

Office image sets the tone for clients and staff

The first thing most clients see when they walk into a law office is the office itself. If you have a dark and uninviting space, the potential client may be inclined to turn around and walk out.

In the fashion world, there's a common adage that the clothes make the man. It may be a slogan born for the purposes of advertising, but it holds some truth to it: Image is everything and perception can be reality, making that first impression of utmost importance.

The first thing most clients see when they walk into a law office is, well, the office itself. If you have a dark and uninviting space, the potential client may be inclined to turn around and walk out.

"My clients come from all walks of life," said Bob Palmer, who opened his small practice five years ago. "It was important to me to have [my office] be a comfortable space, as in they would feel comfortable while they were here. It would be reassuring to them and incorporate a lot of elements of reverence and contemporary feel and design, that it would be a very first-class operation."

When Palmer started the Robert Gray Palmer Co. LPA in 2004, he recognized the importance of interior design elements in his office. A truly great office space combines form and function to appease the client and employees' tastes while simultaneously providing the right tools to get the job done well.

To meet those needs, Palmer turned to Rob Valentine of Design Collective Inc. Five years after Valentine did the original design, Palmer came back to him this year to update his space.

The doors open to a lobby with floating seating and wood floors, a design Valentine said was "deliberately done to be very loungey — not pretentious, but soft and inviting."

It also features a hospitality area with coffee and water along with several appliances, accented by granite countertops. It's a feature usually confined to staff rooms, but Palmer said the unconventional move has worked out well.

While it's important that the lobby has nice features, Valentine said it's equally critical not to come off as over the top. Otherwise, clients will wonder whether they're paying for high quality representation or just a highbrow office.

"You balance things," he said. "You watch how much square footage so you don't overdo it, watch the kind of finishes you use so it doesn't feel too high end. You don't want it to feel like a poverty room either. You want to look like a successful attorney."

A quality office doesn't stop with the lobby though. Keeping employees as comfortable as clients can lead to increased productivity and a happier workforce.

Lighting can be a huge issue for employees, and sometimes windows just aren't enough. Columbus weather has been known to have a cloudy day or two, and when that happens, internal lighting is key for not making employees feel suffocated according to Valentine.

Other trends he pointed out included the use of frosted glass barriers as opposed to walls to make the firm seem larger, and to give employees offices of the same size, which saves the hassle of moving people around if anyone leaves the practice.

"I think it'd be easy to find a lot of people who agree that people are more productive and happy or what have

you when they're in an environment that's pleasing to them," said Palmer. "We work a lot of hours and this is a space that I never mind coming to. I attribute a lot of that to the design of it."

The design of the office also incorporated some features that directly impact the way Palmer's practice is able to do business. Making the workspace efficient is imperative because you're paying by the square foot. Extra room is going to cause an undue strain on your bottom line. A versatile office makes it possible to save valuable space — and money.

Palmer has a large conference room with an audio/visual element to it so he and his staff can conduct presentations, and the recent upgrade implemented Walltalker on the walls, which are high-end dry-erase boards that look stylish when they're not in use.

Palmer's library, which he affectionately calls his "war room," has four smaller tables that easily can be moved into different configurations. If the conference room table isn't big enough, the tables from the war room can be integrated for larger meetings.

Even his office has multiple dimensions, sharing smaller-scale versions of the amenities in the conference room in case he needs that type of setting for a smaller group.

Palmer said the versatility is vital.

"Not only is the space very functional, but the furniture that they recommended to me and the functionality has been very useful to me in lots of different situations that my practice calls for," he said.

Valentine said the biggest key to a quality space is a willingness to try new things. Status quo never separated

anybody from the pack, and you're trying to make a name for yourself. Integrate a mix of lighting, flooring, textures and art to make your space more appealing to employees and clients alike, and use multi-purpose rooms to get the most bang for your rent check or mortgage payment.

It's certainly working for Palmer and his crew.

"After we made these new changes, it made a very positive impact on us, even though some of the changes didn't appear to be that significant as we did them," he said. "It's a fresh look after five years. It's kind of like getting a new car. It makes you feel good and you're glad to be driving it."

Just don't be afraid to push the accelerator.

~ JOSH LEHMAN

