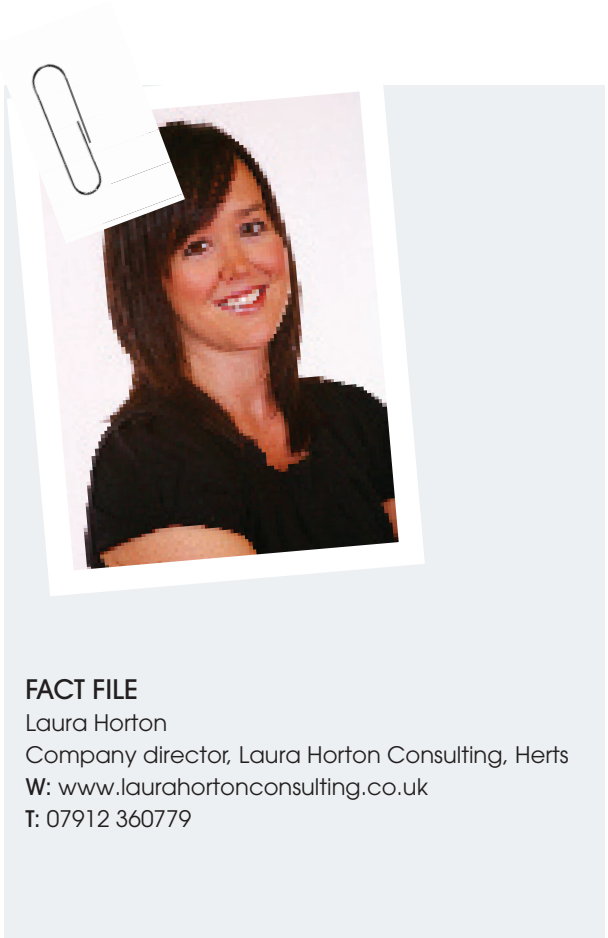


# In business

Do you have a treatment co-ordinator in your practice? If not, you should have or you are losing money, argues **Laura Horton**. Here she tells Moira Crawford how she helps dental practices



## FACT FILE

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‘Practices definitely lose out if they don’t have a treatment co-ordinator. Many spend a great deal on marketing, on their website and so on, but it’s wasted if you don’t have someone trained to follow it through. You need someone to handle the enquiry to a high level and to convert it into treatment.’ Laura Horton is so convinced of this that she has launched a consultancy company that specialises in helping practices to implement the role of the treatment co-ordinator – and insists that investment in such a person will be repaid in no time.

And she should know, having worked as a treatment co-ordinator herself, and with a wealth of experience both in

clinical and non-clinical practice roles. Laura began her career at 17 as a dental nurse in an NHS practice near her Hertfordshire home, and then worked in a variety of practices, large and small, NHS and private, including as a dental nurse temp, which really opened her eyes to the difference between practices, and made her realise that what really mattered to her was giving really good care and customer service.

Eventually she was offered a job at the Perfect Smile Studios and Academy in Essex and Hertfordshire, as a then rare breed: the treatment co-ordinator. ‘I loved it,’ she recalled. ‘For the first time in my professional life I was getting real job satisfaction.’ The partners were keen to develop and train her, and she was able to make a real impression with her contribution. ‘There were weeks when I knew I’d signed up more money for the practice than my annual salary,’ she said.

She then began to run the practice’s training academy and became the practice manager over both the practices, and had to give up the treatment co-ordinator role, because it was just too much. Sorry as she was to stop, it opened another door for her. ‘I had to train up two treatment co-ordinators to take over from me, and I realised how much I enjoyed teaching and training,’ she said.

The seed was now sown for Laura to think about training full-time, and she began to plan her own company. Laura gave in her notice in June 2008 and opened Laura Horton Consulting in July. ‘It’s the best thing I’ve ever done,’ she said. ‘I always wanted to run my own business and finding this niche was the opportunity I needed to use my experience and set up on my own. I believe that the treatment co-ordinator holds the future of dentistry, and I know all about it because I’ve done it myself.’

## Why have a treatment co-ordinator?

As Laura sees it, the role of treatment co-ordinator would be taken on by one or two team members, each holding their own diary and with a room set aside for their consultations. A treatment co-ordinator would see all new patients for an initial free consultation, to discuss the patient’s problems and aspirations in a relaxed but private environment, and show them the possibilities and options. That person doesn’t need to be clinically trained, and an experienced

receptionist could do the job as well as a nurse, but the treatment co-ordinator would need to have 'dental knowledge', explained Laura. 'I train them to hold a consultation in a certain style and provide them with a form and questions which take them through a clear process'.

The treatment co-ordinator's job there is to 'sell' the dentist, the practice and the benefits they have for the patient. Patients are thus filtered before they see the dentist; the treatment co-ordinator can deal with forms, take photos, radiographs if they are suitably trained, and the dentist does not need to see them until they are committed to treatment – so that he/she is free to treat patients and earn while the non-clinical consultation is being taken care of. The treatment co-ordinator is also able to discuss finance, consents and estimates, as well as following up the patient – again taking these issues away from the dentist who can then use the time more profitably.

The presence of the treatment co-ordinator makes the reception staff's job easier when people ring with an enquiry. Instead of just giving a price or small item of information and letting the caller go, the receptionist can immediately offer a no-obligation, free appointment with the treatment co-ordinator. 'It gets rid of "shoppers"', explained Laura, and goes a step towards converting the enquiry into treatment. 'The presence of a treatment co-ordinator is a win-win situation for the patient, the dentist, the reception staff, the team and the treatment co-ordinator themselves.' A well trained treatment co-ordinator can promote the dentist's talents or specialist training, and the advantages of the practice far better than can the dentist personally, 'because we find it difficult to sell ourselves – we're British!' said Laura. What having a treatment co-ordinator does for the practice is to provide great customer service. 'The role really pushes customer service to an outstandingly high level,' she said. 'Every patient gets a great experience and they are all wowed. It creates referrals which cost you nothing.'

### Laura Horton's top tips

- Have mentors. I have two, one in the dental world and one not, but both run businesses and know what they are talking about. I talk ideas through with them
- Listen to advice, consider it, but you don't have to follow it. Always trust your gut instincts
- Work hard
- Don't be too trusting. Some things are best kept to yourself, especially at the planning stage
- Be a leader – and if you don't feel you have leadership skills, you can learn them from courses or books
- Set goals and deadlines – and monitor your progress
- Delegate but delegate well. It takes you to really high levels with your business
- Relationships are everything in practice and in business – work at them
- Have integrity.

### Time better spent

She is convinced that practices should offer free initial consultations – but not with the dentist. One practice she worked with discovered that £400 of dentist time each day was being taken up with free consultations – no scheduling and little control of the diary and the cost meant that hours were being spent by the dentists on patients who in many cases did not take up the treatment. Within a month of employing a treatment co-ordinator, and with a vastly improved conversion rate, the dentists were able to concentrate on practising dentistry and the practice stopped

haemorrhaging money. 'I would expect treatment co-ordinators to attain an average of 70% conversion rate', said Laura, 'which is much more than a dentist would get.'

Even a small or single-handed practice can benefit from the services of a treatment co-ordinator, Laura argues. 'When I started work at the Perfect Smile Studios I was treatment co-ordinator for just one dentist and it still paid to have me there. In fact, in a small practice the dentist needs more than ever to be carrying out invoiced treatment rather than non-clinical work which can be done – probably better – by a treatment co-ordinator.'

## The consultancy business

Taking the leap from a secure and well-paid job into running her own consultancy was a huge one. The only training she had given was within the practice and at the academy, but she had made several contacts.

'I had no savings, although I had been planning how I intended to run the consultancy for a long time,' she said. 'It was scary but it's the best thing I've ever done and I love the challenge.' She got her name around through networking, and continues to be very active on Facebook and Twitter. She has a website, writes regular blogs and articles in journals like this. 'Journal articles are great for my profile,' she said. 'People sometimes get in touch many months after they've been published because they keep them and look back.' The articles also appear on her website. She is now on the lecturing circuit, having taken part in Tony Gedge's 'Marketing Pirates of Private Dentistry' and Private Dentistry Live! Increasingly clients are recommending her to friends.

Currently Laura works on her own, preparing and delivering all the training herself, but has promised herself some administrative assistance as part of her plan for 2010. Not so different from a dental practice, she needs to delegate some of the running of the business so that she can concentrate on what she is good at and what pays the bills. 'I'm looking for an assistant but I need to find the right person,' she said. 'Now I'm looking at employing a virtual PA – a self-employed person working from home who I'm in touch with by email – and that way I don't have to get bogged down with personnel issues.'

The consultancy keeps Laura pretty well occupied, spending two days a week out in practices training, as well as quite a lot of travelling time all over the UK and preparation and follow-up back at the office.

The treatment co-ordinator implementation programme, delivered in the practice, is a two-day course, but she also now offers a number of other programmes and courses, such as on digital photography, telephone communication skills and working with dentists on how they perform dental examinations and present treatment plans. 'It's all about communication, providing high level customer service, and helping patients perceive the high value of what they are getting,' said Laura. She also offers a 12-month coaching programme, visiting a practice on a monthly basis to offer a bespoke programme. At the start

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she promoted all these options but now focuses her marketing on the treatment co-ordinator programme – 'because once I've given that, the other things follow from it.'

## Self development

Laura has always been committed to self development and learning. In addition to courses she was sent on by her employers, she has taught herself most of the skills she has through reading, listening to CDs and studying at home and at seminars. She's currently working towards an MBA.

With no previous business experience, she has learned a few lessons on the hoof. 'Make sure you have some capital,' she warned. 'And write everything down; all your ideas should be on paper, not flying around in your head or you won't remember everything. I keep notebooks and refer back to them regularly.' Finally, 'plan, plan, plan.'

Despite the recession, Laura's skills are in high demand. 'The practices I've been working with are forward thinking,' she said. 'My clients know that to stay ahead you need to aim higher, be different and be better at what you do – and believe and invest in your team'. [PD](#)

Laura Horton will be speaking at the World Aesthetic Congress on 11-12 June in London. For further information, please call Independent Seminars on 0800 371652 or visit [www.independentseminars.com](http://www.independentseminars.com).

