

Oticon makeover transforms outmoded space into a patient-centered practice

By Judith Nemes

In his wildest dreams, David Illich, AuD, never imagined he'd be the grand prizewinner in the Oticon Hearing Care Practice Makeover Contest. But in a fortuitous series of events last year, Illich was at the right place at the right time with just the kind of practice setting that executives at Oticon, Inc., were looking to give a major facelift valued at up to \$100,000.

Illich had recently purchased the office suite of a long out-dated practice in Oceanside, CA, that he had been leasing for close to two decades. The office had a great location, being situated in a physician-owned medical condominium complex adjacent to Tri-City Hospital in Oceanside, north of San Diego. However, it was in desperate need of renovation.

Illich was gearing up for an overhaul to modernize the office, making it more like his far more contemporary offices in the nearby Southern California towns of Escondido and Poway. He had already begun shopping for new carpeting, he recalls, when he opened the April issue of *The Hearing Journal* and

read about a practice makeover contest Oticon was sponsoring. He submitted a detailed, passionate essay and a portfolio of pictures of his Oceanside practice to the contest's panel of judges.

Soon afterwards, the judges selected his office as the ideal candidate for a makeover out of 190 submissions entered by audiologists and hearing instrument specialists from across the U.S., says Roger McGuire, Oticon's business project manager. "For Oticon, the contest was a way to use 'real life' examples to show how a well-designed, attractive environment can be a place where new

and existing patients will want to seek care," notes McGuire. "We know that the physical environment can have an enormous impact upon a practice's ability to attract new patients and convert them into satisfied hearing instrument users."

"There were a lot of great essays," says McGuire, "but the judges felt Dr. Illich's office was the perfect time capsule. They knew he could do a better job serving his patients with a more efficient and convenient office."

STUCK IN A TIME WARP

Before the makeover, Illich had all the instrumentation and equipment he needed to provide first-rate professional care to patients. But he always suspected that patients were taken aback by the surroundings when they walked in for their first visit. "They must have felt they were 20 years back in time," he says, not jokingly.



These before and after photos of the reception area of Dr. David Illich's office illustrate the dramatic transformation created by Oticon's practice makeover. Now, when patients and their family members arrive, they find themselves entering a comfortable, modern hearing healthcare office rather than an outmoded medical facility.

This sets the stage for a vastly improved patient experience.



David Illich, AuD, shows his renovated office to a patient.

Illich, who earned his AuD from the Arizona School of Health Sciences, describes his pre-makeover office as looking as if it was stuck in a 1970s time warp. It had avocado green carpeting, and several ugly styles of chairs ranging from candy red and orange to green. The countertops in the reception area were lime and forest green and the only way into the lab was to pass through saloon-style swinging oak doors. Contributing to the dated feel was the lighting, which cast a dull fluorescent glow over the entire space, he adds.

In addition, the fitting rooms and sound booth all had a typical clinical feel that likely aroused anxiety among patients who found the environment not the least bit relaxing, notes Illich. "When you entered the sound booth, patients felt like they were in a gray, metal box," he says.

Perhaps the worst part of the layout, says Illich, was the long, dark hallway patients had to walk down to get to the sound booth and fitting rooms. "When I opened the door to invite patients down the hall, I saw a look of regret on their faces that they had to walk down that awful hallway," he says. "They seemed to approach it with fear and trepidation."

MAKEOVER MIRRORS PROFESSION'S TRANSFORMATION

As Oticon's McGuire explains, this office makeover was a perfect example of the type of transformation the company sees occurring throughout the hearing care profession. In recent years, there has been a growing shift away from offices focused on products and technology and toward a more patient-centered approach, he says.

Over the last 5 years in particular, McGuire observes, there has been an exponential leap in the type of patient benefits that advances in hearing technology can achieve, such as receiver-in-the-ear instruments and tools to connect people



The original hallway was dark and gloomy, contributing to patient anxiety. During the makeover, the space was opened up by widening the doorway and converting the closet at the end of the hallway into a fitting and counseling station.

to devices such as MP3 players and cell phones. As a result, he says, hearing health-care professionals can now focus on enhancing patients' lifestyles instead of taking the older, more narrow approach of focusing on hearing loss alone.

"These days, we also assess patient lifestyles using a more holistic approach to hearing care," McGuire says. "While the patients have changed in what they're looking for and the technology has changed, the physical environment of most offices is still in a time warp. We are now moving to change that."

For example, he points out, in the clinical setting, professionals used to work knee-to-knee with patients because they were wired into the computer for assessments and fittings, and the physical layout reflected the need for such close proximity. Now, clinicians can sit at a comfortable distance from patients because they can fit them wirelessly. Instead of being confined in a specialized, clinical environment, patients can be fitted in a living room-style environment with comfortable seating.

In addition, because counseling is such an important component of delivering successful hearing healthcare, it makes

sense to create an environment that doesn't feel clinical. McGuire adds, "If a patient feels more at ease, they will have a better experience psychologically."

Oticon's main objective in the makeover of Illich's office was to make it patient-centered. Accordingly, the great majority of changes were made with the patient's experience in mind. In all, Oticon



The original sound booth was cramped and uncomfortable. Adding a PC-based audiometer by Interacoustics and a wall-mounted tympanometer made testing more efficient and the booth more spacious. Consistent décor inside the booth also added to its appeal.



Before the makeover, the sound booth looked like a gray, metal box. The addition of an external wall around the booth makes it far more attractive and less clinical looking.



spent \$85,000 on the makeover, which included renovating the 1200-square-foot office space and providing all new office equipment and furnishings. In addition,



more than \$30,000 worth of state-of-the-art testing equipment from Interaoustics was installed.

WHAT THE RENOVATION ACHIEVED

The renovation of Illich's office began last November when his staff started moving stacks of items out in preparation for the massive overhaul. By the end of February 2008, workers were tearing down walls and peeling away old wood, Illich

recalls. Yet, there was only a 3-week period in early spring when patients were not being seen in the Oceanside office. During that time, patients were directed to one of Illich's two nearby locations, so services were never interrupted because of the work.

Since the makeover was geared to enhance patients' experience during their visit, the description of the renovation follows the path of a patient entering the practice and moving through the office to receive care.

When patients walked into Illich's pre-makeover office, they faced a cold, sterile atmosphere in a waiting room cluttered with hard chairs in a mish-mash of unmatched colors and styles, says McGuire. There was a lot of merchandising material stacked up on tables and countertops and a barrier separated the patients in the waiting room from the receptionist and other staff members. A pocket window opening was the only connection between patients with the receptionist.

"It wasn't very warm or inviting," says McGuire. "So the Oticon design team changed the furniture, the color, and the

light and now the waiting area welcomes patients in and sends them a clear message that they've chosen good credentialed care in a very professional office."

Since the renovation, the front entrance looks completely different. The walls in the entryway have been painted a gold color and the old chairs in the waiting room have been replaced with more comfortable, upscale seating. Oticon tore down the barrier wall separating patients and staff, which has helped create an inviting atmosphere. The more open floor plan enables the staff to handle patient flow more easily because they can see what's going on, McGuire says.

The office staffing area was upgraded too. Much of the old office equipment was replaced with wireless technology and equipment that performs multiple functions to maximize the usage of space.

No more gloomy hallway or scary sound booth

When they left the waiting room, patients used to have to walk down a dark, gloomy hallway to the consultation rooms or the sound booth. Now, though, the hallway has been redesigned to be more open, including through the use of reeded glass on the doors leading off the hallway to the consultation suites. The makeover also involved opening up the suites by adding several windows into the hallway. What had been an old closet at the end of the hallway has been transformed into a lab and patient consulting area containing new seating, cabinetry, and a large mirror.

McGuire says, "Patients we interviewed before the makeover said the hallways gave them the creeps, so we tried to create a space that would encourage people to do something about their hearing."

Illich's sound booth underwent an especially dramatic renovation. Basically a big, metal box, something like a walk-in freezer, the typical sound booth in many offices is a source of great anxiety among hearing care patients, says McGuire. But the new booth in the Oceanside office looks nothing like its predecessor. Oticon changed the color scheme and lighting and now it looks like a small, cozy room, he says. The booth is still sound-proofed, of course, but a new skin was wrapped around the exterior so the metal walls are no longer visible. The equipment also was upgraded, which reduced the number of

tools and wires sticking out.

McGuire explains, "Our intention was to make it a more comfortable experience for the patient so it seems like they are just sitting in another room."

Enhancing the consultation suites

The consultation suites were overhauled as well. For starters, three smaller consultation rooms were dismantled and converted into two larger rooms, with one primary suite that's about double the size

it used to be. Because there is typically only one hearing care professional in the office at a time, Illich didn't need more than two suites. In the old set-up, there was too little space in any of the suites for the practitioner to conduct tests or demonstrations comfortably. It grew even more crowded when a spouse or family member joined the patient and audiologist during the appointment. However, thanks to the renovation, the practitioner now has three consulting areas in the larger suite so that

he can move the patient around with ease.

In one part of the larger suite, Illich can program hearing aids and use the computer to educate patients about hearing loss and different hearing aid possibilities. Another area has a more informal setting that looks like a living room with large leather chairs around a coffee table where the patient and spouse can sit and discuss their options.

The third space in the suite has a taller table set up like a moderately formal dining space. That's where the practitioner discusses matters of price and policies with patients, says McGuire, who notes, "People don't make good decisions if they're too comfortable or if they're not comfortable at all." He adds, "The new layout also provides options for the provider to cater to the personality of the patient or to what their needs are for that particular visit."

The laboratory area was also over-

ing devices as an important investment, and if they're having even a small problem with them, they want to come in and get fast service, McGuire states. The openness of the new lab area helps providers give that level of convenient, personal service, instead of making the patient wait for a clinical room as in the past. McGuire adds, "The cosmetics of hearing aids have improved, and we can show it off more in the new lab. All these factors are important to the customer."

PATIENTS LOVE THE MAKEOVER

David Illich gave the Oticon team carte blanche to change the layout and décor as they saw fit. And now that it's over, he's glad he did, since he—and his patients—are thrilled with the outcome.

"Now the place feels more professional, modern, and clean," Illich enthused. "My work is more efficient because I'm not drag-

ging the patient into different rooms. And now I have state-of-the-art equipment."

Despite its physical shortcomings, his practice was thriving even before the makeover, says Illich. But now he believes his patients will have a more pleasant experience when they visit his office. About half of them are under age 65, and he expects that younger people will especially appreciate the modernized look of the office.

Terry Flannery, a patient who was familiar with Illich's office before the makeover, says the change was dramatic. "The old office was pretty ratty looking," says Flannery, who is in his mid-60s. "Now when you go in, it's much more pleasant and lovely. I can appreciate the good design, and I still get the same great service that I did before."

Oticon feels strongly that highly trained clinicians working with sophisticated hearing care technology should consider their clinical environment as an integral part of the message they send to patients who come to them for high-quality care and service, says McGuire.

He continues, "The old hearing care office was set up for an aged population, and now we're catering to a diverse baby boomer generation that has different needs. As the patient population grows and hearing care becomes more of a total communication industry, the old environment is becoming obsolete and the office needs to change as well."

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Two suites were merged into one expanded suite with more functional space. This enables professionals to provide counseling, fitting, and follow up all in the same room

hauled and converted into a more public space. It used to be hidden behind closed doors, but now it's out in the open and offers a mirrored space where patients can sit on barstools and learn how to use their hearing instruments. "The newer devices don't need the same kind of buffing and grinding that used to take place in the lab," says McGuire. "Now some basic modifications can be made while patients sit with the clinician."

What's more, patients view their hear-

