



After 25 years in practice, **Genna Levitch** tells Moira Crawford why he chose to leave dental practice behind and combine his dental knowledge with his wife's design talent to create a multidisciplinary design studio

With his designer wife, Anne, Australian dentist Genna Levitch runs LDA, Levitch Design Associates, a multidisciplinary design studio offering building design, graphic design, interior design and marketing. LDA specialises in healthcare, with a particular focus and experience in dentistry. After 25 years in practice, Genna joined his wife at LDA 10 years ago, combining Anne's design talent with his dental experience and business acumen, giving them a unique perspective on the needs of dental professionals. They have clients all over Australia, New Zealand and, more recently, the UK.

You and your wife have complementary skills, but how did you come to think of combining them?

I qualified as a dentist in 1976 from Sydney University, where I had met my wife, Anne, who was studying design. I then worked in private practice in Sydney and Anne completed her design studies while working part time as my

dental nurse. She quickly noticed that the surgery was an ergonomically difficult and potentially stressful environment to work in, with the dentist constantly bending, reaching and twisting. This inspired her to complete her final year thesis on 'Ergonomics in the Dental Surgery'. We talked a great deal about the way a dentist works and how to create a surgery environment that works and is convenient. When design is good, you don't notice it – you are less stressed by your environment and are more productive. We didn't realise that thesis would be the start of a lifetime's career, and we hoped for an opportunity to work together some day, but had no idea how that might come about.

You've done a number of different things before launching LDA. What has been your career path?

In the late 1970s we went to the Solomon Islands and Trinidad, and then in 1980 to the UK where I worked within the NHS in Luton and Highgate. I then returned to Australia

and opened my own private practice, built a medical/dental centre in Morisset, north of Sydney and set up a branch practice in Cessnock, which is in the Hunter Valley. In 1986 I sold both and moved to Sydney, where I worked as a journalist and then publisher of small business, health and investment magazines. In 1988 I sold the publishing business, bought a hot bread shop chain and started RE developments on the Central Coast, a beachside region close to Sydney. At the start of the 1990s, with the economic slowdown, I went back into dentistry and bought a share in a large practice.

Were you bored with dentistry?

I have always been more interested in managing a business than working in it. I felt I'd hit a ceiling with running a practice and I wanted to operate in a more representative commercial environment. If, as a dentist, you are business minded it's frustrating not to be able to market your services and yourself in the way you might like. It is entirely proper that health professionals should not be competing directly for patients' custom, but I wanted to experience the rough and tumble of general business.

At what stage did your wife's design skill start to become a viable business?

Anne has a great sense of balance, colour and spatial ability. This became apparent as retail shops she designed reported massive increases in profitability, and she ran a graphics and interior design business specialising in retail design before moving into healthcare. From around 1986 she began designing surgeries for dentist friends. This business grew, largely through recommendation, and gradually developed into her having a standing in the dental community. She set up the business initially at home, while our three daughters were at school.

How did you finance the company?

As the business was run from home, the overheads were low in the initial years. Once we moved out, it has been funded through cash flow. We had no borrowings.

What made the business really take off?

In the late 1990s, the law in Australia changed, allowing dentists to advertise, and many entrepreneurial dentists were keen to have representative practices so they started to invest and refurbish their practices. LDA was in high demand. I'd been looking after the finances and marketing for two days a week, with three days in the practice, but in 2001 I had to take a decision as to which way I was going to go. I decided to sell the practice and go into LDA full time, and the business grew rapidly from four to nine employees.

Was it hard to make that break?

It was a hard decision because dentistry is a high earning profession and Anne was not sure if she wanted the responsibility of becoming the main earner. We also didn't know how we'd get on working together. I promised I'd go back on the tools if things got hard, and for a while in 2005 I

did work for two days a week as a locum for a friend.

How did that feel?

It was easy to go back into dentistry, and it's easier to work in someone else's practice than one's own, because you don't have overall responsibility and everything is provided. I am just very lucky that my wife has a skill that has developed just at the time when dentistry and healthcare in general have reached a point where they need to present themselves in a more professional light.

What does LDA offer?

On our business card we say we can design anything, including a kennel for your pet giraffe! We design anything that affects your presentation: building design, interior design, graphic design and marketing, LDA delivers total practice image development, ensuring all aspects of a practice's visual communication are consistent with the nature of the healthcare facility, the range of services offered and the targeted patient demographics. We feel this approach offers our clients a continuity of service, while maintaining a cohesive design philosophy through all levels of the project. We provide a fully integrated design service, producing everything from a commercial building to design of business cards.

What is that in practical terms?

The full scope of interior services, from design development (space planning and specification of furniture and finishes) through to contract documentation, calling of tenders, administration of construction contracts and site supervision. We believe that a well-designed interior in synergy with outstanding graphic presentation enhances the overall image of a practice and heightens patient response to treatment plan acceptance. Our graphic design and marketing services include logo design, stationery design, print marketing, website development, signage design and advertising/marketing programmes. Additionally, a range of pre-design services such as site location, lease negotiation and feasibility studies are provided, enabling LDA to manage all stages of a client's project from sourcing the ideal site and arranging finance before the design and construction process has even been considered. We are able to take a project through from concept to completion, or assist as required with only certain stages.

What is your role in the business?

I leave the design side to my wife and I manage the business, including business development, finance, IT, HR and marketing.

How is the business doing now?

There was a slow down in the first quarter of this year, but healthcare is generally stable and it is now nearly back to normal. Our turnover is 1.8m (Australian dollars) in design fees, 65% of which is in dental and medical fit-outs, 20% new healthcare buildings, and 15% graphics and marketing. We now have a team of 18 staff.

What are the key differences between running a dental practice and a business like LDA?

As a dentist you don't need to negotiate with people – you discuss the treatment you wish to offer and state your fee; as a businessperson you rely on suppliers, contractors and need to learn to be much more flexible in order for the business to run smoothly. You need diplomacy in dealing with other people and to move from a professional position to a more equal business relationship. You get much more honest feedback in business than as a professional – it's instructive, humbling and a lot more realistic.

Your own background as a dentist must give LDA a unique advantage over other design firms – how does your experience inform the way you work?

It enables us to speak a language that dentists understand, as well as our ability to design with first-hand user experience. I have set up and refurbished practices that I've used myself, and Anne has also worked as a dental nurse so she has direct experience too.

Have you done any training in business skills?

In areas where I've got an interest I've always felt it best to get some formal training, and have done various modules. I have done two units of an MBA in change management, as that's the core of the business we are in – helping our clients move from where they are to where they want to be.

So are you providing something deeper than just a new look for a practice?

We are taking a journey with our clients. They want to change their practice and the way it presents. They have a vision of where they could be. It is our job not only to articulate that vision, but to assist in the rest of the journey as well. It is an ideal time to review and consider an update to the systems and processes that each practice uses. Without expert assistance it can be a daunting experience, often confronting and stressful. We aim to take the stress out of the process and leave the dentist to get on with the business of dentistry. With our integrated approach to practice image development, we are giving them a powerful marketing tool to use within the community and they will need time to learn how to drive it.

What ambience are patients looking for in a dental practice?

The surrounding environment is a very powerful marketing tool for any practice. People love going into a practice that doesn't remind them of a dental surgery. The dentist needs to understand that and prepare themselves and their staff to get the maximum benefit from the whole experience.

How has corporatisation affected your business?

Corporatisation has increased demand. Although still only a small proportion of Australia's 10,000 dentists are in corporates, there are a number of entrepreneurial dentists who have bought and opened practices, as well as the National Australian Bank and the Commonwealth Bank who

have bought some practices. I was lucky to be friendly with one such entrepreneurial dentist and we designed 10 dental practices for his company as they expanded. Most had six to eight dental chairs and were mostly located in regional shopping centres. These dental centres were well managed and quickly accepted by the general public. The company became profitable very quickly.

What have been your best business decisions?

Firstly to work with my wife, secondly to move into larger premises.

Worst business mistake?

All clouds have a silver lining. The worst decisions have led to the best opportunities.

What advice would you give to another dentist thinking of branching out into a dental-related business venture?

I have found that providing a service to the profession is very satisfying. My clinical experience is constantly being tapped, I enjoy working with colleagues and they value our expertise. I love seeing the success our client's experience.

Most of all I am proud that we have been able to develop a niche in the market that previously did not exist: specialised design services. It is a great feeling to have been able to contribute to the development of the profession and increasing its acceptance with the general public.

Until now there have not been many opportunities for dentists with other skills in admin or business to step outside the practice and take up an entrepreneurial role, but these are starting to appear, largely thanks to changes in legislation. Starting a dental-based business is very opportunity related, in the sense that there needs to be an opportunity to provide a new service or product, before it is worthwhile to leave the clinical aspect of the profession.

What next for your business?

Online expansion! LDA has sourced and designed a range of furniture, decorative items and products that will complement any practice. We are expanding our website (www.levitch.com.au) to facilitate this. 

Fact File

- Genna Levitch BDS: director Levitch Design Associates, with Anne Levitch BA Ind. Des. FDIA, design director
- Works: Sydney, Australia
- Qualified, Bachelor Of Dental Surgery, Sydney University, 1976