and so had a very good idea of what was involved. There were a couple of hiccups, we used a lot of glass in the practice and one of the specially cut large pieces shattered as it was being fitted, and it was so cold the external rendering was delayed, but overall things ran smoothly.

The work started in October and by the New Year the practice was just about finished. Aspects brought the project in on time and just about on budget and I believe that this is because of their experience in the dental industry. I am delighted with the finished result.

Sourcing materials

As I was so closely involved in the build, I was able to source some of the materials myself, saving a considerable amount of money. I spent a freezing morning in an aircraft hangar in Kemble, but found some beautiful stone tiles for the toilets. I also sourced some very nice oak for the floors in the reception area. My favourite purchase was the tap in the patient toilet, so many people comment about it and love it.

Whilst Chris created a fantastic practice – I especially like the tiered ceiling in reception – I decided on the interior



finishes. The reception area is a very calm organic space, whilst the surgeries portray a more clinical feel. I wanted our patients to understand that whilst we want them to feel special and pampered during their time at Evolve, we were very serious about the quality of the dentistry that we deliver.

We are fully computerised in the practice, which required considerable time deciding on which practice management software to install. I spoke with many other dentists and two market leaders and decided that they did not offer good value for money, especially listening to others complain about on-going support services. I therefore decided to work with a company called TAB Dental. They provide a fully comprehensive service, installation was straightforward and the training only took a day. Once we were up and running, we haven't had many software problems and the system works really well.

Most dentists like gadgets, and I am no exception. It was great fun choosing all the equipment that I wanted and having the surgeries designed to my exact specifications. There were a few installation problems, but hopefully all the teething problems have now been resolved.

Now, with the practice ready to go and the finishing touches done, we were ready to open, all we needed were some patients!

Opening a private squat during one of the worst recessions in recent times had its worrying moments. I understood early on that my marketing would be key in attracting the type of patients that I wanted to treat. I had decided that I wanted to have older, more financially comfortable patients in the practice.

The marketing started six months before we opened with some adverts in a local glossy magazine. I also had huge branded temporary signs on the hoarding, a Royal Mail mail drop and stand in Waitrose handing out leaflets. Standing in Waitrose for an entire week, just before Christmas smiling manically and handing out balloons, was one of the hardest things I had to do. However, it worked. I employed a telephone answering service that took patient details if anyone rang up, which they did. I then called everyone on the list to see if they wanted to book an appointment.

I also worked with a PR agent for six months, so we had quite a few articles in the local press. I found that real articles worked far better than adverts.

The upshot of all of this was that on our first day we actually had some patients – despite all the software deciding not to work! However, we resolved that issue and were continually thankful that the patients kept coming.

Whoops!

Along the way I made some mistakes – the biggest was deciding to have gas and air plumbed into the surgery. I have done both inhalation sedation and intravenous sedation since I qualified and was used to having gas and air at my disposal. I didn't think it would be a big problem having it at Evolve, however it turned out to be a mistake. The equipment suppliers thought the builders would do the pipe work and the builders thought that the suppliers would install everything. The upshot was that no one did it and it took a lot of frantic phone calls to get it sorted out in time. It also ended up costing about three times the original budget for that item, and I haven't yet had to use it.

I also made a mistake with someone that I had originally wanted on the team and realised quite quickly that she was not suitable for the role after we opened. She had not actually started working for me by then, and had not been issued with a contract, but I still had to pay her a sum of money. It was a hard lesson but luckily I learnt it early on. The team currently consists of two part-time receptionists, a full-time nurse (whom I had worked with previously), a hygienist, an orthodontist and an implantologist. The latter two are part-time and I work clinically three days a week.

Cheap at half the price

With respect to how much it all cost, well, double what I had thought. I had originally hoped to spend £250,000 and ended up spending about £500,000.

I had realised early on that what I wanted would not be cheap, so I had all the finance in place prior to starting the build. The breakdown of the costs are roughly: £120,000 on the equipment, £200,000 on the refit costs, £70,000 working capital and the rest on architects' fees, coaching, materials, furniture, legal fees, the rent deposit and, of course, don't forget VAT.

Going forwards from here, I have just appointed a practice manager and I am looking for an associate to work the two days that I don't work. We continue to market the practice in a very proactive way, and we love finding ways to exceed our patients' expectations.

I currently drive around in a 'Evolve' branded Smart car, I am not sure how many patients this has brought us, but it certainly gets noticed.

If I were to give anyone advice on deciding about whether to do this or not, I would say absolutely yes. Find some great people to help you, remember the old adage, location, location, location, have a realistic budget, and enjoy it! [PD](#)

Companies involved in the project

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