



MEDICALOFFICETODAY

13 New Medical Office Products for 2013

Curtain Call: Window Coverings for Your Medical Practice



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Window coverings are an integral part of your office décor. From plain blinds to colorful shades and drapes, there's a host of options available from which to choose. Which is the best choice for your office? *MOT* explored the pros and cons to each and uncovered the latest trends, and here's what we found out.

Why are window coverings important?

Window coverings provide privacy, invite traffic to your space (particularly if you are located in a retail environment), provide insulation and control glare and light, says Leslie Markman-Stern, an interior designer in Chicago. The latter is important for those who may have issues with light or where excess light is unwanted, such as in testing rooms or headache clinics, or in spaces where clinicians may be using equipment that requires dim lighting or a darker environment.

Patient privacy is of greater importance now because of HIPAA regulations, and different window coverings can provide varying degrees of opacity, privacy and translucency, depending on the activities and procedures within your office, says Carolyn BaRoss, a principal with Perkins+Will in New York City. "They can help with patient privacy between rooms as well as from the outside of the building when looking in," she points out.

In addition, window coverings can provide daylight into and improved views from inside medical buildings, which has proven health and morale benefits, adds BaRoss. This discovery is driving changes to the layout and architecture of entire buildings.

"Many medical-office spaces have historically been configured so that enclosed rooms line the building's perimeter, blocking daylight and views, or are in enclosed interior rooms near the center of the buildings, with little if any access to views or daylight," BaRoss notes. "Lately, there has been growing interest in providing more daylight throughout the building for all occupants, which helps also with LEED certification and 'healthy hospitals' standards."

These new standards mean more partitions with glass, more open perimeters and more need for daylight controls, including interior glazed partitions used to “borrow light” in rooms and areas more toward the center of a building, BaRoss says.

Window coverings have their aesthetic purpose in helping to create a comfortable environment, but they should do much more, says Tim McCall, design director for King Retail Solutions in Eugene, Ore. “They can not only control the amount of light, but also the light quality, something research has found to be important both in terms of overall mood, recovery times and employee productivity,” he notes.

McCall says lighting in a medical office should ideally incorporate and mimic bright, natural light with any accent elements used purely to create drama and further flood the space. “Studies show full-spectrum fluorescent lighting improves recuperation, and sunlit rooms shorten recuperative time; staff work more quickly and accurately when exposed to natural daylight,” he points out. In addition, window coverings should be purposeful in redirecting natural light, diffusing it, changing the tint (color) and intensity (brightness), he adds.

The choice of window covering and systems to control these can also have an impact on heat gain and energy performance in your office, says BaRoss. McCall adds: “Window coverings can also be used to improve air quality and control temperature to provide energy savings.”

Lastly, BaRoss points out, window coverings contribute to your patients’ and staff’s overall experience with your practice. “They affect aesthetics and appearance as well as the flexibility and usability of medical-office interiors.”

The latest trends in window coverings for medical offices

Here’s what the experts say is trending for your office:

- Custom-made draperies and specialty fabrics
- Environmentally friendly materials such as organic wools, sustainable natural bamboo and grasses
- Greater washability in materials
- Multiple layers of window treatments
- Greater emphasis on appearance to promote patient comfort, leading to greater use of fabrics and draperies, which soften the space
- Motorized shade-control systems with daylighting-integrated controls that use photo sensors. Some systems include automatic dimmers for overhead light fixtures, says BaRoss. This can help reduce heat gain inside spaces and contribute to LEED points by reducing energy consumption and increasing daylighting and views for occupants.
- Custom artwork, branding or custom designs on window coverings or roller shades, whether facing interior rooms or facing outdoors
- Coverings that affect the look of an office or building from inside as well as outside. “In general, window coverings affect what the exterior of the building looks like, so it’s important to design these elements as part of the architecture and interior design,” says BaRoss. “For example, there are governors for shade control that can be used to raise or lower all the shades throughout a building to predetermined heights, so the building looks a bit tidier from the outside. Also, you can specify a darker shade cloth from the outside, so it’s not as visible.”
- Acoustical drapery. More manufacturers are offering a selection of this type of window covering, which can provide a level of acoustical control or separation between spaces and at the building exterior. “We have used these, for example, at glass-enclosed conferencing spaces to improve perception of audio-visual presentations, reduce sound transmission between rooms, enhance privacy and control light,” says BaRoss.
- Slatted window treatments—These create privacy while letting in rays.

Benefits to different types of window coverings

BaRoss outlines the variety of functions that each type serves.

Draperies – These (and fabrics in general) are back in vogue. They can be selected with linings or light-block fabrics for a higher degree of light control and privacy.

Roller shades – Some are not completely opaque, and they can reduce glare while maintaining some daylight and views to the outside.

Solar shades – These offer options for color and percentage of openness for varying amounts of access to light and view. “Based on experience, if the shades have some transparency, the darker colors make it easier for occupants to see out toward views from inside the building,” says BaRoss.

Blackout shades – These are completely opaque and can be specified with a track along the window frame to avoid light leak, making control of light much more effective for certain types of medical-office settings requiring complete light control.

Venetian blinds – Many now have integrated light control. The blinds are sealed between the glass panes, with controls outside to adjust their angle or height. These blinds are also protected against dust, which reduces maintenance needs over time.

All window shades, solar shades, blackout shades and draperies provide the most control of light. Some office buildings also use window tints, films, fritting or layers of frosted glass for light diffusion and privacy; the coverings complement and enhance those architectural features.

Drawbacks and cautions with different types of window coverings

Verticals can be a problem in tall windows as they can come off the track if your staff isn't careful, says Markman-Stern. Yet, pull-down types can't control the amount of light as well except for open, partial open or close.

"Any coverings that employ cords appeal to pocketbooks because they are cheap and easy to install," says McCall. "But cords can be dangerous, especially to kids who can get tangled up and even strangled by the cords."

BaRoss recommends avoiding pull cords in a pediatric environment.

Super cheap coverings will damage quickly and easily and require more frequent replacement, McCall adds. "Custom, lasting treatments will look beautiful much longer, and the superior materials lend themselves better to dual purposes such as temperature insulation and air-quality control," he says.

For draperies and fabrics, inventory management might become a concern if drapery panels are not all the same size and material, so where to reinstall each piece requires coordination. "I'd recommend the use of high-performance fabrics meant for healthcare or office settings – there are many beautiful drapery fabrics of natural and synthetic material on the market from which to choose," says BaRoss.

Be careful about material choices such as silk, which are beautiful, but sunlight can cause fading so location has to be considered. Consider flame-spread ratings, light-fastedness, cleaning method and material health, and avoid PVC and materials with EVOCs that offgas, BaRoss recommends.

Big shades can get very heavy, so electrical motor operation and remote control can be very helpful, rather than just providing a pull cord, which may break or become too cumbersome to operate.

Other things you should know about window coverings

Consider buying some overstock for any custom material so that repairs and replacements can be made as needed, BaRoss suggests.

Along with window coverings, make sure to consider films, fritted glass, light shelves or other architectural means for controlling light and privacy, says BaRoss. "These can be integral to the glass or the architecture, either inside or outside the building, and in addition to window coverings and treatments," she notes. "Sometimes used together, the level of control and long-term return on investment may be best for the office-building owner."

Markman-Stern says the type of material in a window covering is sometimes important if you're using specialized equipment such as an MRI machine.

Finally, take into consideration your environment and your values, says McCall. "Do you prioritize aesthetics, eco-friendliness, light control, temperature control, maintenance and replacement cost or some other factor over others? Take a minute to decide because the wrong window treatment might look great in your imagination and play out horribly in your office. If you take the time to decide what you need to get out of your coverings, you'll be able to identify the best materials and covering styles to maximize the experience of your entire space for your staff and patients."