

# Business of Dental Hygiene



## Independent Dental Hygiene Clinic Startup: Interview with Allison Keating

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I met Allison in my efforts to maintain contact with my profession after moving to Canada from the United Kingdom. Allison is an independent practitioner who owns her own clinic—Floss Dental Hygiene Care—in Calgary, Alberta. I wanted to know everything about how she first set up and now runs her business, and she kindly agreed to share her experience through the following interview:

**Q: Have you always had an entrepreneurial spirit and when did you realize you would like to own a dental hygiene clinic?**

A: As a teenager I set up a cleaning company and had a pop stand where I employed friends. I have always found business interesting and exciting. After graduating with a degree in dental hygiene, I worked for five years as a dental hygienist while completing my Master of Business Administration (MBA). While studying for my MBA I began thinking of starting my own dental hygiene clinic.

**Q: What was your vision for the clinic?**

A: I wanted to focus on management of the clinic while having dental hygienists working with me. I chose to have three dental chairs as I felt that revenue stream would increase the value of the business if I were to sell the clinic.

**Q: What was the process for implementing your business plan?**

A: While doing my MBA I did a project simulating the startup of an independent dental hygiene clinic including a survey of dental hygienists (questionnaire on viability of independent practice, potential issues, profit projections, growth expectations). I also conducted a prospective client survey of 110 people, asking if they saw the value in seeking oral health care from an independent dental

hygienist and other questions. I researched regulations, created a business plan, secured a loan, located a space (which took six months), registered my clinic name, purchased the instruments and equipment, and designed a logo and website. I had projected that my business growth would be incremental not exponential, and calculated my average gross revenue by intentionally underestimating the profit/revenue per client.

**Q: How long did it take to get the clinic ready and what was the whole process like?**

A: It was a year-long process and it was a stressful because I was also working in another clinic. I didn't want to spend money on a construction manager so I managed the entire construction project myself. I enjoyed that side of the process.

**Q: What is your usual week like? How many clients do you see in a day?**

A: At the beginning I was in the office approximately 10 to 12 hours a day, typically seeing 3 to 4 clients. Much of my time was spent on administrative work and marketing efforts. I spent most of my day at the office so that I wouldn't miss calls or emails from prospective clients.

**Q: Ten to twelve hours a day is long and tough. Did you have a personal life?**

A: No, not really. I spent most of my time at work or networking for the company. I didn't really have time to spend on hobbies. I was "lucky," because my significant other was working away from home so I didn't feel like I was jeopardizing our relationship by devoting so much time to the business. I can't imagine having been able to do this, though, if I had kids or pets to take care of!

*Continued...*

## &gt;&gt;&gt;&gt; Business of Dental Hygiene

*Independent Dental Hygiene Clinic Startup... cont'd*

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**Q: How did you advertise your clinic?**

A: I tried everything our regulations allow. I promoted the clinic in community newsletters but found “paper” marketing techniques did not work. Then I tried personal networking and found that was the most productive option, although time intensive. I went to five to ten different networking (business or social) events per week. The idea is to meet people and introduce them to the concept of independent dental hygienists. I belonged to a BNI group (Business Network International) and attended weekly meetings and additional events. I also belonged to the Calgary Chamber of Commerce where I gave presentations and went to monthly meetings. It was busy, but it got the word out there about Floss Dental Hygiene Care.

**Q: Do you employ any staff?**

A: Yes. A few colleagues joined as contractors and a few joined as employees. I also had a dentist who rented a chair part time. It was great to have a team and work on growing the office together.

**Q: How long was it until the clinic was profitable?**

A: Floss Dental Hygiene Care was profitable from the very beginning, thank goodness! I did a lot of planning to ensure I had sufficient capital to start, including funds to purchase sundries and supplies for the first few months.

I wanted to discharge my debt as soon as possible, so I held off paying myself for a long time. I didn't pay myself anything for the first year, and only paid myself a small monthly salary in year two. I always carefully considered what I needed before actually purchasing it. For example, I bought used Cavitron machines and didn't purchase a whitening system until I actually had a whitening client booked in the schedule!

**Q: What does your future hold?**

A: I recently decided to sell my practice because I was given a wonderful opportunity to work as a representative with a dental industry corporation. My MBA and three-year business background with my clinic gave me a solid portfolio of experience and transferrable skills.

During our conversion, I asked Allison, “What was the process of making your dream a reality?” Her response was that it wasn't a “dream”; it was a concrete plan to get a dental hygiene clinic started and running. I then suddenly realized that I was speaking to a business person. She researched, planned, and calculated well. Allison advises: “The overall goal of a small business is to serve a community and sell a great customer service.” I think she has achieved that. I'd like to thank Allison for taking time away from her busy schedule to speak with me and to share her experiences. I wish her the best of luck in the future.