

PRACTICE GRAND OPENINGS

John Masserano

At Masserano Practice Design and Development and Align Healthcare Real Estate, our small team estimates that our clients have generated revenues into the billions of dollars since we started setting up dental, medical and veterinary practices in 2005.

Having facilitated hundreds of grand openings throughout my career while assisting doctors through the steps required to successfully start their businesses, I want to share the "grand opening speech" I give to clients as the construction of their offices reaches completion. These events are one of the most important ways businesses can kick-start their marketing efforts, and I believe their significance should not be overlooked.

Why are and opening events so important?

Many of the practices with whom we work have a goal of receiving patient referrals as one of their primary sources of business, especially those who are specialists within their field of practice. Other practices' growth may be more driven by the enrollment of that practice with insurance plans. In either case, these practices can benefit from holding a grand opening event.

Such an event is an opportunity for the practitioner and its team, as well as its new and state-of-the-art facility, to be introduced to others. For those who can potentially refer patients, it is helpful to know the personality of the doctors and the attributes of the practice and office to whom they are referring. While these relationships will develop over time as a practice establishes its reputation with peers and the public, a proper introduction can help begin the process from when a practice first starts to do business.

A grand opening is also a great opportunity for a new practice to communicate about its services, technology and the characteristics that will make the referral sources comfortable or even proud to send their patients. After all, if patients are referred to a practice that has many stunning aspects, this will be a positive reflection on the source of the referral. Therefore, in many cases, a grand opening event is also an opportunity for the new practice to begin building these relationships wherein they can protect these sources of referrals, making sure credit is given to those who are sending the business. In welcoming the new practice to leaders within their community, these events ensure that word of mouth begins supporting the growth of a new practice.



Chambers of Commerce

Over time, I have found that most communities have at least one chamber of commerce that loves to welcome new businesses. In some cases, there are also other organizations and special chambers of commerce serving specific demographics within a city, such as a Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, for example.

Before the grand opening event, new practices can place a phone call to the local chamber of commerce to notify them of the practice opening soon; they will likely be very happy to assist with holding a ribbon cutting ceremony, which often includes the town mayor and other officials. These folks see these events as opportunities for publicity and to tout the growth of new businesses and services within their community, and so they are generally eager to participate in and help with these events for free.

In most cases, the chamber of commerce will communicate with the mayor's office in scheduling these events as well as even providing a red ribbon and giant scissors! Even better, I've seen them bring photographers and videographers so that they could immediately publicize the event on their own social media outlets.

Event Prerequisites

Before initiating the process and setting a date for a grand opening event, it is important to complete some prerequisites to get the maximum benefit out of the investment. I say investment, because a respectable amount of time and money should be spent in planning the social gathering. The mayor's ribbon cutting ceremony should be only the first activity; it is not the most important part of the event, but rather it should be thought of as an activity that is an "excuse" for a party.

This party is intended to facilitate an opportunity for many important conversations about the new practice in hopes of starting long-term relationships. It should therefore go without saying that the new practice must have its persona in order, such as a consistently branded website and active and up-to-date social media outlets. Once a new practice is announced, people may immediately start to monitor these channels, so they should be presented to each new contact.

Moreover, in terms of time investment, it is important to determine a grand opening guest list that includes all parties who may be likely sources of referrals to the practice. This does NOT include inviting the public to the party; instead, the investment should be leveraged by inviting those who are able to refer multiple patients or who are influencers in the community. Using the example of a new pediatric dental practice, the grand opening guest list would include all nearby pediatricians and, perhaps more importantly, their staff, who often have much of the communication with patients.

As a list of all these potential relationships that could be important sources of business is formed, visits should be made to meet these people in advance of the event, such as while the practice's office construction is nearing completion. Many clients or their new staff will deliver goodies to these other practices in their communities, making them aware that they are opening soon.

On that note, timing is important when it comes to planning the grand opening event. One of the most stressful times I see for clients who are opening new practices are the few weeks before and after the practice's first patient appointment. There are numerous variables that must come together in relation to the office space, equipment, systems, training, staff and general business operations. There are administrative, safety and compliance procedures, and a long list of things to have in place, some which only take shape after the first patients have been seen.

For this reason, I always recommend that clients don't plan a grand opening event until at least 30–60 days after their practice opens for patient appointments. This gives the practices a chance to work out kinks, to get their team and systems organized and to generally let things calm down a little after they and their new staff have endured what is usually a lengthy and stressful opening process in the best of cases.



The Office

The office itself is the location where the ribbon will be cut and the grand opening event will be held. Ideally, the practice will have artwork in place and the office will be fully furnished so that it appears to be a fully functioning and "settled" business. This does not mean that all exam rooms or operatories must have equipment or even cabinets, but all parts of the office that will be initially accessible to staff and patients should look ready for use.

Moreover, while there are usually some contractor punch list items and organization that must be undertaken, it is ideal if a new practice appears to have its business in order where it is visible to the referral sources and public. However, many of these details come together soon after an office starts to see patients and not before.

Ready to Go

So let's say all the topics above are either well under way or in control; what does the grand opening event actually look like?

I would describe it as a happy hour event that is held on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday at a time when practices are finishing with patients and are generally on their way home for dinner. I like to say that Thursday is my preferred day for a grand opening event, since staff of other practices who are attending the event are happy that the weekend is approaching, and they may be in a good mood to socialize. Fridays and weekends are not as favorable since an event may infringe upon people's personal lives, thereby limiting attendance at the event. And, naturally, Mondays are Mondays.

The "happy hour" styled event will usually have to start a little early to accommodate the office of the mayor or officials that will host or participate in the ribbon cutting, as this part usually kicks off the party.

Because of the busy schedule of some of these officials, especially when a mayor is involved, the date and time of the event will need to be planned several weeks in advance if a practice wants to have a chance of aligning the ribbon cutting ceremony with the above-mentioned ideal party times. There are occasions when it isn't possible to have these occur in one event; however, advanced planning really helps.



Relationships

Remembering that the goal of the event is to build relationships with the potential referral sources and the public influencers, it's essential for new practice leaders to have a meaningful conversation with every single person in attendance. Since this takes time, several important steps should be taken.

The first of these is where the financial investment comes into play: I recommend that grand opening events are catered with finger foods and, usually, adult beverages. Rather than practice leaders or their teams personally serving the attendees, third parties should be hired to ensure that all guests are taken care of and that trash is disposed of discreetly, for example. The new practice staff should be free to engage with all attendees throughout the party.

Also very important, be sure to have take-away containers available for people to take food home with them if it appears there are going to be a lot of leftovers. Several times I've seen parties where food was over ordered, the host wanted to give it away instead of throwing it out, but there were no containers.

Second, since the team for many new practices is initially very small, the list of invitees can include anyone that was of key importance in the development of the new practice or its facility. Inviting family or anyone else knowledgeable about the practice and its team can also be useful, as they can help socialize and carry conversations while the business owner makes the rounds to talk with the other guests. I've also noticed that many clients invite their colleagues and residents from their schools. The attendees at the event will be a reflection on the practice, so anyone that can add value to conversations or to others at the party should be included – not to mention folks who will take photo and video content for the practice's social media.





Final Thoughts

While I've covered many of the important aspects of grand opening parties, there are any number of other creative ideas that can make the events memorable. Some practices offer fun or valuable door prizes or raffles, some send out beautiful invitations, and some include thoughtful goody bags for guests. Moreover, while administering activities at these events, photos and videos should be taken to create social media content.

Ideally, enough steps will be taken to ensure a memorable and well documented event. I even suggest, if the event is successful, that it is repeated from time to time as the practice moves forward. For example, the "Grand Opening" event can become a "Grand Opening Anniversary" event.

Finally, a debriefing shortly after the event is very important for new practices. This isn't only an opportunity to recap and make a note of the things that were learned as new relationships were formed; the debrief should also involve making a prioritized list of those with whom timely follow-ups should be made. Some thank you notes will undoubtedly be in order, and those are yet another opportunity to reach out and continue furthering the new relationships made at the event.

During the consulting that our team provides to its clients, we offer numerous pieces of sage advice that inform on every aspect of setting a strong foundation for practice growth. With this advice, our clients can start preparing for the future of their practices and for their administration of exceptional patient care. We're hopeful that sharing these thoughts on grand opening events will help those other brave entrepreneurs that open new businesses and establish new practices.

~ John Masserano

John Masserano is the founder of Masserano Practice Design & Development (Masserano PDD) and also of Align Healthcare Real Estate and Align Healthcare Practices (Align) in partnership with Joseph Lombardi. At Masserano PDD, Masserano leads a highly skilled and experienced team that assists doctors with the processes involved in developing new office locations and starting practices. The team focuses on all aspects of real estate, design, construction and project management along with preparing practitioners for running their businesses.

At Align, Masserano and Lombardi provide comprehensive real estate brokerage services to doctors, assisting them with market research, site selection and lease and purchase negotiation as well as seller/landlord representation of healthcare-oriented real estate. They also engage in the brokerage of dental practices. These companies uniquely leverage one another's substantial skills, talents and vast networks to achieve industry-leading results for their clients.

Masserano is a commercial real estate, design and construction expert who graduated from the University of Alabama with a B.S. in finance and a concentration in real estate. He has practiced various commercial real estate disciplines for 30 years, most of which have centered around the dental and healthcare community. Prior to founding Align in 2021 and MPDD in 2005, Masserano delivered business services on a national and international basis through Orthodontic Centers of America, Inc., formerly the world's largest publicly traded provider of business services to orthodontists and pediatric dentists. There, he served as vice-president of real estate and construction, developing numerous dental facilities while simultaneously overseeing a full range of real estate, construction and design services for nearly 1,000 practices. Masserano has completed real estate transactions and developed facilities within almost every U.S. city or submarket with a population of 100,000 or more. Today, Masserano PDD is one of the leading and most reputable providers of office development and practice startup services in the United States, while Align is the leading provider of healthcare real estate services to private practices in the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania areas.