

Just What the Doctor Ordered: Building a Strong Medical Office Building Landlord/Tenant Relationship

Article By:

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A strong, ongoing landlord/tenant relationship benefits everyone in the medical office context, as this article from *Medical Office Today* discusses ...

BUILDING A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR LANDLORD

A strong relationship between a medical office tenant and a landlord/owner can be beneficial to both parties. But all too often, the relationship between the two is almost non-existent. At worst, it may be strained because of distrust and miscommunication.

Establishing a good relationship takes time and effort, but the payoff is worth it, according to both healthcare and real estate professionals.

"During these tough economic times, I think it's essential to have a good relationship with your landlord because things could change very quickly and drastically," says Dr. Steven Moss, a vice president with Malo Health Group in Rutherford, N.J.

Here, *Medical Office Today* outlines the benefits of a good tenant/landlord relationship and how to go about building one.

Mutually beneficial

At the very basic level, the relationship between the landlord/owner and medical office tenant is financial. You, as a medical office tenant, pay rent to your landlord on a monthly basis. But the relationship can go beyond that and be much deeper, Moss says. "At the heart of the relationship is a payor and payee, but when viewed from both sides as mutually beneficial, it becomes synergistic," he notes.

Moss speaks from personal experience: Malo Health Group signed a 15-year lease for more than 52,238 square feet in a 12-story building owned by Onyx Equities LLC. The group uses the space for one-stop health and wellness center that includes an oral surgery clinic and an ambulatory surgery center.

"For us, it's important to have a good relationship with Onyx," Moss says. "We're going to be here for 15 years, and a 15-year relationship is one that we want to be mutually beneficial and productive. We've always viewed the relationship as a partnership."

Making the relationship a priority

The relationship between medical office tenants and landlords/owners begins well before the lease is even signed. But, once that lease is signed, many medical office tenants choose not to pursue a relationship with their landlord or invest in the one that has barely had time to take root.

Most physicians don't make it a priority to build a relationship with the landlord or the property manager. Likewise, administrative professionals such as practice managers take their cues from physicians and tend to neglect the relationship.

"I don't think it's very common for physicians to seek out the landlord – they don't see the benefits of having a good relationship," Moss notes. "When the landlord approaches the tenant to have a friendly relationship, a lot of physicians probably think 'What do they want now?' They're suspicious, and they just don't get that it's not a one-way street."

Beyond lack of interest, the lack of time is perhaps the biggest hurdle to building a relationship. Moss acknowledges that healthcare professionals, like everyone else, have limited time to spend on non-healthcare-related issues. Nonetheless, he doesn't think being pressed for time should preclude the development of a deeper, stronger relationship.

In fact, investing time in relationship building is a good investment, according to Sarah Teel, principal of MSL Investments, a San Antonio-based firm that represents medical office buildings owners.

Think about it this way, Teel encourages: "At home, you have one neighbor who goes out of her way to get to know you – you feel comfortable with her – and you have another neighbor who has never even said hello. When you make cupcakes, you're going to want to share them with the neighbor who has built a relationship with you."

Cupcakes aside, the analogy applies to the tenant/landlord relationship, Teel contends. "I think you'll find that landlords and their representatives are going to go out of their way to help those tenants that have made an effort to have a relationship with them," she says. "That's not to say that landlords are not responsive to the needs of other tenants, but when there is a special situation, the relationship makes a difference."

When relationships make a difference

Dr. John Whitfield, a gynecologist in Fort Worth, Texas, goes out of his way to maintain a good relationship with his landlord, Healthcare Realty Trust, a Nashville, Tenn.-based company that owns millions of square feet of medical office space across the nation. He occupies about 2,500 square feet in Healthcare Realty's medical office building on the Baylor All Saints Medical Center campus on 8th Avenue.

Jacque Flanagan and Licia Matute handle the leasing and property management for the building in which Whitfield is a tenant. "We make a point to get to know our tenants," Flanagan says. "We stop by their offices on a regular basis just to check in and to see if they need anything. I think a tenant loses out if they don't get to know us because there are a lot of ways that we can help."

Whitfield knows that relationships make all the difference when it comes to resolving problems that pop up in the course of daily business. Before moving into his current medical office space, his relationship with a prior landlord was iffy, and that impacted his practice.

"When you have a relationship, and you're comfortable with the people running the building, and you know you can approach them, everything is so much easier and things run more smoothly," says Whitfield, who has been a tenant in Healthcare Realty's building since January 2009. "The relationship means that if you need a little favor, they're more likely to help you out."

It's important to establish a relationship with your landlord before you need something, experts agree. "Spend the time getting to know them, so that when you do need something, you're comfortable asking for it," Teel recommends.

Above all, **communication is the most important element when building a relationship between tenant and landlord**, according to Matute of Healthcare Realty. "If you're communicating regularly, being honest with each other and building trust, your relationship will grow stronger," she says. "That's what we try to do every day, and fortunately, our physicians and their practice managers are receptive to our efforts."

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