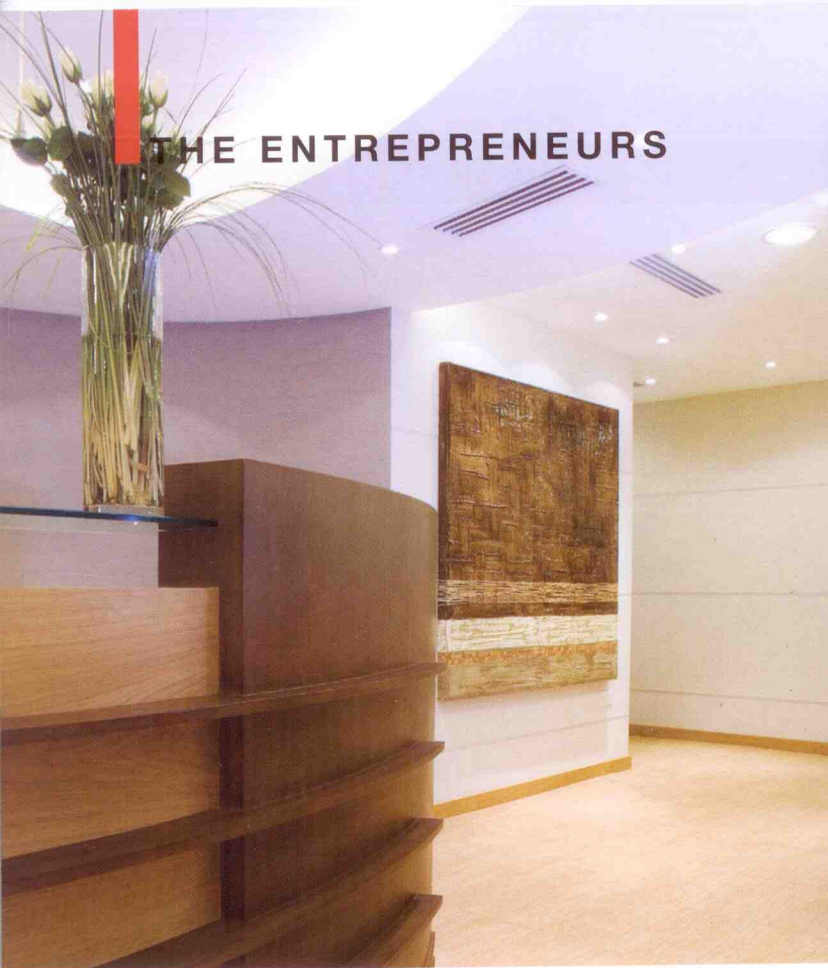


THE ENTREPRENEURS



Reason to smile

At the Dental Studio, Dr Jaco Smith promises you won't feel a thing. Every aspect of his award-winning dental surgery is designed to make a visit a pleasure rather than a pain. **Precious de Leon** reports.

THE DENTAL STUDIO is a dentist with a difference: the clinic in Dubai's Jumeirah area wants to make that annual visit a painless affair. Or, if not painless, then at least calm and soothing.

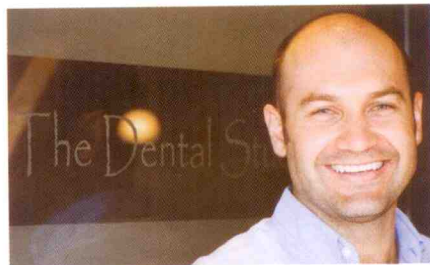
More Zen garden than dental clinic, visitors are set at ease by a fountain, stone steps and fragrant flowers before entering a Feng Shui-arranged reception laid out in subdued browns and greens and filled with the heady scent of aromatherapy candles.

A first-time patient could easily mistake it for a spa. Except here, they're not called patients, but clients. Scented towels are offered on arrival while mint water, herbal teas and coffee are served in the twin waiting rooms.

"We were clear on what we did not want to be," says Dr Jaco Smith, the

Dental Studio's director and founder. "We have moved away from the idea of a sterile clinic and redesigned the total client experience around the hospitality model, rather than the medical one."

Music or even movies viewed through 3D glasses are available for anyone who can't bear to hear the sound of drilling. Smith's unconventional approach to tra-



Non-sterile: Dr Jaco Smith

dition-bound medical practice earned his clinic the Outstanding Customer Service Award at the recent Lloyds TSB Small Business Awards.

A South African, Smith came to Dubai in 2005. After a seven-year stint in England, he took up a position on the dental team for the Bahrain Royal Family. He decided however that his and his family's future lies in Dubai.

When he set up the Dental Studio in 2006, nine years after he conceived the idea, he took over one of the oldest trading licenses in Dubai, issued in 1976 for one of the first dental practices in the emirate. When the business was transferred to him, the clinic had a 10,000-strong database but only 700 active patients. Now there are 3500. One of the first things he did was give his clinic its



unusual name, a departure from the traditional practice of hanging out a shingle bearing the medical practitioner's name. "It's important that customers get to know the place rather than just the person," says Smith.

Then came the hard part of getting the finance. At the time he was setting up the Dental Studio, most banks he approached weren't geared for financing businesses that employed fewer than 40 people. Smith had four. Now he employs 12 medical and administrative staff. He eventually found a bank willing to finance the venture. It cost a little more than \$1 million to set up.

Another challenge was finding the right ad agency. Most, he says, weren't able or willing to work with start-ups and their equally small budgets.

"When I started to tell them how much my budget was, their eyes glazed over," he says. "After three of these interviews, you realise you have to go it alone."

The Dental Studio got a listing in *The Connector* and three interviews on 103.8FM, which resulted in four new clients, who among them spent close to \$41,000 on treatments and services. Since then the Dental Studio's reputation has spread by word-of-mouth, which,

Smith says, is the best possible advertising for a business such as his.

Working with marketing specialists firm Bramley Group for strategy and communications firm All Details for PR, Smith is focusing now on community involvement to create targeted awareness. He is a visiting dentist at the Al Noor School in Dubai and is considering working with the Emirates Foundation. He's writing medical and business articles for select publications and does the odd interview.

The Dental Studio has also started segmenting its client base to create tailored messages. A golf day, for instance, has been organised for its gold members.

Though most of the clients visit for reasons of hygiene and health, a large part of the business is cosmetic surgery.

THE DENTAL STUDIO

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"Everybody wants a nice smile and a lot of the client requests are cosmetically driven. But we always drive the importance of oral health. We can't do the cosmetic smile if you don't look after your teeth," says Smith. "But we do find there's an increasing number wanting cosmetic treatments."

The Dental Studio hopes to open another branch at the end of the year. Feasibility studies are currently focusing on Mirdif in Dubai, in Abu Dhabi and, regionally, in Qatar. Franchise opportunities are also on the table.

Five years into running his own surgery, Smith has not been deflected from his goal of changing the way we look at the dental profession. Admitting that maintaining the same standards across a number of branches will be difficult, he is determined to make it work.

To what does he attribute his success? "My model works because of me in a sense, and the type of person I am, the lessons I've learned from being a dentist and really wanting to change our profession. I took me and integrated it into the business and the systems we follow."

What advice would he offer entrepreneurs? "Take something simple and make it extraordinary," he says. ■